The Modest Narrator

By Matthew Gremo

Tassie Keltjin, the introspective twenty-year-old narrator of Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs,* exists within the least conducive social climate for a young woman whose years of repressed adolescent discovery and aspirations in finding herself have finally begun to surface. Two decades of bottled up uncertainty have poised themselves to erupt into a society still fresh with post-9/11 fear, racism, and misguided notions of the world outside of the United States. While Tassie herself maintains an almost willful ignorance to the issues of the world at large, she exists as a sampled microcosm to the nation's flood of unrestrained emotions—showcasing the absurdity of her country's actions by the ease in which they can be related to a young woman searching for her identity. One of the only luxuries capable of providing blind comfort to her disassociated thoughts and fears is the overwhelming warmth offered by music. Each time Tassie straps on her transparent bass and wraps her headphones around her ears, she is offered the simplest form of escape in a most deserving self-medicated fashion. It is in these moments, in which she unknowingly administers crash courses in music therapy, that she is capable of re-grounding herself through passion and honest exploration.

Growing up on a small farm as the daughter to an increasingly drunken father and an unintentionally distant mother, Tassie's seclusion from outside forces was almost entirely inherent. There were no children to relate to or share stories with—aside from conversations with her brother which lacked any genuine emotion—and any attempt to latch onto something that varied from what was expected of her was matched with the small town's unified response of "well, that's different" (Moore 67). Her rural home itself was even further removed from this scattered society by the unusual nature of her father's farm and his inability, or unwillingness, to

follow suit with his peers by painting his barn blue instead of red and choosing to grow potatoes instead of more traditional cash-crops (Moore 19). This forced isolation from such a young age made the transplant to a college town all the more of a shock to the system for Tassie, causing her to constantly doubt her words and actions in this new world, which her peers had already adapted to and thrived in. Finding herself uncertain of every decision she faces, any direct statement she makes is adjusted with a contraction of "quasi," in order to distance herself from every truly saying anything (Moore 23). This internal struggle of trying to define her own identity within this new world constantly plagues her mind and leads to extreme anxiety and self-deprecation. In order to find solace from the torrent of thoughts constantly bombarding her psyche and calm her doubts and fears, she retreats back into the familiarity of isolation and turns to music as a means of coping. Without being entirely aware of its healing nature, Tassie consistently self-administers forms of music therapy as a means to assist in dealing with and expressing her bottled up emotions.

The most traditional forms of music therapy—as stated ironically in the introduction to a "quasi-experimental study"—take shape as "free and structured improvisation," singing songs that are "familiar" or "improvised," and of course, "listening to music" (Gold, Wigram, & Voracek 292). Even before the tragic events of the novel unfold and assault the narrator's psyche, these methods were being implemented by Tassie as coping mechanisms to simply existing. An unusual cornucopia of tastes in music, coupled with the repressed persona of a "lyric lass," leads Tassie to finding solace in both listening to music and writing her own songs. By doing so, she is able to find brief moments of peace within her hyper-analytical thought processes and refocus on solidifying her own identity. The actual benefits of these excursions, however, are quite possibly entirely unknown to Tassie; as, to comprehend the therapeutic

effects of music, it is necessary to understand how it can be "metaphorically represented as both a mirror and a window" to the individual psyche (McFerran, Roberts, & O'Grady 543).

The concept of music therapy acting as a mirror for the individual is represented by its ability to reflect "an emphasis on the personal, including the intrapersonal and private roles that [it] can fulfill," especially when the individual is aware that there is "no expectation of an audience for their musical engagement" (McFerran, Roberts, & O'Grady 544). In this way, music is used to "reflect on past experiences," and to plan "future direction" (McFerran, Roberts, & O'Grady 544). As all of Tassie's "adult" excursions into music exist almost entirely in private, they act as the most honest representations of her actual character. Unfortunately, the majority of the music that Tassie listens to and performs is only partially alluded to with the lists of band names currently rushing into her ears, including, but certainly not limited to: Sleater-Kinney, the Violent Femmes, and Modest Mouse (Moore 27). To pinpoint precise albums and songs that could operate as a potential mirror requires historical context, as well as an understanding of the neurotic character traits which inhabit Tassie's mind. As Modest Mouse is one of the few bands who are mentioned twice in the novel—first when Tassie introduces her love for music and later as a means to distract her from the frigid temperature in her apartment—and because their front-man shares an upbringing similar to that of Tassie, they act as a plausible template by which to apply the mirror theory.

Just as Tassie's fear in saying or doing the wrong thing leads her to be unable to speak with any authority or decisiveness, Modest Mouse has been described as crafting songs that, while rooted in a "profound and complex worldview," are "permeated by paradoxes" (Smith 428). Their front man, Isaac Brock, actually lived a similarly detached life to Tassie, as he was "raised in communes until he settled into a trailer park," causing the majority of his songs to be

inspired by his exposure to a rapidly urbanizing society (Smith 431). Their most noticeable work, *Good News for People who Love Bad News,* would certainly be the easiest album to draw parallels to along Tassie's life, as well as the plot of the novel as a whole—with lyrics such as "Don't worry, we'll all float on okay" acting as a perfect soundtrack to the overwhelming sense of acquiescence running through the veins of every character in the story ('Float On').

In fact, the album was created as a response to what Brock saw around him in the slowly crumbling society that followed the attacks of 9/11. In an interview shortly following the album's release, Brock stated his lyrical inspiration as being a "completely conscious thing" in response to "how bad shit had been going, and how dark everything was, with bad news coming from everywhere. Our president is just a fucking daily dose of bad news….I just [wanted] to feel good for a day….I just wanted to make a positive record" (qtd. in Smith 446). However, despite Brock's attempts to write "optimistic songs," they were still "always tinged with resignation," as he was unable to fully accept that everything truly would end "okay" (Smith 448). While this notion running throughout the album may have greatly influenced Moore when writing the novel, the album itself was not released until 2005, making Modest Mouse's groundbreaking release of *The Moon and Antarctica,* in 2000, a far more plausible deduction as to what Tassie was actually listening to.

The album is described as the tale of an "alienated individual searching for a home in the universe, setting out on a journey away from 'the cold, cold part of the world'" who wants "everyday reality to remain outside, allowing the actual material world to erupt within, and is prepared to indulge in fantasy until it does" (Smith 441). Chalked full of front-man Isaac Brock's gritty and abstract lyrics, the album offers commentary on what he perceived to be an overcrowded and decaying society, with songs such as "3rd Planet," "Tiny Cities Made of

Ashes," and "Dark Center of the Universe." While each of these songs could act as a platform to better understand Tassie's environment, Brock's own introspective pieces, such as "Paper Thin Walls," offer far more commentary on her psyche. Playing as if it were an anthem to entertain Tassie's severe neuroses, it operates as the perfect "mirror" to her actual character.

Strangely enough, the song is predominately comprised of a series of acoustic guitars and features only very subtle bass—posing no problem to a woman who "contrived to know stray licks not usually played on bass," especially when compared to the rest of her repertoire from "the olden days," such as Jimi Hendrix (Moore 27). It begins with an outright statement addressing the core of Tassie's overwhelming sense of anxiety with, "These walls are paper thin / and everyone hears every single sound / Everyone's a voyeurist, they're watching me / watch them, watch me right now" (Brock). Tassie's belief that everyone is watching and judging her actions is a running theme in her rambling stream of thoughts, originally manifesting when she first meets Sarah and becomes incredibly self-conscious as to how she is talking and acting. Something as simple as saying "congratulations" to the news of Sara pursuing adoption, is questioned as to whether or not it is "what people say"—as Tassie exists in a constant state of worrying about how others may perceive her (Moore 16). Likewise, her fear in being evaluated by those whom she meets is projected onto others with an extreme over-analysis of their physical appearances. With Sara, for instance, this manifests as lengthy observations, noting such things as her face resembling the "…powdered, thinning skin like a crepe, with the same light freckles as a crepe, her gnarly-knuckled hand, arthritic from chopping herbs, going through her spiky russet hair," and so on (Moore 37).

This method of projection, while acting as a marker to Tassie's own psychological issues, is never applied as a defense or coping mechanism. Traditionally, according to psychoanalytic

theory, projection is a means by which to "believe, without real cause, that someone else feels the same way we feel, specifically that someone else has the same problem we want to deny that we, ourselves, have" (Tyson 84). For the majority of the novel, however, these observations are kept solely inside the framework of Tassie's own mind, and therefore never provide the brief moments of undeserved solace she may have obtained by sharing them with the individual she was observing. In fact, the very process of retaining the over-critical examinations of others is what leads to Tassie assuming that others are doing the same to her. In turn, this immense build-up of constant anxiety requires the relief provided by music; in this instance, the unconscious association with someone else sharing the same delusion and therefore removing the stigma of something being wrong with the way in which she perceives others.

As the song's introspective chant comes to an end, the simple line "I can't be a fool for everyone that I don't know" offers further context as to how this piece could potentially act as a "mirror" for Tassie. As the metaphorical interpretation of music acting as a mirror can be expanded to incorporate its "reflective role" in identifying "self-perception" beyond the "abstract reflection of internal state," the final lyric of "Paper Thin Walls" can be identified as Tassie's sole aspiration for her future self (McFerran, Roberts, & O'Grady 544). By ultimately defusing her anxiety and abandoning the fear of how others perceive her, she will be able to obtain a true sense of identity and cease playing the "fool" who is only concerned with emulating the expected nature of others.

However, simply identifying the music that Tassie could potentially be listening to—especially when the act of doing so requires presumptions to be pieced together like a puzzle in order to understand the influence of what one of over thirty bands could have had on her thoughts and actions—is only the tip of the iceberg in understanding the therapeutic impact of

music on her psyche. As she delves further into auditory medication by actually playing her bass as a means of relaxation, the second metaphorical understanding of music therapy—seeing music as a "window"—can be used to further understand her character. This theory views performing a musical piece as equivalent to a "performance of identity"—one which in most cases would be used to "assert public personality" (McFerran, Roberts, & O'Grady 544). Tassie, however, rarely performs with anyone else to hear her—save for her roommate Murph, on occasion. In fact, she recalls once agreeing to perform at a local fair in her hometown of Dellacrosse, where she "played 'Blue Bells of Scotland' and wore a kilt," only to arrive at the conclusion that "everyone at that stupid fair had their head up their hinder," as they pinned her a "lyric lass" (Moore 27).

This element of seclusion in her performances, where only the reader is provided as an audience, works to cement "the idea of music as a window [suggesting] an element of personal control and conscious decision making," but diminishes the aspect of the window theory being used for individuals to wear "music as a badge that identifies their values, attitude, and opinions to others" (McFerran, Roberts, & O'Grady 545). As Tassie is performing for no one but herself, the "window" to her actual identity is far more defined and genuine—acting, instead, as the few moments in which she does not feel the need to put on a show.

Her reluctance to actually perform on stage is most likely—at least partly—attributed to Lorrie Moore's own history in the realm of music. In a 2013 interview, Moore claimed that music had always been one of her passions; however a "humiliating choir audition [her] freshmen year" stopped any dream of her actually performing dead in its tracks (Buntin 32). In another interview, Moore claimed to be "insufficiently gifted and driven" when it came to music, and went on to say, "writing I could plod along with—and no one discouraged me. People were

much kinder. I headed toward the kindness" (Pneuman). While Moore's passion for music has worked its way into the majority of her writing, her abandonment of that passion is most vividly displayed in Tassie—a character which she developed over the course of a ten-year hiatus from novels (The New York Times). The only bright-side to this bleed over into fiction is the incredibly vivid understanding of loss in confidence and uncertainty in ability that Tassie has inherited from the woman who penned her.

Under the constant guiding thought that she is not truly talented, Tassie even attacks her own choice in instrument—proclaiming that her love for the bass is attributed to an amazement in what a "mere four string could do," and while she "started with the cello when very young," she ultimately "descended" to the bass, as if it were a less difficult instrument to master (Moore 64). The move to an electric base, "with its buttery, mushy fingerings" that ultimately classify it as a "toy," from her traditional upright bass, further works to distance Tassie from understanding any talent that she actually has with the instrument (Moore 275). The instrument itself is also incredibly indicative to how Tassie views herself—a backup performer who is not meant to perform center-stage. However, her unwillingness to see her ability as a gift is strangely juxtaposed against her honest passion for playing the instrument. With her entire hometown staring peculiarly at her when seeing her lug it around and even her own brother objecting that the bass is an instrument for boys, it remains the one aspect of Tassie's life that she never questions—the rock amidst her internal turmoil.

This connection to her bass becomes Tassie's lifeline when tragedy strikes in the form of her first true love interest, Reynaldo, leaving her—perhaps to return to a terrorist cell—as she applies the third aspect of music therapy by putting down the headphones and writing her own music. In the realm of music therapy, the ultimate goal is for a patient to express themselves via

their own music, as "lyrics are frequently a way that people relate to the deeper parts of themselves" and assist in lending the individual "an alternative means for finding words to convey their otherwise inaccessible thoughts, emotions, and memories" (Slyter 22). At its heart, this is the true power of music therapy, as patients often understand the value of "expressing their grief-related emotions" but "struggle to find a forum" to do so (McFerran, Roberts, & O'Grady 546). Tassie understands the importance of this approach when she states, "though in real life a boy's love was a meager thing" there was still something to enjoy about "what a boy's love could do in a poem or a song" (Moore 218).

The lyrics themselves are rather poetic and abstract—much in keeping with the bands that inspired her—and even offer context to the novel's namesake. In what Tassie proclaims to be a "waltzy ballad," she sings "Did you take off for Heaven / and leave me behind / Darlin', I'd join you / if you didn't mind / I'd climb up that staircase / past lion and bears / but it's locked / at the foot of the stairs" (Moore 219). To express the emotion of being left behind and not only being unable to chase the one you love, but them not wanting you to, is something that Tassie would be entirely unable to speak to another human being. In fact, it's quite possibly an emotion that she herself would struggle to come to terms with in her own mind. By using song writing as an outlet, instead of only seeking comfort in the lyrics of others, Tassie is finally able to transcend the personal boundaries that she had created for herself and receive the full benefits of the therapeutic nature of music.

This is also Tassie's first experience in what could be considered group therapy, as she is sharing these words and performing music alongside her roommate, Murph. By doing so, she breaks ever so slightly out of her isolation and enters a realm where her emotions can finally be expressed. In this way, her heartbreak in losing Reynaldo works as a catalyst in the evolution of

her character through the vehicle of music. Not only does Tassie begin to comprehend her own emotions, but for the first time she is capable of sharing them with someone else. The importance of this is that it allows Tassie to realize she is "not alone in having such pain," and enables her to potentially find "consolation, and even some resolution, of sorrows" (Slyter 23). These nights spent with Murph also mark the first instances of Tassie finally accepting that she may actually have talent, noting that Murph's remarks on the xylophone being "just a toy" and that "anyone could play," were untrue (Moore 218). This evolution in Tassie understanding both the importance of music, and the genuine emotion it could convey, offers her the necessary tools to cope with the more severe tragedies that would soon encroach on her life.

As the innocence of Mary-Emma, Sara's adopted daughter, is taken away from her and her brother falls victim to an IED explosion in Afghanistan, Tassie is left in a state of devastation that words could not even begin to describe. At her brother's funeral service, her perspective on the outside world and how she was meant to fit within its confines vanishes—crawling into her brother's coffin in an effort to "preserve him somehow with memories" (Moore 300). The weeks that follow are filled with Tassie reverting to the pointless observations and rambling monologues that she had just begun to escape—an inability to cope begging the necessity of distractions.

Her family becomes nearly catatonic, unable to openly discuss their loss, with her father steadily increasing his alcohol intake and her mother scrambling to relate to a daughter who had nearly become a stranger to her. However, because "music helps to bridge the gap between nonverbal and talking therapy," Tassie once again finds solace in her bass (Slyter 22). In an attempt to collect her thoughts and feelings, she finds "comfort in playing cello pieces on "Ole Bob," her upright bass, stating that "it was sometimes fun to do this, make the bass play cello,

like making an old man sing a young man's song," as if music would allow her to exist in a time before she lost everything (Moore 276).

While these tragedies clearly worked to not only shape Tassie's relationship to music, but also offer perspective to the petty concerns that once infested her mind, she remains reluctant in admitting any true growth. In fact, Lorrie Moore offers very little when it comes to an optimistic future for Tassie, save for a single subtle action that may in turn become the most defining moment of her life. Weeks after her brother's death, when Tassie stumbles upon a handwritten flyer that reads "BASS PLAYER NEEDED FOR BAND," she takes a moment to remove "one of the phone number flaps that were cut into the bottom" and stuff it into her pocket (Moore 314). While Tassie may have taken the number on a passing fancy, her doing so involved no second guessing, or "quasi" decision making, and acts as one of the only moments in Tassie's life where she consciously takes action in choosing her own path. As music began as a means to provide comfort to a woman who had no other means of coping with societal pressures and overwhelming tragedy, it became the one defining feature in her attempts to find her own identity; a final gleaming hope that Tassie will in fact cease to play the fool and perhaps even provide the same comfort to others that she once so desperately needed.

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