

## EMBRACING THE SIRENS

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First Place, Essay

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**T**HERE IS A PLACE IN WHICH I THRIVE that defies orthodox description. Reality is powerless within this sanctuary, as it is immune to decay, pressure, and the passing of time itself. Here there is joy, tranquility, exaltation, sorrow, loss, and rage. The entire spectrum of human existence—who we are, what we endure and may ultimately become—rests within my paradise. From this ivory tower I can drink in transcendent peace or passionately burn until all that remains are cooling embers and lightning coursing through my spine. I am free to run the corridors of my mind and drown in the purest form of human expression. My world, my escape, my haven and lover is music itself.

Music is not just entertainment or background noise, it is my drug—Eden in a needle. I give myself over to a song completely, embracing a singer's fear and pain as my own, or envisioning myself floating on the surface of an orchestral lake, rising and falling with the liquid cadence. Every band, each song, is a source of refuge and inspiration all its own; some shroud me in calm, while others ignite my soul. One pours grief into my heart, tightening my throat, while the next bathes me in euphoria, the rush almost dizzying. This versatility and limitless capacity for expression is the hallmark and beauty of music.

The Norwegian band, Tristania, is a monument to the art of emotional manipulation. When depression strikes me, I frequently turn to them, allowing *Equilibrium* to feed my pain with its soothing vocals, lonely acoustic harmonies, and haunting lyrics: *I swim in you / in your dark rivers / dive in your mind / search for your monsters, search for resistance / sink into the mud*. Though the melancholy song inspires no joy, sometimes what I need isn't for someone to lift me out of my mud, but simply to sink into it next to me. Conversely, when all I crave is pleasure, I dive into *Angina*, another Tristania masterpiece—this one driven by an exquisite drumbeat and a fusion of female soprano and male growling vocals. The intensity of the music, fueled by the choir and violin solos, immediately fires a shock of adrenaline through my veins, my stairway to Elysium. Though their styles differ drastically, the catharsis I find in these songs is truly a testimony to both Tristania's talent and the raw power of music.

In contrast, sometimes a single piece of music can evoke quite different feelings in me depending on when I listen to it. *Nemo*, by the symphonic metal band Nightwish, is an upbeat song laced with spirited bass-lines and classical instruments, brought to life by Tarja Turunen's angelic vocals. Spiraling through gentle, reflective verses and choruses bursting with horns and strings, *Nemo* anchors perfectly into both my somber and joyous moods. If I listen to it with a

heavy heart I descend into the lyrics, identifying with Tarja's lament: *This is me for forever / one of the lost ones / the one without a name / without an honest heart as compass*. But when I am in high spirits, *Nemo's* passion and beauty translate into rapture, and as the epic final chorus lifts me up, I learn to fly.

This emotional hurricane occasionally stirs up vivid surreal landscapes. While most music grants my mind's eye rest, the best will carry me off to other worlds—places which neither truly exist, nor do not. Spellbound, I close my eyes and sink into the silhouettes rising in my mind's eye, allowing them to blot out light, touch, and even time. I am neither asleep nor awake—lost in the other reality, yet physically bound to this one. I am there now; I am taken.

Opeth's album, *Blackwater Park*, is one such masterpiece. The monolithic title track captures the collapse of a society at the hands of a merciless plague in corrosive poetry: *Lepers coiled 'neath the trees / dying men in bewildered soliloquies / perversions bloom 'round the bend / seekers, lost in their quest / ghosts of friends frolic / under the waning moon*. Fearful anxiety permeating its opening chords, *Blackwater Park* turns sinister as Mikael Åkerfeldt shrieks the first verse, and then the storm suddenly breaks without warning, leaving behind a tranquil acoustic passage. A lone guitar whispers in your ear so gently that you could almost sleep through it, yet it carries a pervasive tone of desperation that claws at your heart. Something is not right here; you can feel the wind picking up speed, but cannot see the thunderheads on the horizon. The graceful tune conveys crushing loss, a sense of paranoid isolation—and then the guitars, drums, and vocals descend without warning, shattering the fragile peace. The rampaging drums accelerate mercilessly and the guitars poison all hope as the lyrics unveil the end. Disease has brought death to this town, death has led to panic, and panic to self-destruction. Amidst a staggering crescendo, Åkerfeldt roars, *sick liaisons raised this monumental mark / the sun sets forever over Blackwater Park*, and the song comes to a close. The final chord conjures up a city in ruin; its story has been written, the book closed and burned. Seconds later, only silence remains.

*Blackwater Park's* cover artwork—a bleak swamp with human shadows hidden amongst the trees—has always evoked powerful imagery in my mind. When I listen to the title track with my eyes closed, I can feel the cold on my skin and sense the branches whipping at my face as I force my way through the desolate marsh. A chill cuts through me, and I witness the collapse of an unsuspecting civilization as Åkerfeldt screams, *I am just a spectator / an advocate documenting the loss / fluttering with conceit / this doesn't concern me yet / still far from the knell / taunting their bereavement*. I hear the mothers wailing in the village, see the suffering clinging to one another, carts burdened with the dead. The smells of sweet, wet leaves and earth, chimney smoke, ripe gutters, and funeral pyres coalesce and choke the air around me. Then I open my eyes and destruction

evaporates into reality. The scene is gone, but so is the emotion, and with it the experience of it all. It had all seemed so real just moments ago.

It is this hypnotic immersion which convinces me that music is the purest form of expression. Songs do not merely tell stories—they create the nonexistent for the short time the listener is held captive. The resulting experience can be frightening or soothing, causing us to be introspective and critical, or carefree and reckless. Music trawls our souls, digging up what we've tried to bury, or finding that which we were once afraid we'd lost. It can imprison us within ourselves or kick down the doors to self-discovery and release. Music is the apex of art, mathematics, language, and beauty. It literally defines human expression, knowing no limitations in laying bare our hearts. Music is where I feel most alive, my alternative to drugs and alcohol, my therapy and my passion. A painting may steal my breath, a book might refuse to let me sleep, but music, I believe, surpasses both as an art form. A truly gifted band, in essence, is one which paints a best-selling novel through a sound track that can never die.

