

**“Heaven Has No Fury Like...” the Realization of Mortality:
Horror, Humanity, and Feeling Alive on Ethel Cain’s *Perverts***
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CONTENT WARNING:

Mentions of sexual content, sexual assault, child abuse, murder, self harm, and suicide are discussed in an academic and analytical context within this article. Please proceed thoughtfully.

I - Introduction After Introduction.

“Pervert.”

Doesn’t that word make you curl your toes and crack a polite yet uncomfortable, disgusted smile? Perhaps you think of the peeping tom, of the sex addict, of the woman exploiter. Ethel Cain’s *Perverts* EP takes a broader definition, the idea that a pervert, or a perversion is “to distort or corrupt the original course, meaning, or state of (something),” or “to lead (someone) away from what is considered natural or acceptable.”¹

Though sonically the EP strays from the horror music of Diamanda Galás or authorless satanic chants (fitting instead into the genres of “drone” “slowcore” “ambient”², whatever that really means), and lacks obvious horror violence like the satanic rituals and cannibalism of *Preacher’s Daughter*, *Perverts* is horrific in its own right. The true horror of *Perverts* doesn’t lie in our disgust of the subject matter – the pervers – but rather in the horror they experience – of alienation, isolation, damnation – and the horror of our own connection with these experiences. The pervert is terrified, horrified of themselves, and we are terrified, horrified, of them, for them, and of ourselves, for relating to them, and for feeling human at all.

Hayden Anhedonia, mastermind behind the Ethel Cain project, is quickly building a sonic universe of horror-as-human, even as *Perverts* steps away from the so-called Ethel Cain Cinematic Universe, breathing life into Paul Santilli’s thesis that horror is human exposure to the naked fact of being human³. Though Anhedonia references plenty of horror literature and cinematography in both releases (the 10th track of *Preacher’s Daughter* is named directly after the snuff film *August Underground*) Anhedonia focuses less on descriptions of violence and bloody catharsis, (than say, contemporary Bethany Schmitt aka The Buttrass of the Horrorcore genre⁴) and more on the feeling of naked exposure before God, or a lack of one.

Personally, *Preacher’s Daughter* drags me from a dust filled, catatonic cat nap, clawing through claustrophobic dark and humid trenches, to emerge naked and crying in a field of mud, sun rising. Gutted but seeing clearly, stronger and free. My humanity affirmed, whether divinity is there to watch over me or not. *Perverts* on the other hand reflects, to me, the damp and horrible January it was released into. Forced motionless on a brutalist, wooden pew, I feel my last thoughts and feelings drained out of me, as the EP

¹<https://genius.com/Ethel-cain-perverts-lyrics>

² <https://www.vulture.com/article/ethel-cain-perverts.html>

³ Santilli, Paul. “Culture, Evil, and Horror.” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2007, pp. 173–94. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27739626>. Accessed 22 Jan. 2025.

⁴ <https://undergroundunderdogs.com/2018/07/07/welcome-to-hell-the-story-of-butrass/>

leaves me eternally clothed in the feeling of frailty. I feel that the sunlight outside would reduce me to dust. I feel dead.

Anhedonia's deep meditation on perversion, which extends from its perverted subjects to suggest that all of us, our society included, are perverted, reveals that the deepest horrors are the ones that live within us, are us. Mortality is to be feared, to be ignored through devotion to the divine. Otherwise it will skin, strip, and devour us. Anhedonia expertly crafts this fear on the hour and a half journey of *Perverts* where we leave feeling the most mortal we have ever felt: ashamed, numb, dead.

II - Concept (Concise).

Perverts began as a case study of perversion through exploring pervers. However, Anhedonia's growing interest in creating a slowcore project took president⁵, which is why songs like Amber Waves and Punish, teased early and generally beloved, now feel slightly out of place on the sonically polarizing EP. While the other songs on the album may be more obscure and lyricless, they still hold traces of the original theme's focus on the personification of perversion while pushing for a greater reckoning of societal degradation. Anhedonia's release of the short story "The Consequence of Audience" via her tumblr⁶ to tease the EP's release, as well as its mysterious ending line "It's happening to every-body," clarify the project's abstract and universal take on perversion. *Perverts* industrial, black and white aesthetic furthers Anhedonia's abstract take that anything deconstructed, decontextualized, or disillusioned, is perverted. Postmodernism, the perversion of science and the orderly world.

III - Sonics.

Sonically "slowcore." I am as useless to explain this term as this term is to explaining itself. More interesting than obscure and meaningless genre labels is Anhedonia's use of the medium of sound. Though *Preacher's Daughter* is completely constructed around religion narratively and lyrically, *Perverts* is arguably a more pure, and doubly heretical, exploration of religion. Anhedonia uses the idea that repetition, of lyrics specifically, is spiritual. Within Christian music the repetition of promises and devotions creates not only a deeper devotion to Christ, but a simulated meditation that feels proximus to God Himself. While the 12th track of *Preacher's Daughter*, Sun Bleached Flies, is a prime example of the repetition of lyrics to feel closer to God, with the words "If it's meant to be, then it will be/I forgive it all as it comes back to me," repeating dutifully throughout the song, take any track on *Perverts* and it is the complete opposite – empty. While lyrical repetition is spiritually pleasurable, the droning noise of *Perverts* becomes painful as listeners feel themselves unravel under the inability to track when the verse of ambiguous noise began and ended, if it did ever, at all. *Perverts* perverts spiritual repetition leaving a vacant numbness of disorientation and at times, anxiety.

Hell isn't actually the opposite of heaven. Which is exactly why *Perverts* is the antithesis to the Christian religion. While Christians and their art devote themselves to God, *Perverts* devotes itself to negative space, to nothing. Which is to say, *Perverts* holds nothing at its center. While Christians participate in the act of worship and pursuit of God and heaven, *Perverts* holds the experience of humanity, making no commentary, no move to chase or revile it, instead letting it sit open as reality. *Perverts* is an observation, not a judgement.

⁵ <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/ethel-cain-and-kiernan-shipka-on-nihilism-and-nightmares>

⁶ <https://www.tumblr.com/mothercain/765264825035177984/the-consequence-of-audience-as-i-went-there>

IV - Referentials I Did Not Read.

Perverts is extensive in its literary references and film inspirations. Many have drawn parallels between the grey monotony of the EP and *Silent Hill*, even though *Anhedonia* has never mentioned it as a source of inspiration. For the purpose of this brief article I didn't have time to watch or read any of the references, but I will list the most relevant here for journalistic purposes (and in case you want to dive deeper, I certainly will when I have the time):

The Reflective Skin dir. Phillip Ridley (1991) Stills from the movie are used in promotional materials, while its aesthetic (golden fields of wheat, aka amber waves) is referenced lyrically. *Knockemstiff* by Donald Ray Pollock (2008) The book of short stories that began the idea of a pervers case study, itself a recount of different deviants and named after the town in Ohio. *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis (1945) Though mentioned by a reviewer⁷, not *Anhedonia* herself, themes of mortality and the divine, as well as strong visual elements make it a twin to *Perverts* in both visual and thematic form.

Along with the literary references mentioned by *Anhedonia* herself, some draw parallels between *Perverts* and Dante's *Inferno*, likely because of *Anhedonia*'s reference to Ptolomea – the third ring of the ninth layer of Dante's hell – via a song of the same name on *Preacher's Daughter*. Though the EP is nine songs long, thus paralleling the number of layers in Dante's hell, and some songs fit neatly under one of nine sins (Punish is Lust, Etienne is Violence, Amber Waves is Gluttony), because *Anhedonia*'s end project already deviated from the concept of songs from the perspectives of different pervers, it becomes a stretch to assign each song a unique sin (Lust comes up many times). Though Dante's *inferno* is so foundational to the discussion of mortality, divinity, and sin, *Anhedonia*'s *Perverts* is more subversive than the categorization of each song into a distinct bucket. *Perverts* lingers and repeats in part because its core idea is about the chaotic and difficult reality of mortality.

V - Too Much About *The Great Divorce* and Symmetry.

Dante's *Inferno* is also decisively about the heavenly (or hellishly), not the earthly. *The Great Divorce* on the other hand, is supposedly a meditation on terrifyingly human experiences, just like *Perverts*. Again, I haven't read the 1945 novel, however, from what I understand, it centers a fall to hell, an ascension to heaven, and a return to mortality, much like the structure of both *Perverts* and *Preacher's Daughter*. On *Preacher's Daughter*, titular character Ethel Cain oscillates between heaven and hell, with the last five songs representing this journey:

1. Family Tree (Intro) – mortality
2. American Teenager – mortality
3. House in Nebraska – mortality
4. Western Nights – mortality
5. Family Tree – mortality
6. Hard Times – mortality
7. Thoroughfare – mortality
8. Gibson Girl – mortality

⁷ <https://www.thelineofbestfit.com/albums/ethel-cain-perverts-from-hell-to-heaven-and-back>

9. Ptolomea – decent to hell
10. August Underground – hell
11. Televangelism – ascent to heaven
12. Sun Bleached Flies – heaven
13. Strangers – return to mortality

Though *Hard Times* and *Gibson Girl* recount horrible situations for Ethel (being sexually abused as a child, and being drugged and pimped out), they are decisively human ills. What begins in Ptolomea, as cued by the distorted vocals and droning build up, is the ritual sacrifice and murder of Ethel Cain. Now, Ethel's descent into hell during Ptolomea and instrumental stay in August Underground aren't her fault, technically she isn't being punished by God. Rather, hell is the feeling, and it can only be the feeling because Ethel still believes in God. This belief in God is what allows her to ascend to heaven in another instrumental, Televangelism, and reflect on her time there in Sun Bleached Flies. So why not end it there? Like *The Great Divorce*, Ethel returns to earth in a juxtaposingly sweet song about being cannibalized. Though many misinterpret Ptolomea as the moment of Ethel's cannibalization, it occurs on Strangers where she sings "Am I making you feel sick?" Being cannibalized isn't as horrible as the betrayal she experienced on Ptolomea because Ethel understands and accepts her mortality, as well as the mortality of her killer. Though some don't interpret Strangers as a mortally grounded and Godless song, I continue to interpret it as such because Ethel ends the album with a call out to her mother, instead of God, whom she repeatedly called out to in the rest of the album.

Similar to *Preacher's Daughter*, though more cynically so, *Perverts* repeats *The Great Divorce* cycle but stays in hell, instead of the mortal world, for the majority of its journey:

1. Perverts – decent to hell
2. Punish – hell
3. Housofpsychoticwomn – hell
4. Vacillator – hell
5. Onanist – hell
6. Pulldrone – hell
7. Etienne – ascent to heaven
8. Thatorchia – heaven
9. Amber Waves – mortality

An inverse of *Preacher's Daughter*, though not by that much since practically every song on *Perverts* is an instrumental, the ascent to heaven begins in the monologue at the end of Etienne and sustains itself on the peaceful Thatorchia. *Perverts* lack of narrative cohesion (not a bad thing, just very different from *Preacher's Daughter*) makes it a bit difficult to justify the placement of the descents and ascents, however it is still clear, though perhaps less satisfyingly than on *Preacher's Daughter*. The descent to hell occurs after the sharp juxtaposition between the hymn "Nearer, My God, to Thee" and the statement "Heaven has forsaken the masturbator." Here, though there is little narrative to metaphorize the fall, the blunt lyrical juxtaposition makes it clear. Though Punish is similarly mortal to *Hard Times* and *Gibson Girl*, its focus on the continued punishment of the act after the fact, instead of the disillusioned reflection of happenings on *Hard Times* and the present moment of *Gibson Girl*, makes its narration from

hell instead of from the mortal world, more sensible. As my lyrical annotations later in the article will further corroborate, the sound and state of the narrators on tracks 3-7 are clearly mortals writhing in the torture of their sins, perversions. Whether they are forsaken by God or not, they create their own hells. Etienne, however, breaks the droning and moaning tradition of the previous tracks by telling the story of a man who attempts to kill himself by overexerting his out of shape body. As he keeps running, the running makes him feel good. His punishment becomes his pleasure and he ascends. Though he neither ascends nor descends literally, like Ethel on *Preacher's Daughter*, his emotion is more symbolic of the ascension which continues on the sweet and instrumental Thatorchia. This heavenly delusion ends on Amber Waves where a similar sunny clarity is painted as on Strangers, this time with an alcoholic blur as the narrator recalls his addiction to pills and the loss of his lover to his addiction. The statement that closes out the track, and *Perverts* as a whole, "I can't feel anything," is decisively mortal, evocative of the "days that go by, time on without [us]" of work, of school, of addiction, of duty.

So while *Preacher's Daughter* ends on the defiant statement "Am I making you feel sick?" *Perverts* resigns itself to "I can't feel anything." Hayden Anhedonia paints two different conceptions of the truth of the mortal world – freeing, disappointing, torturously numb.

VI - Tracks (In Depth).

Though at this point I need not ask if I am making you feel sick with analysis and psychotic devotion (but this is our collective torture, the perversion of *Perverts*), I have taken the time to compile lyrical and structural analyses of each track that contribute to the overall meaning of the EP (and to the overall excessive length of this article).

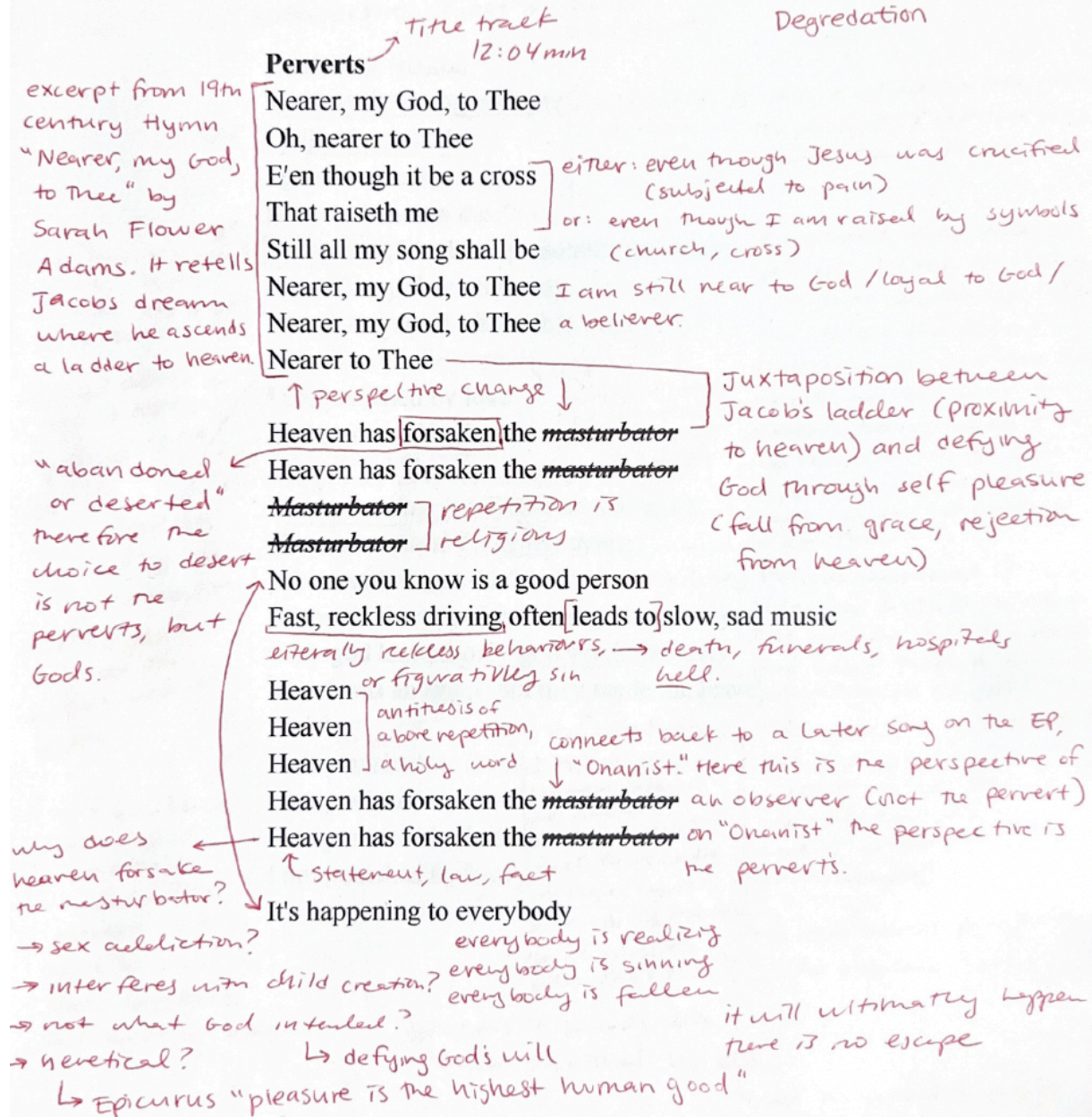
Perverts

The title track opens on a juxtaposition: between closeness to god and forsakenness. The opening hymn, sung in lo-fi by Anhedonia, retells Jacob's dream of the ladder to heaven, making the idea of nearness to God and the fall from heaven literal.

Dante's 6th Layer of Hell

Heresy

Baudrillard's 10th Pillar Degredation



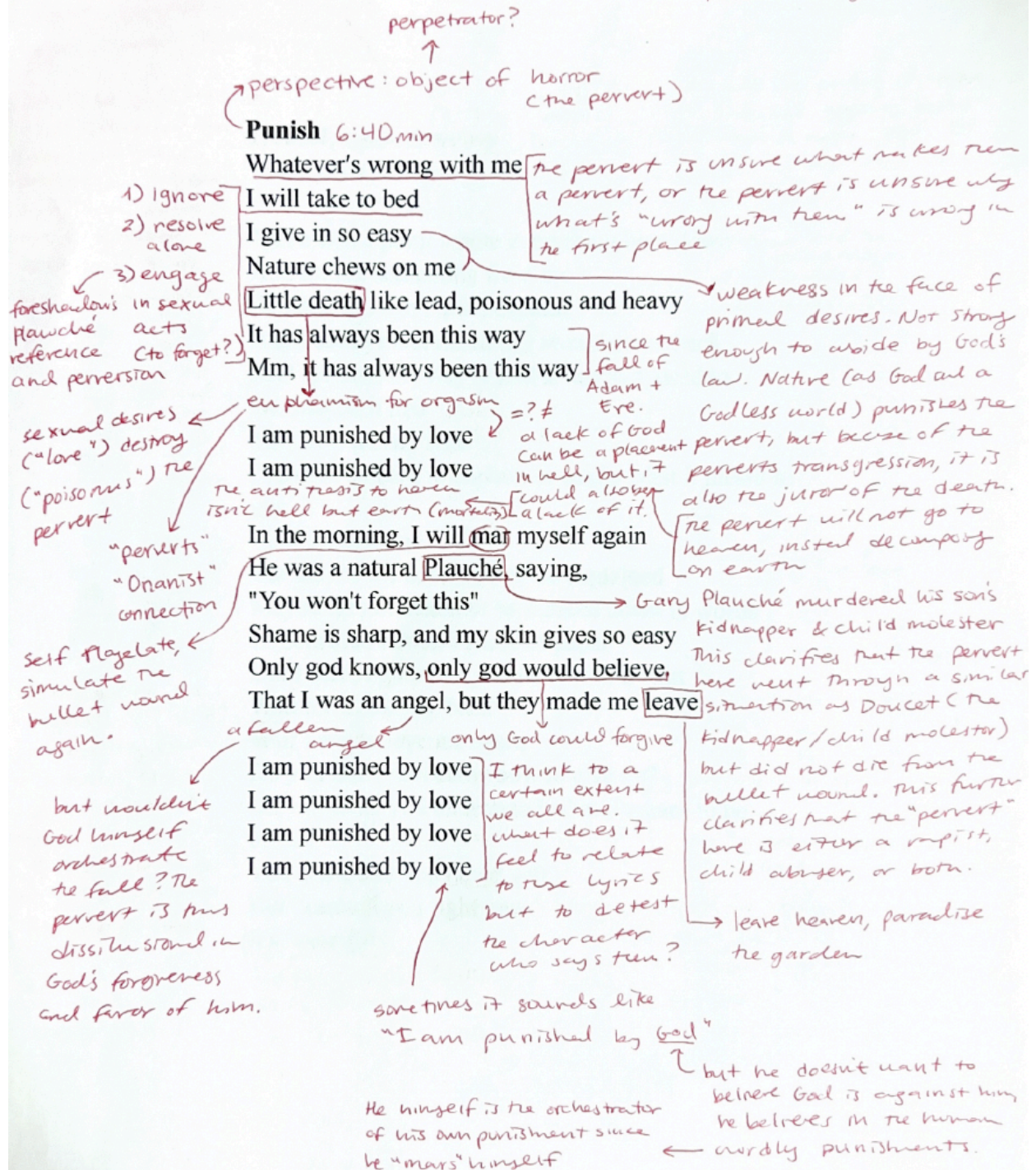
Punish

Unlike the title track, whose perspective is multiple and debatable, Punish is from the clear perspective of a sexual offender⁸ inspired by the killing of Jeffery Doucet by Gary Plauche⁹.

⁸ <https://genius.com/Ethel-cain-punish-lyrics>

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PUE8fYxjq8&rco=1

Miracle Village, FL



The title of this track refers to the book *House of Psychotic Women: An Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in Horror and Exploitation Films*¹⁰. The song itself isn't as clear a reference to horror as the title may have you believe. It isn't particularly horrific beyond the distorting repeats of "I love you" and "I do."

¹⁰ <https://genius.com/Ethel-cain-housofpsychoticwomn-lyrics>

psychotic
subject: ~~long~~ woman
object: ~~long~~ object

could be somewhat of
a "perversion" in the
idea that men
pursue but women
don't. But women
are expected to
have love, to be
long, so it could
be either.

either
love or
sexual
purity/
dignity

Hous of psychotic woman

I love you (x 8)

13:35
wom (an) → without the ending of -man,
woman (w) → the subject appears less
human & more female
"womn" resembles
"womb"

There was a point where everything bent down

→ would then
reference an angel

And it took something from me

reminds of
sexual assault + rhetoric

Something I can't quite explain

And I always wondered if it would come back

And love me the way it said it was supposed to

→ if "it" is the subject
perhaps the lover (or
the lover's love) is what
was taken

But maybe it lied

pronouns are ambiguous,
could refer to God, to
the lover, to both

Maybe it was all a lie

I've tried so hard to explain in words what it meant to
me

How it felt to me

But maybe it's not meant to be explained

Maybe it's not meant to be marked down in words

Or scrawled out on a piece of paper

"it" → love
↓
God
Anhedonia's great
thing

Until then, I guess I'll just lie here and wait

Wait for it to come back

Wait for it to love me again

Do you think you know how to give up?

giving up is a privilege sometimes

Do you think you understand what it means to be

loved? → if in the context of God, it would seem sinners haven't
felt the love of God by some interpretation

You don't, and you never will

But I can tell you right now

any sin begets forgiveness?

It's beautiful

big talk coming from a
"pervert" "sinner" or
"psychotic woman"

Ecstasy of St. Teresa,
God's powerful is beautiful
(and sexually charged)

since both the
letters "E" & "A"
are missing from
the title, it can
be interpreted
next may stand for
Eve & Adam &
thus the love they
wait for is God's
love.

irony / juxtaposing sentiments

It is such a precious thing to be loved] and yet the protagonist mentions previously they are no longer loved, we only understand the true extent of society's precious when it is taken away from us

Such a precious, magnificent thing to be loved

Such a wondrous and painful thing to be loved

When you were young, you said you wished that someone loved you

I do → this complicates the idea that the "it" or object of the woman's love is God

I do

I do

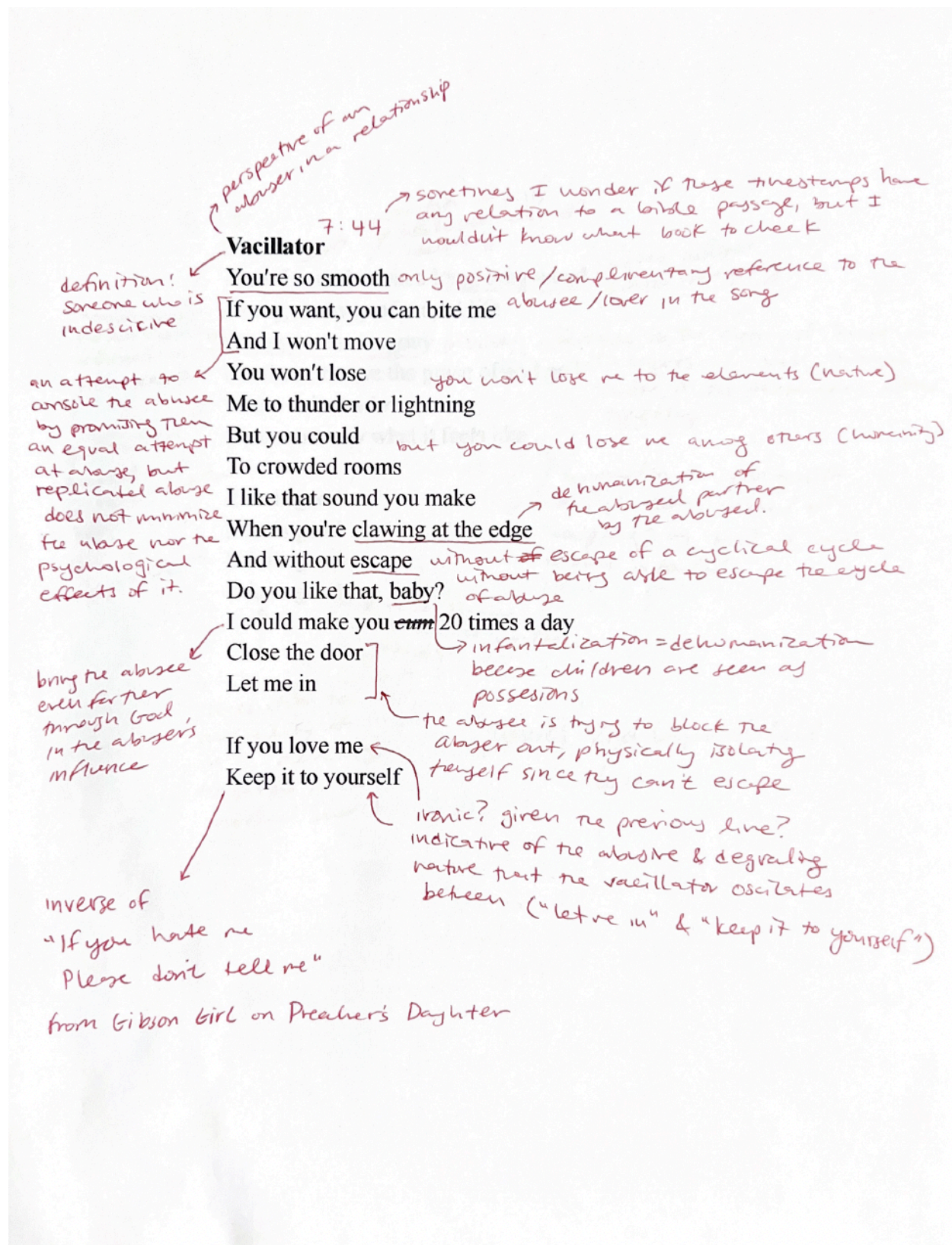
I do

I love you (x 18) → evocative of the protagonist's psychosis

repetition is religious, but at what point does it become self serving, lustful, degraded? Does not repeating to such a frequency degrade the message, no matter how religious?

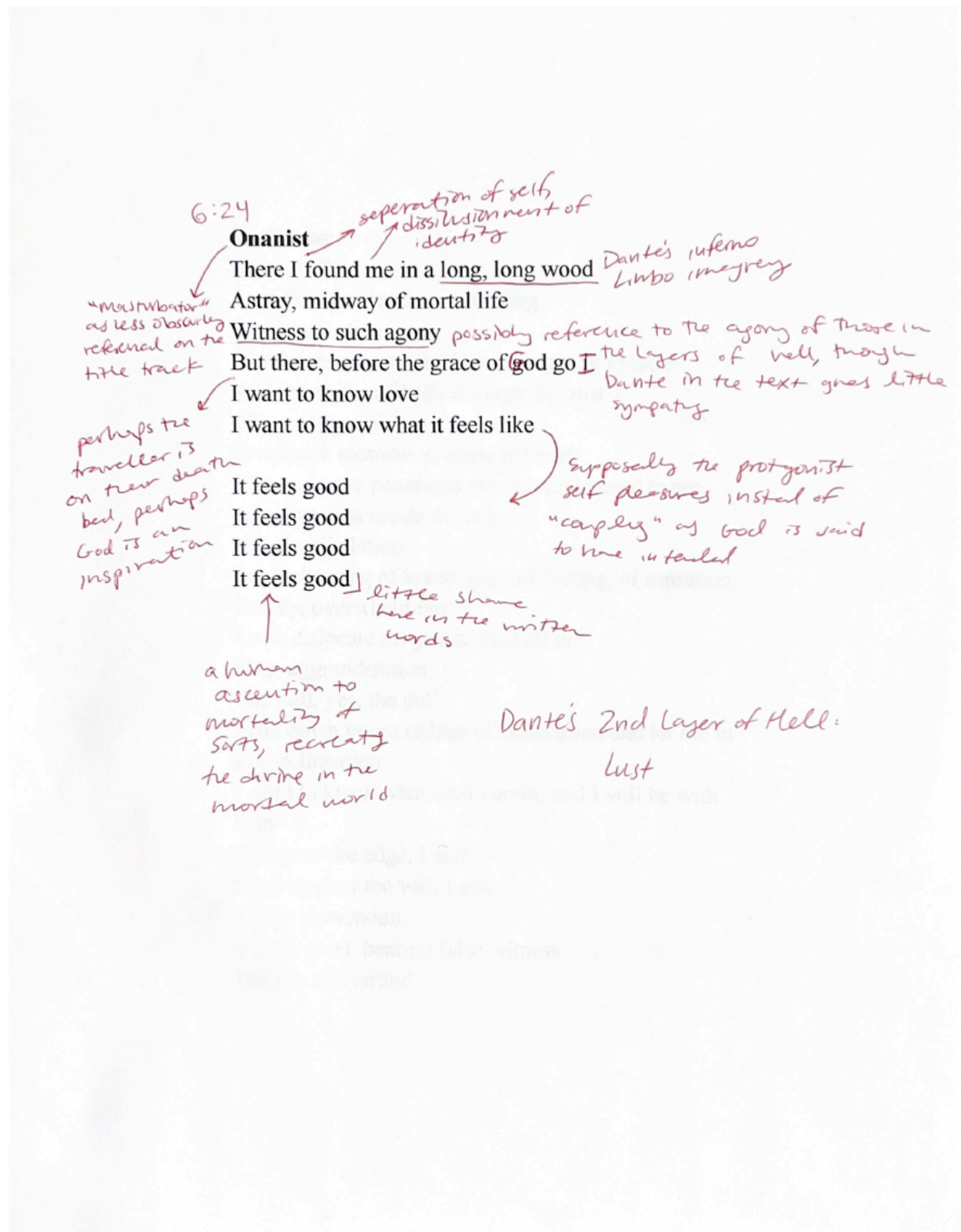
The perspective of an abuser in a relationship¹¹ is considered here, though interestingly, unlike in other songs from the perspectives of “perverts,” there is little to no shame expressed by him.

¹¹ <https://genius.com/Ethel-cain-vacillator-lyrics>



Covering similar themes as the title track, this time from the perspective of the pervert and with less obvious wording (Onanist is a rather obscure word referring to someone who self pleasures¹²), this is perhaps the most clearly Dante inspired song on the album due to its imagery of a dark forest.

¹² <https://genius.com/Ethel-cain-onanist-lyrics>



DO NOT ASK ME.¹³

¹³ ask her. or listen to this: <https://www.nts.live/shows/ethel-cain>

I DON'T KNOW

Pulldrone

One, apathy

I am that I am, and I am nothing

Two, disruption

There goes a great shudder through the muscle

A shimmering of bells through the mist

Three, curiosity

One quick moment to crane the neck

I have always possessed the insatiable need to see
what happens inside the room

Four, assimilation

Lo, wellspring of knowledge, of feeling, of sensation

Beauty, overwhelming

I will dislocate my jaw to fit it all in

Five, aggrandization

The pull, yes, the pull

Send down your cordage of suffocation and let me in

Six, delineation

I want to know what God knows, and I will be with
Him

Sent over the edge, I sigh

Flush against the veil, I sing

Seven, perversion

It is no good, bearing false witness

The sinner's errand

I'M SORRY

I'M SORRY

I am what I am, but we are not the same
It is no good, speaking of fairness
The fool's errand
Eight, resentment
Are these laurels to be proud of?
Let me tell you how much I've come to hate you
since I began to live
Hate, hate
Nine, separation
I was an angel, though plummeting
The stars are as beams shining through the wheel
I am sure that hell must be cold
Ten, degradation
Nature chews on me
Eleven, annihilation
This agony
Such is the consequence of audience
I will claw my way back to the great dark, and we
will not speak of this place again
Twelve, desolation
Therein lies sacred geometry of onanism
Of ouroboros, of punishment
I am that I was as I no longer am, for I am nothing
Amen

I'M SORRY

Named after architect Etienne-Louis Boullée¹⁴ and referencing his plan for Isacc Newton's grave, this song is Anhedonia's appreciation for his neoclassical work.

¹⁴ <https://genius.com/Ethel-cain-etienne-lyrics>

perspective of suicidal
possibly chronically ill(?) man.

Dante's 7th layer of Hell
Violence

suicide is a
perversion of life
but then the man
perverts the suicide
by wanting to live
again... double.

8:43
Etienne

this is an intro
to the otherwise
instrumental
song

So he decided that the best way to end his life was to
have a heart attack

He thought he could induce the heart attack

By running a very fast rate for a sizable distance

'Til his heart was exhausted and he died

So he set out to run as hard as he could

He ran and he ran until he was exhausted

And he collapsed, but he didn't die

So the next night he tried the same thing

And he ran again, and he still didn't die

So he tried again the third night, and then the fourth
and the fifth

And after this had been going on for a week

He felt so good that he didn't want to kill himself
anymore

↳ a mortal way to
reconcile, so the
man makes further
away from the
divine in two ways.

specifically the
forest for those
committed suicide

↳ suicide is heavily
framed upon in
Christianity because of
the belief that since
God created humans
only God should
have the power to take
life away as well

repetition is spiritual,
also humanly proven
to be effective, so his
recovery is both
incredibly moral
and religious in its
own right

Thatorchia
Instrumental.

Amber Waves

One of three songs remaining from the original concept of *Perverts* centers around addiction and losing love and life because of it¹⁵. It uses the imagery of *Amber Waves* from “America the Beautiful” by Katherine Lee Bates¹⁶ and though it centers a personal addiction, it can also be interpreted as commenting

¹⁵ <https://genius.com/Ethel-cain-amber-waves-lyrics>

¹⁶ <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/america-beautiful-1893>

on the abuse and destruction of American society by the addictive.

A good song for thinking in the shower

11:32

Amber Waves

excerpt from
1970's Little
Haze on the
Prairie

corroborates
the imagery
of Amber
waves from
"America's the
Beautiful" poem
what
summer feels
like sometimes,
but also refers to
the protagonists
denial of the real
world, instead using
drugs to escape
via catatonia

to feel beyond
the human experience
to experiment with
highs.

Um, I don't know I-, I-, I'll take it

Um, how much should I take?

I would recommend that you take just as much as you
need

(To feel good) again, human pleasure above God,
above acceptability. This creates an
easy environment to overdose or
become addicted

Before she leaves

Amber waves at me

Days go by

Time on without me

I'll be alright

I'll be alright

I take the long way home

Shaking the bottle and letting them roll

'Cause the devil I know

Is the devil I want

Is it not fun

(To feel many other ways?)

What you do

Is nothing to me

the addict
is empty, I still kick rocks when the walking is good)
And pretend at the chain link that I am the wood

nothing
matters

pretend to be a stronger &
nicer fence (picket for example)
instead of the flimsy and hollow
chain link → metaphor for fulfilled life/
better circumstances

sometimes the addict can
feel society when
they choose to, there
is some semblance of
humanness and choice

either a lover cast aside by the drug
addicted protagonist, or the "golden
age of America" cast aside by a
modern (and opioid addicted) society

empty words

alleged self discovery

shaking pills out of a bottle
and letting the pills roll into a hole,
"shaking the bottle" also evokes
imagery of an alcoholic

being addicted is easier to
deal with than being a good
person to Amber (being a good
person in a relationship)

As I'm leaning my head back

Sayin', "Take me, I ain't gonna scream"

Yet here I am, empty

[Watching love of mine leave]

But I'll be alright

Me and my amber waves

I'll be alright, I'll

Is it not fun

To feel many other ways?

What you do

Is nothing to me

Is it not fun

In the (catatonia?) disorder categorized

[Maybe it's true

You were nothing to me

I can't feel anything

Finally admitting the reality

And I agree

a mellow oscillation of numbed
emotions. Anger, complacency,
weak, tickling love.

in a screaming or
pill swallowing notion

they would not mind being
taken (dying) because it
doesn't feel like anything,
or rather because it hurts
so much, but they can't
scream because the addiction
leaves them feeling so empty

Amber
the addiction
becomes too
much for the
lover to bear

only because
the pills numb
the feelings, it's
still an empty
promise

the pills make the
addict believe
there were no feelings
in the first place
because in the end,
after all the drug
use, the addict
can't feel anything,
they're only a shell
of their former self

Amber shifts from a person to
a concept, a comfort
by the memories of the way even
after they are gone

by irregular movement
including intense
immobility

Though *Perverts* might be aesthetically far from horror and slasher films, neither evoking bloody imagery nor satanic chants, the everyday and omnipresent static horror she presents is more akin to the dreadful processing of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Drawn out and complicated, harrowing and deadly in its mental turmoil.

The horror of *Perverts* is the horror of ourselves. The feelings of our bodies and the shame of our feelings. Hayden Anhedonia brings our separated selves together – the judger and the feeler, the shameful and the shamed. By the end of *Perverts* we awaken from a droning dream, feeling spit from someone's acidic stomach. We feel reduced to the pink noise, fuzzy and filled, did mortality always feel this way?

VIII - Epilogue (Apology).

If you know anything about *Perverts* you will know I have neglected to mention Baudillard's Pillars of Simulacra¹⁷ and Anhedonia's Ring¹⁸. This is because I have not had time to do the work to understand it, though I hope to in the future. Further references will be left in the footnotes.

Works Cited.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, Jean, 1929-2007. Simulacra and Simulation. Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1994.

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23RghN4sHkM>