

For Emma, Forever Ago



*"Emma is not a person... Emma is a place that you get stuck in.
Emma is a pain that you cannot erase."*

Justin Vernon



I've never spoken at length about the impact of this album on my life, mainly because it's not easy to talk about. There's so much emotion wrapped up in these nine tracks that are more complicated than I've ever been able to express, but for the first time, I'd like to take a moment to break it all down as best as I can.

For Emma, Forever Ago is an album that breaches the unconventional to investigate the foundational aspects of the human experience. According to Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs," everyone has basic physiological needs, including the ability to breathe, eat, sleep, and reproduce. Less foundational but also critical are our safety needs, which include health, employment, personal security, and shelter. Up next is our need to love and be loved—to belong and experience intimate connection with others. Second-highest on the hierarchy is esteem, represented by things like respect, strength, status, and freedom. At the very top is the pinnacle and ultimate goal of humankind: self-actualization. We all want to become all that we can be, but we never can if our more foundational needs are never met. Justin Vernon engages with every level on the hierarchy by just being human—wrestling with the raw emotions that result from total isolation, devastating loss, soul-crushing love, and the ego death associated with exposing your innermost thoughts and feelings to another person.

As winter reared its icy head in November 2006, Justin Vernon packed up his things and headed to a remote cabin in Wisconsin, reeling from a myriad of unfortunate events to which he had recently fallen victim. A year before, Justin and his band, DeYarmond Edison, had moved to North Carolina to write and play music. Before too long, he contracted mono, gave himself liver issues from drinking too much, gambled away all his money, and dissolved his relationship with both his band and his long-term girlfriend at the same time. He could have gone to stay with his family in the house where he grew up, but instead he headed deep into the woods to stay in his father's old hunting cabin. It was built on 80 acres of land the Vernons bought back in the late-70s, otherwise inhabited only by various wildlife. Cold, isolated, and depressed, Justin spent the next few months drinking beer, hunting for food, and wrestling with the pain that wouldn't leave him alone.

Eventually, using an old guitar and some recording equipment stashed in the trunk of his car, Justin started crafting his magnum opus—nine songs detailing the complex emotions he felt after suffering so much loss.

Flume

The album opens with the quiet strum of a vintage guitar, like the distant echoes of a rusty banjo played by a fire in the dead of winter. It beckons the listener closer, promising to reveal mysteries of the heart in exchange for time and a bit of company. With every visceral chord, it's clear that the lonely specter sitting before you has a story to tell, one full of pain and regret that he must relay before he can truly move on.



The opener to *For Emma, Forever Ago* may best be described as *hauntingly beautiful*. While the lyrics are more symbolic than perhaps any other Bon Iver track, the emotions in every line are deeply relatable. The very first words on the album are “I am my mother’s only one...it’s enough.” It’s a grounding statement, a reminder that even after all the rest have abandoned or betrayed him, he will always have his mother to cling to. He’s not claiming to be an only child—his two siblings wouldn’t be too happy if he were—rather, he knows that his mother sees him as irreplaceable, the one and only Justin Vernon. The next line reads, “I wear my garment so it shows...now you know.” This is a play on “wearing your heart on your sleeve,” extending that sentiment to the rest of his clothing. He’s preparing himself and the listener for what’s about to happen—a complete and utter baring of the depths of his heart and soul for all to see and know.

*“Only love is all maroon
Gluey feathers on a flume
Sky is womb and she’s the moon”*

The chorus contains some of my favorite poetic lyricism in music history. On its own, it’s a beautiful yet mysterious image of death and rebirth, but as always, there’s more going on than meets the eye. Anyone who’s been in love can attest to the deep suffering it brings, even when it’s right. When it’s done with you, it never looks as glorious as it did before. Maroon is the color of dried blood. It’s also a verb meaning “to abandon or isolate,” implying that love is nothing more than isolation, and it’s the only thing that could cause such severe pain. For Justin, to love is to be alone.

A *flume* is an artificial channel of water, often used to transport timber. In verse 2, he says he “move[s] in water, shore to shore...nothing’s more,” and the second line in the second chorus reads “lapping lakes like leery loons.” Loons are aquatic birds who live in lakes and ponds—very agile swimmers who would have no trouble swimming laps around a lake. “Loon” is also a synonym for “fool,” so to be a “leery loon” is a bit of an oxymoron—despite being careful not to get in a relationship, he ends up falling for his lover’s ruse anyway. He’s flown too close to the sun, the wax on his wings has melted, and Justin the Loon drifts down the flume of his own bad choices, his wings gluey and caked with dried blood. All he has left is the moon—likely his mother—not bright or warm enough to melt his wings, but just enough to comfort him.

*"Only love is all maroon
Lapping lakes like leery loons
Leaving rope burns, reddish ruse"*

Learning to let go of the people and things that we love is painful, like trying to hang on to a rope as it slips away—all you end up with is red, raw skin, and a bloody reminder of what you've lost. While there are exceptions, relationships are often untrue and insecure, leading to heartbreak and lingering regret.

A long, disjointed instrumental passage follows. The entire structure of the song falls apart for a moment: the drums knocking against each other, the vocals falling out of sync, and the strings of the guitar grating against each other like they've lost all purpose. It's subtle but powerful, leading into one final burst of the chorus, Justin himself sounding like the words are practically being strangled out of him.

❧ ❧ ❧

Lump Sum

The very first thing Justin conjured and recorded in those Wisconsin woods was the choral arrangement that opens this track. The first thing that often strikes me about "Lump Sum" is its BPM. The rhythmic guitar patter and choppy backing track sound like a steam train chugging along at a brisk pace through the icy tundra. It's immediately captivating, and the cryptic lyrics to follow only compound that fact.

"Lump Sum" is slightly more straightforward than "Flume," evidenced by how Justin lays out and breaks down the situation he's thrown himself into. The first line reads, "Sold my cold knot...a heavy stone." He once "tied the knot," but that commitment has since grown cold and stale, along with the symbol of that commitment—likely a diamond ring, hence the "heavy stone." In selling his "cold knot," he's letting go of something he once spent a lot of time and money on. Having cut ties with the people he loves, he yearns to "venture home" and disappear for a while, selling his "red horse" in order to do so. It's ironic, since it was most likely his sole means of transportation, but since he wants to "vanish on the bow," it's probably meant to signify that he doesn't intend to return any time soon. It could also be one of the four horses of the Apocalypse, specifically the one that represents war, division, and conflict, implying that he's getting rid of it because he knows it isn't worthwhile to fight anymore.

*"Fit it all, fit it in the doldrums
(or so the story goes)
Color the era
Film it as historical"*

Justin wants to stuff everything he's been feeling and fighting as deep as it can go, down in the dungeons of his very soul. However, he's uncertain if his choice to isolate and hide his pain away will actually solve anything, or if it's just something he's been told will work ("so the story goes"). In "coloring the era," he hopes to add some context to his situation in order to see it from a different angle and possibly find a way out of his depressive state. To "film it as historical" might ground his emotions and experience in reality, forcing him to face it in the same way one might wrestle with the raw nature of a historical documentary.

Justin recognizes that his efforts to "pump the plumb"—to unclog and clean out the grime left behind by his great loss—have so far been fruitless. He can't remove the issues flooding his life...certainly not alone, nor in the state he's in. Instead, he has to change course or risk going down with the ship.

*"In my arbor 'til my ardor trumped
Every inner inertia
Lump Sum"*

Setting aside interpretation for a moment, those three lines are just beautiful to look at and read. Before taking the time to learn what he's saying and why, I had no idea what any of these words were, but I was still awed by how intricately and beautifully they run together. To put it succinctly, these lines represent the core of the entire album. "In my arbor 'til my ardor trumped every inner inertia;" in other words, he's devoting himself to recovering from the mess in which he finds himself. He'll stay in the cabin (his arbor) until his desire to change (his ardor) stifles the inner turmoil manifesting as pain and depression. A lump sum is a single payment offered once, as opposed to several payments over time—Justin would rather deal with his problems head-on than patch them up with short-term solutions.

He repeats the line "so the story goes" ahead of "balance we won't know...we will see when it gets warm." This decision to leave it all behind is a risk, but he hopes it'll be worth it. "When it gets warm" may refer to the onset of spring at the end of winter, though it could also point back to the "cold knot" from the first line—in contrast to the cold, stale relationship he was in before, he hopes the next one will warm the knot and provide the balance and peace he so desperately needs.

"I was by myself for a pretty long time...I think when you spend enough time when it's quiet around you and you don't open your mouth for three or four days, there's parts of your brain that can kind of rest. When we're out in the world and we have to talk to people, we edit ourselves...when we're out here, we're all kind of wearing mirrors on our faces...when you're alone for a long enough time, you can feel a lot more peace."

Justin Vernon

☒ ☒ ☒ ☒

Skinny Love

If asked, many people would probably point to “Skinny Love” as their first (and for some, only) experience with Bon Iver. It might have even been the Birdy version, as was the case for me. Regardless, the impact of this track on indie folk was massive, and put Justin Vernon on the map. A painful, gritty examination of a dead relationship, “Skinny Love” is a masterclass in visual storytelling and complex emotional expression. The only instrumentation to speak of is an old, rusty guitar, backing Justin’s stellar vocals that range from quiet desperation to passionate disbelief.

It’s too often overlooked that this track isn’t specifically about a singular person or relationship, but about the reason for being in a relationship in the first place. As Justin explained in an interview with Pitchfork:

"To say that “Skinny Love” is about Christy [Smith, Justin’s then girlfriend and a player on For Emma] would not be entirely accurate. We dated and she’s an incredibly important person that I lived with for a long time, but it’s about that time in a relationship that I was going through; you’re in a relationship because you need help, but that’s not necessarily why you should be in a relationship. And that’s skinny. It doesn’t have weight.

Skinny love doesn’t have a chance because it’s not nourished."

There’s a lot of significant repetition and parallel themes at play in this track. As most people fresh out of a relationship do, Justin asks a lot of questions, trying to flesh out his emotions in the wake of such loss. The song has two verses, two choruses, and a short outro, structured around two warring emotional states. The verses contain contemplative lyricism and soft vocals, asking questions and looking back on the sorry state of the relationship, while the choruses are much more accusatory and violent. The first verse is almost two, consisting of two paragraphs in eight lines, each with a similar melody and rhythmic structure:

*"Come on, skinny love, just last the year
Pour a little salt, we were never here
My my my, my my my, my my
Staring at the sink of blood and crushed veneer*

*I tell my love to wreck it all
Cut out all the ropes and let me fall
My my my, my my my, my my
Right in this moment, this order's tall"*

He starts in the most vulnerable way possible: begging his love to last at least until the end of the year. He then tells her to pour salt on the ground, which has a myriad of implications. Salt has healing properties, so to “pour a little salt” on an open wound should help the healing process along, despite the initial stinging sensation. However, “we were never here” seems to refer to the old practice of cursing destroyed cities by sprinkling salt on the ground to prevent life from growing out of the ruins. For those who are superstitious, throwing salt over one’s shoulder is supposed to ward off bad luck, countering the accidental spilling of salt. Putting it all together, it paints a picture of two people walking away from a destroyed relationship, leaving all traces of it behind and sprinkling salt to confirm (and ensure) it stays dead.

Probably the most iconic refrain in the entire song comes from the next line: the emotional repetition of the word “my,” occurring three times throughout the song. It’s borderline onomatopoeia, like Justin can’t think of any other way to express his surprise and disappointment. He almost stutters it, like he can barely choke out the words in the midst of his distress.

Frustrated and alone, he punches the wall, splitting his knuckles and scattering drywall everywhere. After taking a breath and cleaning his hands, he steps back and stares at the “sink of blood and crushed veneer.” It forces him to acknowledge that their relationship was nothing more than a facade—a thin wall that may have looked beautiful on the outside but hid an ugly truth within.

After a moment, he tells his love to “wreck it all, cut out all the ropes and let me fall,” begging to be set free in order to sort it out on his own. His lament that “right in this moment, this order’s tall” is ironic, exposing his own cowardice to end the relationship and inability to nurture it. He wants a healthy relationship “right now,” unwilling to acknowledge the amount of selfless effort he would have to exert to achieve that. To stay in the relationship would be too hard, but ending it would be much worse.

“Come on, skinny love, what happened here?”

Suckle on the hope in light brassiere

My my my, my my my, my my

Sullen load is full, so slow on the split

The second verse is set between the two choruses, picking up Justin’s hopeless exploration of his dead love where the first verse left off. He asks her one of the simplest, most heartbreaking questions a person can ask after a painful breakup: “*what happened here?*” Reminding her how shallow and baseless their relationship is, he tells her to “suckle on the hope in light brassiere.” The implication is clear: it was never deeper than sex. The “hope” in question was only ever physical, and relatively unsubstantial at that. “Suckle” is usually used in reference to breastfeeding, and the “light brassiere” indicates there isn’t much to feed on—regardless, Justin thinks the hope they experienced during sex could have been enough to nurture the relationship, but that sentiment is evidently not shared.

The last line of the verse is the most cryptic of all. On the one hand, it could mean that the baggage Justin is carrying from the relationship is heavy, making it difficult for him to let go and end the relationship. On the other, it could imply that the baggage they’re both carrying is “sullen,” or gloomy, but that his lover is taking a long time to end it regardless. Either way, it’s clear that the burden is weighing on them both, and neither of them are willing to do what’s necessary to find relief and move on.

The chorus is loud, painful, and intense, carrying the greatest emotional weight of the entire song:

<i>"And I told you to be patient</i>	<i>And I told you to be patient</i>
<i>And I told you to be fine</i>	<i>And I told you to be fine</i>
<i>And I told you to be balanced</i>	<i>And I told you to be balanced</i>
<i>And I told you to be kind</i>	<i>And I told you to be kind</i>
<i>And in the morning I'll be with you</i>	<i>And now all your love is wasted</i>
<i>But it will be a different kind</i>	<i>And then who the hell was I?</i>
<i>And I'll be holding all the tickets</i>	<i>Now I'm breaking at the britches</i>
<i>And you'll be owning all the fines</i>	<i>And at the end of all your lines"</i>

The first four lines are qualities Justin demanded of his love—to be patient, fine, balanced, and kind, a list which closely resembles that of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (i.e. “love is patient, love is kind,” etc). These lines are regrets rather than reminders, projections rather than honest admonitions. Despite the fact that he asked those things of her, he never gave her any of it to begin with—he was not patient, he was not fine, he was not balanced, he was not kind. Despite projecting all the blame and responsibility onto her, he knows he’s at fault for many, if not most, of the problems in the relationship.

We all make mistakes late at night, often ones we regret in the morning. In the next two lines of the first chorus, Justin promises that he’ll still be with her in the morning (or the “mourning,” anticipating the end of the relationship), but it won’t be the same. This could either mean that he won’t feel as angry when the sun comes up, ready to reconcile, or that their relationship will be dead by dawn. All the tickets he holds and the fines she owns are one and the same, representing everything he’ll owe her once this is all over.

After repeating his regretful demands on the second chorus, Justin goes on to claim, “now all your love is wasted, and then who the hell was I?” He realizes that he asked too much of her without giving anything back, but he simultaneously feels so uncared for that he assumes she must have thought of him, her love, as a waste of time and energy. “If you loved me, and your love was all a waste, **who was I to you anyway?**” However, like before, he isn’t some innocent victim—the next line seems to describe Justin dangling by his pants in a deep pit, his lover genuinely trying to pull him up out of the pit. As she strains, his pants start to tear because he refuses to do anything to help, but he continues to paint her as the villain.

This drags into the final line, the essence of which is that he’s “breaking...at the end of all her lines.” He feels like a puppet on a string—being manipulated to do whatever she wants him to—or a fish stuck on a hook without the power to free himself. It could also be a theater reference—suddenly breaking character (laughing) because he’s tired of the relationship, and everything she says and does feels rehearsed. He isn’t fooled by her act anymore.

*"Who will love you?
Who will fight?
Who will fall far behind?"*

After a brief instrumental break, the song closes with these three questions, but to whom they're directed is left ambiguous. He might be asking his lover who will replace him and do what he was never willing to do for the relationship; he could also be asking himself whether or not he's even worthy of being loved or fought for. It seems to me that the only question he truly knows the answer to is *"who will fall far behind?"*

This song...wrecks me. It never fails to make me emotional, no matter where I am or what I'm doing. Every strum, every strained yell, every part of it feels like a roundhouse punch to the gut. It's visceral, disturbing, and extremely vulnerable. With its sparse, powerful instrumentation and achy, passionate vocals, "Skinny Love" is one of the most beautiful songs ever written, and my love and respect for it only grows with time.

☒ ☒ ☒ ☒

The Wolves

"The Wolves (Act I and II)" provides a break from the emotional intensity of the first three tracks, taking a moment to scale back and refocus. It starts very slow and quiet as Justin introduces the theme of the track in the opening refrain: *"Someday, my pain will mark you...harness your blame and walk through."* He hopes that his lover will one day realize how much she's hurt him and learn to be gentler in the future—despite the fact that he initially intended no one but himself and his closest friends to hear the album, anyone who's ever hurt him certainly knows by now. His cry of "harness your blame" is a call to own up to the guilt and blame she has for herself, releasing it so that she can accurately see the destruction she's caused and take responsibility. He just wants her to see him and his pain for what it is—utterly devastating.

*"With the wild wolves around you...
In the morning, I'll call you
Send it farther on"*

Despite his anger, he sees the multitude of selfish, horny men that would only want to be with his ex for reasons other than love, and wants to protect her. However, instead of reaching out to her at night when she's likely in the most danger, he waits until the morning to call and "send it farther on," a phrase that might imply distancing from her and the "wild wolves" surrounding the tumultuous situation.

The next few lines are relatively straightforward, in which Justin calls his decision to isolate a “game,” with his ex as the star of his thoughts. He tells her, “swing wide your crane and run me through,” which paints an image of massive wrecking ball cranes designed to demolish everything in sight. He can’t seem to let go, after everything they’ve been through, and would rather she put him out of his misery than deal with the pain any longer.

The chorus is one of the most interesting segments on the entire album, a choral refrain that builds in volume and intensity for two whole minutes. Blending auto-tuned vocals and hectic layered guitar riffs over the top of the repeated lines “What might have been lost” and “Don’t bother me” creates a beautiful cacophony of sound and color, overflowing with melodic and emotional dissonance. As Justin explains at various live shows, the question “what might have been lost” is a question he asks over and over still, and it serves as a reminder of what he has gained because of the failures of that past experience. When “don’t bother me” begins to be incorporated into the mix, it’s sung at a lower register, which makes it sound like a separate thought—one directed at his ex now that she’s made her decision to leave him. Eventually, the two phrases begin to blend together, sounding in some parts like one complete thought: “what might have been lost don’t (doesn’t) bother me.” He wants his lover to believe that he’s over it, that he just doesn’t care anymore, even if he doesn’t believe it himself. It’s a gorgeous bridge/final chorus that makes for one of the most emotional moments in his entire discography.

As the song comes back down, he returns to the opening line: “Someday, my pain...” Despite having just claimed that the pain has no effect on him anymore, he finds himself back at square one, acknowledging the fact that he hasn’t found the solace he’s looking for...not yet.

☒ ☒ ☒ ☒

Blindsided

At the halfway point in the album, things are beginning to look pretty bleak. Justin explained at his Eaux Claires music festival in 2015 that “Blindsided” is about him breaking into the Wisconsin and Minnesota Credit Union that was under construction near his house at the time. “I didn’t make it,” he added, which carries a lot more weight than you’d expect.

The break-in is a facade for what was really going on in his head when writing this song. Considering that it would have been mid-winter when this break-in was supposedly staged, construction would have been stalled, so Justin planned to find his way in and choose a place where no one would ever think to look for him. This song is about suicide, and though he never makes it into the building, he spends a lot of time by the construction site just thinking about it.

*"Peek in
Into the peer in...
I'm not really like this
I'm probably plight-less"*

Despite looking into the dark building and contemplating his next move, he recognizes that it isn't really in his nature to carry out such a dark plan. He doesn't consider his situation to be desperate, dangerous, or otherwise difficult, hence "plight-less," which keeps him from going any further in thought or action.

The bridge introduces a new repeated question: "Would you really rush out? (for me now?)" He seems to be asking if anyone would even come to his aid if he were in such a dark and desperate situation, whether it were freezing outside alone or actively attempting suicide. Who he's asking isn't clear, but the distant and echoing "for me now?" makes it seem like there isn't anyone around to hear his cry regardless.

*"Taught line
Down to the shoreline
The end of a blood line
The moon is a cold light"*

In an attempt to take a step back and calm down a bit, Justin goes down to the ocean to reflect on his life and choices. The last two lines are in reference to suicidal ideation and the harsh reality of his partner's evident infidelity (a theme lightly brushed upon in "The Wolves" but not significant enough to warrant a full explanation).

Reflecting on the sea, he says, "There's a pull to the flow...my feet melt the snow. For the irony, I'd rather know." He sees the flow of the tides, feeling them pull him in and considering the idea of floating away from his problems and partner completely. The "flow" could also represent a slight change of heart, considering how the chorus shifts from "I am blindsided" to "I was blindsided" by the end of the song. The image of his feet melting the snow, followed by the line "for the irony, I'd rather know," seems to indicate that he's come a long way just to stand outside somewhere he isn't invited (likely the house in which his lover is cheating on him). He's stood outside for so long without doing what he came to do that the snow melted under his feet.

Justin has learned a lot over the course of the song—he no longer feels in the dark about the situation. He doesn't feel "blindsided," but the waves of that initial pain continue to undulate in the back of his mind.

☒ ☒ ☒ ☒

Creature Fear

The concept behind “Creature Fear” revolves around the basic human fear of the unknown. After a long opening section characterized by soft humming and slow guitar strums, Justin comes in with a relatively different timbre than any other track on the album, singing:

*“I was full by your count
I was lost but your fool
Was a long visit wrong?
Say you are the only”*

He was fully satisfied with what she had to offer, ignoring her mistakes and flaws because of his blind love and because he didn’t think there was anyone else for him. He asks if a long visit was wrong, wondering if they wouldn’t be in such a mess if they had spent less time together. Alas, he knows better than that.

The calm breaks in the face of the storm as the vocals and instrumentals suddenly increase in tempo and volume as Justin cries:

*“So many foreign worlds, so relatively fucked
So ready for us, so ready for us
The creature fear”*

It’s a simple yet profound declaration that the future is ever-changing, full of endless possibilities (most of them pretty awful), and heading toward us like a speeding bullet whether we like it or not. It represents a deep fear of the unknown that pervades every human heart and spawns all sorts of evil, so much so that it almost resembles an entity in and of itself—this **creature fear**.

In the next verse, he claims that he was “teased by [her] blouse” but “spit out by [her] mouth”—brought in by her physical beauty but chewed up and spit out by her careless treatment of him. What else can he do but “tear on, tail on...” Despite knowing his own worth (or thinking he does), he still ends up taking “all the wind on” and “signing another floor”—in other words, he’s taken on loads of pain and emotional trauma, finding himself run into the ground so hard that it leaves a mark, both on the floor and elsewhere within. The BPM kicks up again as he heads into the second of three parallel choruses:

*“So many territories, ready to reform
Don't let it form us, don't let it form us
The creature fear”*

Similar to the way the early American colonists claimed and reformed the original U.S. territories, every stage of Justin's relationship changed both him and his partner. Almost to himself, he pleads "don't let it form us," don't let those things fundamentally change who they are in the aftermath. This creature fear of how their future will affect the present is eating him alive, and there's nothing he can do to change it. He wonders if he's ready for that, asking in the third person, "So did he foil his own? Is he ready to reform?" Whether or not he thinks he's ready, the future's coming, and it's terrifying.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

For Emma

The penultimate song on *For Emma, Forever Ago* is the title track, with easily the most upbeat instrumental on the entire album. Backed for the first time by bombastic brass, snappy snares, and a driving bassline, it sounds like a celebration despite its lyrical content. The liner notes array the lyrics like dialogue between two characters in a play (I'd rather let this one speak for itself instead of providing my own interpretation):

narrator:
(so apropos:
saw death on a sunny snow)

him:
"for every life..."

her:
"forgo the parable."

him:
"seek the light."

her:
"...my knees are cold."

(running home, running home,
running home, running home...)

her:
"go find another lover;
to bring a... to string along!"
"with all your lies, you're still very lovable."
"I toured the light; so many foreign roads **for Emma,**
forever ago."

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Re: Stacks

My wife and I often lay in the dark and listen to this song, singing along to the only words we ever seem to make out: *“when your money’s gone, and you’re drunk as hell...”* It’s a gorgeous closer, and wraps up the entire album neatly in a bow without providing the type of closure you expect. I know I said “Flume” might be Bon Iver’s most cryptic and symbolic track ever, but “Re: Stacks” might seriously have it beat. Every word seems to have layers upon layers of context and meaning, all of which may never be fully uncovered or understood by anyone except Justin Vernon himself. As for me, I hope to have it totally memorized someday, along with the rest of the album of course. How else am I going to impress the crowd at karaoke night?

The first question anyone listening to this song might ask is, *“what the hell does re: stacks mean anyway?”* A totally valid question, with a very simple answer. I’ll let Justin take it from here...

“It’s ‘Regarding’ People use it in letters and emails. It’s about pointing towards an idea, to amplify that this song is about the stacks. I mean, every song title does that in a way, but I just really wanted to point it out: this song isn’t the stacks, it’s about the stacks.”

Justin Vernon

If I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard a British pop star name drop “Re: Stacks” in the past ten years, I’d have two nickels. Which isn’t a lot, but it’s weird that it happened twice, right? The first time I ever heard the song’s title (without knowing anything about it) was in Ed Sheeran’s 2014 track “Nina” when he says, “I met you when I was a teen, but then you were one as well, and I could play a guitar just like ringing a bell. Sometimes I wonder, in any other summer, could you have been my part-time lover to me, listening to Stevie Wonder? Under the covers where we used to lay...and *“Re: Stacks” is what the speakers play.*” Then a few years later, Kygo collabed with another favorite artist of mine, Ellie Goulding, on the track “First Time” where she sings, “Getting drunk on a train track, way back, when we tried our first cigarettes (Oh). Ten dollars was a fat stack...I’d do it all again. Bomber jacket and a snapback, your dad’s black Honda was a Maybach (Oh). *“Re: Stacks” on the playback, I’d do it all again...*” So yeah, I remember noticing that years ago before I knew anything about Bon Iver and thinking it was odd that they both brought it up, but I probably attributed it to the fact that they dated at some point and one of them introduced it to the other.

“This my excavation and today is Kumran”

The very first line already brings up a multitude of questions. What is his excavation? What in the hell is Kumran? What does that have to do with anything? Well it turns out, Kumran (normally spelled Qumran) is both an archaeological site in the West Bank and the closest settlement to where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. “When they found them it changed the whole course of Christianity,” Justin explained in an interview, “whether people wanted to know it or not. A lot of people chose to ignore it, a lot of people

decided to run with it, and for many people it destroyed their faith, so I think I was just looking at it as a metaphor for whatever happens after that is new shit.” The album itself was an excavation of himself and everything he’s ever done, digging deep to wrench the skeletons from his closet and break down the walls of his own insecurities. The fact that “today is Kumran” is significant, because it symbolizes a moment of foundational change—Justin has discovered something about himself that will change his entire life, but whether he’s ready to accept it or not is a different story. “Everything that happens is from now on...this is pouring rain, this is paralyzed.” Having seen what he’s excavated, he doesn’t like the truth it reveals, and it makes him feel let down and unable to break free from the depressive mindset he’s stuck in.

The “stacks” themselves have a double meaning—some parts of the song make it sound like they’re poker chips, other parts describe them as an emotional burden. The next part of the verse says, “I keep throwing it down, two hundred at a time...” He’s throwing his chips onto the table, giving out more and more love, but nothing he does proves fruitful. He feels hopeless and empty, unsure of where he might turn for relief.

*“And it’s hard to find it when you knew it
When your money’s gone and you’re drunk as hell”*

It’s hard not to feel hopeless when you seem to be losing everything, despite all your best efforts. In a 2011 NY Times piece about the situation, he said, “I lost \$220 online, which at that point was all my money. It was a microcosm of the rest of the stuff in my life — like, yes, you are actually not able to control this.”

*“On your back with the racks as the stacks as your load
In the back and the racks of the stacks are your load
In the back with your racks and you’re unstacking your load”*

Not being able to move on from someone can be a painful emotional burden that lingers with you into all future relationships. The chorus visualizes this as stacks of...well, something, as well as racks—the point is that it’s heavy, and piled high enough to cause severe pain and depression. In contrast to the first two lines, the third sheds light on how far Justin has come, finally finding the strength to let go and unstack his load, however long and wearisome a task it proves to be.

*“I’ve been twisting to the sun
I needed to replace
And the fountain in the front yard is rusted out
All my love was down in a frozen ground”*

Sunflowers are so called because they consistently turn toward the sun for light and life, which Justin finds himself doing for the first time in a long time. Tying that line into the next, it makes it sound like what he's "needed to replace" is a light bulb, tossing out the old one for a new bulb with a fresh filament. In a similar way, his rusted out fountain and frozen love symbolize the fact that he's no longer able to express emotion and show affection like he used to, and as a result, the "fountain" isn't nearly as beautiful as it was before.

The next few lines are some of the most iconic on the entire album, in which a black crow sits at a distance from Justin and dangles his keys in front of him, "he even fakes a toss." The crow is depression, and it isn't the first time it's reared its ugly head—back in "Blindsided," Justin compared himself to a crow, crouching by the bank as he contemplated breaking in. In "Re: Stacks," the keys represent a better, happier life, but his depression keeps him from actually obtaining it. Even the smallest glimmer of hope—a fake toss—is quickly stomped out before it has the chance to sprout up. "Whatever could it be that has brought me to this loss?"

In the final lines of the album, Justin provides a hint of emotional resolution and peace despite the turmoil:

*"This is not the sound of a new man
Or crispy realization
It's the sound of the unlocking and the lift away

Your love will be...safe with me"*

☒ ☒ ☒ ☒

For Emma, *Forever Ago* is an indie folk masterpiece, a heartbreaking album with layers upon layers of cryptic lyricism that tugs at your heartstrings whether you know what he's saying or not. It's brilliantly written, with some of the most haunting vocals and crushing instrumentals I've ever experienced. Justin Vernon's story of isolation, grief, and growth is an inspiring one, and affects me in ways I don't quite understand and couldn't possibly explain. I find solace in its warmth, like sitting by the fire with an old friend in the dead of winter. I learn something new every time I listen to it, and it will always hold a special place in my heart.

In conclusion, I hope we all get to experience a love as deep and rich as Justin did for Emma, forever ago.

"Love is the one thing we're capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that, even if we can't yet understand it."

Amelia Brand, *Interstellar*