

PJ Harvey

Is This Desire?

*And they came to the river
And they came from the river
And he wanted the sun
Just to call his own
And they walked on
And they walked from the road
Til they came to the river
Til they came up close
Throw your pain in the river
Throw your pain in the river
Leave your pain in the river
To be washed away slow*



James Rattue

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Thanks to: Jennifer Snapes
The Gardeners

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Introduction

You can look into a turbulent and stormy sky and imagine shapes; you can listen to white noise and hear it resolving into words. The results of both will be indeterminate and uncertain. PJ Harvey's fifth studio album¹, uniquely in her output so far, has a question for a title: so you're not imagining that, but what emerges from the songs is something equally unclear and doubtful, a question that never receives an answer. It's a question which does not concern this album alone.

Harvey's work across her so-far three-and-a-half-decade career has been so wildly and in fact deliberately disparate that it becomes tough to settle which album might be thought better than another. If we might agree on what are the weakest ones – I would venture to argue *Uh Huh Her* (2004) and *The Hope Six Demolition Project* (2016) – it's only in terms of their relatively limited success in achieving her own ambitions, and there's little consensus beyond that. However, my definite impression is that, while it didn't participate in either the critical acclaim of *Dry* (1992) and *Let England Shake* (2011) or the commercial success of *To Bring You My Love* (1995) and *Stories From the City, Stories from the Sea* (2000) either side of it, *Is This Desire?* is the PJ Harvey recording PJ Harvey fans like to like most. It *belongs* to them rather than to anyone else more than any other does: the main online fan forum is still called 'The Garden', after one of the album's tracks.

For an artist of such longevity, variety, and depth, it surprises *this* fan that (magazine articles and reviews aside) there is so little serious criticism of Harvey's work. Until *Let England Shake* emerged, it was her first two albums that provoked most academic discussion. In 2001 Mark Mazullo wrote an article for the journal *Popular Music* glorying in the title 'Revisiting the Wreck: PJ Harvey's *Dry* and the drowned virgin-whore', while Barbara O'Dair, in her 1997 account of radical women in music, *Trouble Girls*, described *Dry* as 'a visceral living diary writ large of growing up female'. Sheila Whiteley of Salford University contributed an analysis of 'Rid of Me' (the song, not the album) to a 2000 collection. Judith Peraino, Professor of Music at Cornell, picked apart 'Dress' and 'Man-Size Sextet' note by note for a 1998 article in *Woman & Music*. Professor of religion at British Columbia University, JRC Cousland, contributed an essay on Harvey and Nick Cave to Michael Gilmour's *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music* (2005), focusing on 'Working For The Man' from *To Bring You My Love*. Abigail Gardner, Reader in Music and Media at Gloucestershire University, is Harvey's strongest academic partisan, writing about her music four times. She contributed an essay on the idea of England in *White Chalk* and *Let England Shake* for a 2015 book examining Englishness in pop; 'Sleeve Notes: PJ

Harvey's Gothic world', again looking at the imagery of *White Chalk*, jointly with Katerina Flint-Nicol of Kent University, for *Studies in Costume and Performance* in 2016; writing an entire book on *PJ Harvey and Video Performance* in 2015; and 'Youtube, Ageing and PJ Harvey' in *Convergence* 25 (2019), examining how Youtube's search algorithms bend our sense of chronology. At the time of writing Dr Gardner is working on how Dorset is represented in Harvey's work. More to our point here, when she was a doctoral student at Oxford, Melisse Lafrance wrote a chapter on *Is This Desire?* for the book she co-authored in 2001 with Lori Burns, *Disruptive Divas*, and we'll refer to that several times. This is not *that* much for 35 years of acclaim.

The well-regarded '33 $\frac{1}{3}$ ' series on pop albums, published by Continuum, contains a wide range of responses from the academic to the more meditative, but among Harvey's output only *Rid of Me* has received a volume dedicated to it. In 2007 Kate Schatz produced a response to the album in the form of a novella in which each chapter is named from one of *Rid of Me*'s 14 songs, and begins and ends with the first and last words from its eponymous lyric. It's quite an achievement technically, but tells you nothing about the work it derives from! There should really be more, we feel.

When I first heard Polly Jean Harvey's music, in the form of the single 'Sheela-na-Gig' on John Peel's late-night Radio 1 programme early in 1992, I had no idea that we were born six weeks apart on either side of the fair county of Dorset – she in Beaminster, me in Poole. But then I had no idea she was even English. In 1995 I and a couple of friends watched my little black-and-white TV set in my flat in Chatham open-mouthed as Harvey and Nick Cave coiled round one another performing 'Henry Lee' from his *Murder Ballads* album, an impeccable *haute Gothique* coupling which still now shapes many people's perceptions of them both, even though it lasted just a few months. By the time *Is This Desire?* came out the artist and I were both 28, and I remember the hair standing up on my neck as I listened to the whispered opening words of 'The Wind' – *Catherine liked high places* – and realised this woman was singing about my patron saint, and the place which is my spiritual home, the chapel on the hill at Abbotsbury: the *omphalos* of the Jurassic Coast. That added an entirely new dimension to my fandom. Now, after more than thirty years of my life tracking her development, I found I wanted to produce something more substantial about her work than the odd blog post. DesperateK, one of the Gardeners – members of the fan forum – commented:

I would love to see *Is This Desire?* turned into a well-researched volume ... it's the kind of record that has an interesting background, a complicated creation process, and a lot of things to analyse in the songs themselves.

I write; I've even been published. I like grappling with an intellectual problem. Why shouldn't I do that? The thought came to my mind.

There were good reasons why not, mainly that I knew so little about music. The best of the 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ series, such as Samantha Bennett's volume on Siouxsie & the Banshees' *Peepshow*, can talk fluently and in detail about key signatures and intervals and the like (it helps that Dr Bennett is a Professor of Music), and I couldn't. My own musical ability extends no further than occasionally tormenting a piano I acquired from a friend who could no longer look after it. A decade after it arrived in the house I'm little advanced from where I was at the start, and the *technical language* of music was definitely a closed book to me. Happily a member of the congregation at a church looked after by a friend of mine, a gifted music teacher, lives locally to me and gave me an idiot's grounding in the basics so I could at least say *something* worthwhile.

Strangely enough, *Is This Desire?* was not the album of PJ Harvey's that I listened to most frequently; I'd always responded most strongly to the theatrical passions of *To Bring You My Love* and the phantom Dorset landscape of *White Chalk* – though there was no single recording I didn't get a great deal out of, even if I found *Uh Huh Her* patchy and *Stories* not really 'like her'. I still believe, too, that *Let England Shake* and *Hope Six* represent together a towering *moral* achievement, quite apart from whatever their musical, artistic merits may be. But I've come to feel that *Is This Desire?* expresses Harvey's talents and vision with perhaps more consistency and subtlety than any of her other works. It was also apparently the recording she thought most highly of at one stage, too.² So why don't we contemplate the stormclouds, and see what emerges from them?

1. Inputs

i. Biography

Since first stepping on a stage in her own right in 1991, Polly Jean Harvey from Corscombe in Dorset had been struggling to negotiate her ambition, the need to create and to communicate what she'd created, with the unwelcome results of that ambition in media attention and the demands of the music industry. Serving her apprenticeship in her friend John Parish's band Automatic Dlamini for a couple of years before had not quite prepared her for the spotlight that would be shone on her once she began performing with her own group, under her own name. For several years her techniques to manage the tension included black humour and brittle resistance, and it took a long time for her to settle into an easier way of coping. She was helped and to an extent defended by her friends and collaborators, key among them being Parish and his partner Maria Mochnacz. A short and very public relationship with the Australian singer Nick Cave – a figure who'd featured in her imagination ever since John Parish played her his band's songs in her late teens – seemed, when it finished, to bring to an end a particular phase in Harvey's own sense of self and purpose, and by the time she began composing songs for a new album in the middle of 1996 she was still in a state of uncertainty. Her previous record, *Dance Hall at Louse Point*, had been a collaboration with Parish, a collection of songs battered out between them while they were touring *To Bring You My Love*, each one bearing the name of the location where it was written; but now she was writing alone again.

The sequence of events at this point is reasonably clear, the only ambiguity being where Harvey was living in mid-1996 – whether it was still the remote old house in West Dorset where she wrote *To Bring You My Love* or not. This is itself only of any interest because of her own insistence that the process of writing was affected by where it happened; her grisly flatshare in Tottenham and the flat over her parents' friends' restaurant at West Bay had been locations in the past, as well as that 'very old and very cold' isolated house where she claimed to have been able to 'smell all the people who'd lived there'.³ Wherever it was, there one morning she found herself penning the words to what became 'My Beautiful Leah':

*She only had nightmares
And her sadness never lifted
And slowly over the years
Her lovely face twisted*

It was, gently and insidiously, one of the most horrific things she had ever written. She was, later, absolutely explicit that this was a kind of breaking point. She listened back to what she'd recorded, and then picked up the phone to Mark Ellis, 'Flood', the producer on *To Bring You My Love* who she once said 'would make a good therapist', and told him she was giving up music to become a nurse. 'I thought, No! This is enough! No more of this. I don't want to be like this. Because it was all so black and white and life isn't just black and white. I knew I needed to get help'. Once the remaining dates of *Dance Hall* were fulfilled, Flood, John Parish and Maria Mochnacz made sure Harvey had a holiday in the US, at least part of which was spent on a road trip with Eric Drew Feldman, her *To Bring You My Love* keyboardist. Then she moved into Parish and Mochnacz's basement in Bristol, and wrote songs there, running them past her friends and reshaping them according to their advice.⁴ Actual recording for the album wasn't resumed until March 1998 by which time she had probably relocated to West Bay into a Victorian flat in a building that, she told Caitlin Moran for the *Observer* the following year, 'looks like a coffin. ... That'll delight all the people who believe I'm all blood and pain and witchery'.⁵

The Moran interview is important because it influenced the way *Is This Desire?* came to be seen within the narrative of Harvey's personal life. Ever since she'd emerged, interviewers had seen this young woman from what the music world thought was such a non-standard background – the rural working class – as a challenge, a code to crack, a puzzle to unravel: they wanted to work out what made her tick and, as her personal life was something she was always deeply reluctant to be explicit about, mined the music for clues. By the early 2000s, after the *maestra* turned 30, journalists largely gave up trying, and once she'd ascended to near the status of a national treasure, they seemed finally to have worked out that the question was irrelevant anyway. But in 1998-9 this amateur-psychological tendency was still in full flow. Harvey had been perfectly open – though imprecise – about the fact that the album was composed during a tough time for her, but that she was largely through it by the time she sat down with Caitlin Moran. Moran felt that

If the fuel you use for your creativity is negative, the fumes it kicks off will make you sick; and Polly Harvey seemed very sick ... the confusions and unhappinesses of her life are private - even though the way she processes them is public and unique ... *Is This Desire?* is unlike any of Harvey's previous work. While *Rid of Me* and *To Bring You My Love* were storms at full peak, the height of the fever, *Is This Desire?* comes from the morning after - walking around the wet garden in the pre-dawn, shaky but no longer glassy-eyed. It's a very post-therapy, coming-to-terms-with-things album. The progress is mirrored in the music: Harvey has abandoned her hot red

guitars in favour of inky blue keyboards; and where once she would have screamed and retched, she now turns up the bass until the room heaves, and gets machines to do the dirty work for her.

Well, that's all right then. When Nigel Williamson interviewed Harvey for the *Times* 'Metro' section in January 1999, a month before the *Observer* article came out, the headline writers dared to title that piece 'How I Learned to Lighten Up'. Ultimately, this was another way of putting Harvey into the 'OUT' tray, ticking her off the to-do list, defusing her ability to disturb: of binding the witch.

The most extreme version of the case that *Is This Desire?* is driven by internal concerns arising from Harvey's own life is expressed by Caroline Sullivan:

Though Polly Jean Harvey has never stooped to anything so conventional as an "answer record," that's essentially what *Is This Desire?* is. Its origins stem from an intense romantic entanglement with Nick Cave, which ended in 1996 ... The break-up first compelled him, then Harvey, to engage in a bit of back-and-forth "he said, she said" via songs on their respective next albums. ... Rather than emulating Cave's literalism ... she heaped the pain and disappointment onto a procession of female characters.⁶

This is, to put it generously, hugely overstated. As we will see, the one song on *Is This Desire?* you might make a case for being linked to Harvey's sense of herself is 'Angelene', and even then the actual subject of the track doesn't seem to reflect her experience in any straightforward or even roundabout way. Nothing else bears a trace of her relationship with Cave, even if 'A Perfect Day Elise' mirrors the kind of song he might have written. As Harvey said, the album may have *come out of* a desperate time, but it in no way *addresses* it.

Strangely what seems like the clearest statement counting against this point of view actually argues in its favour. In December 2020 Harvey was preparing to release the demos of *Is This Desire?*. Earlier that year the Royal Danish Library had hosted an exhibition of items made or collected by Nick Cave that aimed to offer an insight into his creative world, 'Stranger Than Kindness'; among the pieces displayed were two sketches he had made for Harvey, and a collage she'd prepared for him. Harvey posted an image of the collage on her Instagram feed and commented 'When I am writing an album the demos of the songs capture the atmosphere of the moment in a way that can never be replicated. I made this collage for Nick during the time I was writing this album, and in some ways the words of the collage went on to inform the song, *Is This Desire?*, and indeed the whole album'.⁷ At first reading it seems as though all these events, the creation of the collage, Harvey and Cave's relationship, and the writing of the *Is This Desire?* demos, were simultaneous,

but we know they can't quite have been. Harvey and Cave got together right at the start of 1996 and had separated by late Spring; the demos *we have* were laid down at least a year later (bear in mind that Cave's *The Boatman's Call* was done and dusted by August 1996). None of the imagery in the words of the collage – 'He saw stars and stars and stars in the sky. They had never seemed so bright' – emerges in the song,⁸ so if this is what Harvey means by the one influencing the other, it's clearly on the level of a general theme of two people doubting their feelings about each other (a pretty universal dilemma) rather than a specific situation she was trying to work through.

To me, the truth seems fairly clear. By mid-1996, Harvey had achieved all that she had imagined, and probably more; her time with Nick Cave formed part, perhaps the culminating part, of that phase of her life. Now she faced the question of whether she wanted to carry on, trusting that inspiration would take her forward, to reformulate her work as vocation, or do something else. Eventually, she opted for music, and found rest in that decision. There's no more mystery to it than that.

She would write songs just as disturbed as 'My Beautiful Leah', and more so, in the years to come. The simple fact that this piece was not discarded in drawing *Is This Desire?* together, while other tracks were, is the strongest evidence that Harvey's personal journey in fact had limited relevance to the work she produced. The recording is not therapy, it is not even in any straightforward way the result of therapy; it is art. The only definite link between her life and the work is that she decided to produce it at all, rather than take another path.

ii. Career

Harvey's strictly personal life may leave little trace on *Is This Desire?* but the album still definitely occupies a pivotal position in her progression as an artist, as we've already suggested. There are many different ways of parsing her career, but we might think in terms of an early phase of her challenging external constraint, pushing against what she thought of as boundaries imposed on her by the expectations of others, succeeded by one in which she challenges primarily her own abilities and understandings. *Is This Desire?* sits on the cusp between them. The impression of relaxation Caitlin Moran gleaned from the album is genuine, but it arises from this – the new sense that Harvey is clear about what she wants to do, and both feels morally justified in carrying on doing it, and confident that she will, by and large, be allowed to. Let's look at how this has come about.

Harvey fully expected her first album, *Dry* in 1992, to be the only opening she would ever get to record music, and kept her arranged place to study at Central St Martin's College of Art in London as she believed there was every chance she would need it. 'I never thought I'd have that opportunity, so I felt like I had to get everything on it [*Dry*] as well as I possibly could, because it was probably my only chance. It felt very extreme for that reason'. It was also recorded in somewhat oppositional circumstances: Harvey insisted on making it with Too Pure, rather than accepting a generous offer from Island Records who would subsequently become the band's label, on the basis of a verbal agreement in the pub which for her had the moral force of a written contract.⁹

Rid of Me (1993), the album Harvey never thought she would be able to make, occupied an even more confrontational position. 'My attitude was: they [her label and the music industry generally, or maybe the world as a whole] have to know they can never, ever tell me what to do' and to this end she would make 'the most uncommercial record ever'. Her bandmates weren't as extreme, but percussionist Rob Ellis was on board: 'You should be able to go from a whisper to a scream, just like that', he told the *NME*, snapping his fingers, 'and I don't think anything on [*Dry*] is there yet'. Harvey listened to the Pixies' first album from 1988, *Surfer Rosa*, and knew that was the sound she wanted – spare, uncompromising, brutal – and so the *person* she wanted to produce her next work was the man responsible, the forbidding Steve Albini. 'I was trying to cause a riot', Harvey summarised, and '[*Rid of Me*]'s extremity set up a picture of me in people's minds that has never really gone'.¹⁰

Harvey never strays all that far from blues, but *To Bring You My Love* took swamp blues (and flamenco, in the case of the devastating final song) and elevated it to such extremity it bordered on camp, the theatrical expression defying the listener to take the titanic themes seriously. An artist hitherto lauded for her raw authenticity deliberately embraced artificiality, to the extent of wearing costumes and makeup so exaggerated she looked like a drag act. Her own gender, which she'd had a conflicted relationship with since childhood, now became a performative text. Employing as producer the services of Flood, who polished the recordings to a high-contrast, technicolour gloss, was part of the act. The album was a turning-point in its own right, as with it Harvey swept away everything she seemed to have stood for – though audiences largely responded with enthusiasm rather than alienation, turning her from an indie star into an icon.

That provoked another *volte-face* with *Dance Hall at Louse Point*, composed together with John Parish. A few early gigs aside, the album was toured as accompaniment to a performance by the Mark Bruce dance company, and part of the point, as far as Harvey was concerned, was to release herself from the

responsibility of being the star turn. Critics, reviewers, and audiences were having none of that: at the Fleece & Firkin in October 1996, for instance, the venue couldn't restrain themselves from putting Parish's name in tiny letters beneath Harvey's on the posters.¹¹ Island wanted to release 'Is That All There Is?' as the single, a queasy enough recording, but Harvey and Parish insisted on the defiantly inaccessible 'That Was My Veil' at which point the record label must have given up any hope of achieving much more than recouping costs. Nevertheless, even though Harvey had failed to blend into the background as she intended, you can see where this album is coming from.

In each of these recordings prior to 1998, then, Harvey is in antagonistic dialogue with the world around her, straining against what she perceives as the structures and expectations which confine her. In contrast, while in no way compromising, *Is This Desire?* doesn't feel at all like a work that's pushing against or reacting to anything. She did tell Richard Kingsmill in 2001 that 'it was quite a fight for me to put it out; a lot of people were very disappointed in it, people in the business, the record company that I work with, were wanting something different from what I gave them', but 'I was adamant that this was the way I wanted it to be'.¹² The artist is following her own instincts and interests, and, whatever challenges she might have faced personally or professionally, this album comes from a place of confidence and control.

Those instincts and interests were leading her to widen her musical palette. Harvey had originally come to attention as a guitarist – even to the extent that interviewers bewildered her by asking how she felt about playing a 'male' instrument¹³ – and when she wanted anything else drafted in help to play it. In contrast, *Is This Desire?* featured electronic sounds, drum machines, and recorded effects that she had never tried before. As usual, commentators can be reductive about this shift, putting Harvey's interest in it down to a relationship with a local West Dorset DJ called Ben T,¹⁴ or, as Kyle Rainville wrote on RateYourMusic.com in 2014,

My guess is that when *To Bring You My Love* lost the Mercury Prize to *Dummy* in 1995, PJ Harvey decided that she would be able to do that style better than Portishead could. Sadly, though, she couldn't.

Neither romance nor rivalry need be dragged in to explain Harvey's experiments, though – she certainly has never seemed to show any interest in the latter. Instead, electronic music was something in the air in the later '90s that she hadn't tried, so she went there to see what would happen. She stated herself 'I was making extremely difficult music, experimenting with techniques I hadn't used before and not really caring what other people thought about it'.¹⁵ This was a pattern that would shape several of her records over the years to come – writing pop for *Stories*, for instance, or organising an

album around a completely unfamiliar instrument, a piano, in *White Chalk*. It was a reflection of her fundamental artistic restlessness.

Is This Desire?, then, marks a pivot in Harvey's development as an artist. It's the place where she turns from challenging the world to challenging herself. It's not as though these two impulses don't overlap, before or after; but from this point forward the latter becomes the more vital driver of what she does.

iii. Inspirations

Before *Is This Desire?*, Harvey's work had never shown particular literary influence, unless we count the Bible, which she clearly had read, showing some familiarity not just with the stories but also the actual text (in fact we can pin one of her unpublished song titles, 'Time, Times and Half a Time', registered along with songs that appeared on *Dry* so presumably quite early, to a specific translation of the Scriptures, the New International Version.¹⁶) But otherwise her materials came from elsewhere: Captain Beefheart lyrics, for instance, or the Georgian-language records she found in the Watsons' flat at West Bay, samples of which made their way onto a couple of songs on *4-Track Demos*.¹⁷

In 1995-96, though, she was clearly reading the fiction of JD Salinger and Flannery O'Connor: many years later she put up a photograph from this time on Instagram, showing her lying on a blanket somewhere outside with a copy of O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*. Fragments of these stories can be found on the album as follows:

'Angelene': The lines 'rose is my colour and white/Pretty mouth and green my eyes' are directly lifted from JD Salinger's 1951 *New Yorker* story 'Pretty Mouth And Green My Eyes'. The words 'Dear God, life ain't kind' *could* be adapted from 'For Esmé, with Love and Squalor', another Salinger story from the *New Yorker* published a year earlier, where the words 'Dear God, life is hard' appear.

'A Perfect Day Elise': The basic scenario of a violent death in a seaside hotel, as well as the title, is drawn from Salinger's story 'A Perfect Day For Bananafish', though Harvey changes the number of the crucial room from 507 to 509. Yet another story originally published in the *New Yorker* (in 1948 in this case), this tale and the preceding two were collected in *Nine Stories* in 1953, an edition of which Harvey presumably read.

‘The River’: The source here is Flannery O’Connor’s short story ‘The River’ from 1953; the line ‘throw your pain in the river’ (with ‘leave’ changed to ‘throw’) and the reference to ‘two silent birds’ are direct borrowings.

‘Joy’: Joy, or Hulga, Hopewell comes from O’Connor’s 1955 story ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’; the words ‘never danced a step’ and ‘I’ve been believing in nothing ever since I was born’ are lifted directly.

‘No Girl So Sweet’: Only the line ‘took her from heaven and gave her to me’ comes straight from O’Connor’s 1953 story ‘The Life You Save May Be Your Own’, but the descriptions of fast driving and a character being an ‘angel’ also appear in the story. The title isn’t a direct quotation, but in the story Lucynell Crater is referred to as ‘sweet’ several times, and the words ‘nothing so sweet as a boy’s mother’ do feature. All these three short stories were reprinted in O’Connor’s 1955 collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, which is probably where Harvey read them.

What strikes me most about all these borrowings is how little the songs follow the source material. For RateYourMusic in 2012 DrManhattan was impressed ‘how well [Harvey] manages to take the people from these stories and make them live in this album’s dilapidated roadhouse’, which is a great phrase, but in no case is the relationship direct: what is lifted from Salinger’s and O’Connor’s stories is an idea, a mood, a phrase or two, but not a *narrative*. What is absolutely *not* happening is that the literary works are being retold in the form of songs: instead, everything is re-arranged and re-purposed, as it were melted down and poured anew into the mould of the singer’s imagination. Joanie is the name of the character in ‘Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes’, not Angelene,¹⁸ and they share no sentiments; the narrative of ‘A Perfect Day’ is entirely altered, and whereas the original ends in suicide, the song appears to culminate fairly unequivocally in murder. ‘The River’ detaches its central motif from anything Christian and deals with two unnamed characters rather than the child of O’Connor’s story. Lucynell Crater in ‘The Life You Save ...’ is non-verbal with learning difficulties, and nothing about the story connects with the song arising from it. Only the figure of Joy Hopewell could be read as having some echoes in the anguished, despairing subject of Harvey’s song of the same name, but it’s precisely that anguish, which is so very extreme and intense, that separates her from O’Connor’s character. Joy Hopewell is bitter and resentful, and deceived, but never anything other than controlled and active.

Is This Desire? thus uses its inspirations – for these five songs, anyway – not as framing tools but as jumping-off points that lead Harvey, and us as listeners, in a completely different direction. She will use this technique again over the

years, for instance in the echoes of TS Eliot we can hear in *White Chalk*. It's quite different from the mode she adopts in *Let England Shake*, where a key part of the effect is that each quoted fragment retains its ability to refer to its original context even while relocated in her imaginative landscape. Again, the album sleeve art for *Is This Desire?* includes an image from a children's picture Bible showing Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem and some cut-up words which together clearly have *some* relation to the scenario of the song 'Is This Desire?'; but, just as clearly, the characters in that track are no more the Holy Family than those who appear in the other songs *are* the people from Salinger's and O'Connor's stories. The text provides only an image, a set of words, not a narrative: that comes from Harvey.

Wordsworth and Blake have also been mentioned in connection with *Is This Desire?*, but in such a general way there's really little that can usefully be said.¹⁹ The album also marks the first time Harvey uses folklore as the raw material for music, and we'll deal with that in due course.

iv. Composition

In 2026, we've become used to PJ Harvey's albums taking several years to develop from inception to release, but thirty years ago this wasn't the case: for her to set writing aside for a year or so and then return to it made *Is This Desire?* remarkable, enough for the singer to refer in early interviews to the length of time it had taken.²⁰ James Blandford's biography of Harvey, *Siren Rising*, isn't particularly well thought-of in the fan world – by its end it's become rather Polly-by-numbers, 'In August Harvey went to X, September saw her visiting Y' – but it has moments of real usefulness, and its treatment of *Is This Desire?* is one. In between the two editions of the book in 2004 and 2007 Blandford seems to have had access to information which made him significantly revise the passages dealing with the development of the album, and he describes it with unusual detail. This is what the second edition of the book says:

[Harvey] went into the Small World Studios at Yeovil in April (1997), to put down the material she had ready and by June had submitted no less than 8 tapes to Island containing a variety of alternate recordings of every song that would end up on the eventual album as well as all the B-sides and an early version of 'The Faster I Breathe the Further I Go'. It would appear that a tentative master was produced kicking off with 'Is This Desire' and closing with 'The Faster I Breathe' ... (p.109)

Blandford resumes his account on p.113, describing, as in the first edition of the biography, how in March 1998 Harvey returned to the Townhouse Three Studio in London where *To Bring You My Love* had been recorded, and quoting the singer herself that she ‘totally re-recorded a lot of the songs, replaced vocals on other songs, remixed everything and basically sort of started again’; note that the album credits state that the recording was made at Whitfield Street in Soho instead, nowhere near Townhouse Three in Battersea. But then Blandford adds:

The entire collection of tapes handed over to Island from the 1998 *Desire* sessions betray just how much work had gone into the album, with a mind-boggling number of versions of each song filling individual reels, as well as the intriguingly abandoned cut titled ‘Summer’s End’. Even the B-sides had been overhauled repeatedly ...

This is so specific that it rather implies Blandford had either seen these tapes himself, or spoken to someone who had (incidentally, Harvey has never registered a song with the title ‘Summer’s End’).

In 2021 John Parish spoke to online music magazine *The Quietus*, listing his 13 favourite PJ Harvey tracks. This caused quite a stir among fans, as he described *Is This Desire?* as ‘probably the most compromised album that Polly’s made’, due not just to what he felt was a lack of focus inevitably arising from the length of time it took but also because ‘it was also the only record where the record company came in and had a degree of creative input, which had never been sanctioned on any of the other records ... there were a couple of people who I felt took advantage of the fact Polly wasn’t very well at that time ... she wavered in the middle’.²¹ He’d argued that the album should open with ‘Nina In Ecstasy’ but was ‘heavily overruled’, and preferred a couple of the demo versions to the final recordings: ‘There’s nothing wrong with Rob [Ellis]’s arrangement of ‘The Garden’ ... but for me the demo was perfect. Haunting, understated, and incredibly moving’.

The idea that demos represent a purer, more authentic version of an artist’s vision than finished recordings is a persistent one in fan discourse, and when *Is This Desire?*’s demos were released some Gardeners were disappointed that they turned out to be so similar to the album. One suspects this isn’t only because they’d paid extra for them, but also because demos are thought to promise access to ‘the real PJ Harvey’ in a way commercial recordings don’t: they *belong* to the fans more than the final product. The ideal is just her and a guitar. John Parish’s words echo this feeling. However, pick what he says apart a bit and we find ourselves far from any idea that the final recording failed to represent Harvey’s own preferences. Parish goes on to say that both recording sessions included the same musicians, engineers and producers, that the

additional resources in the London studio didn't really make any difference, and that the key shift between 1997 and 1998 'was that Polly probably changed'. It's worth remembering that, as Harvey's oldest musical friend, John Parish has beliefs about where her abilities lie and what she should be spending her time on, and this isn't always what she chooses herself: so, he was very disenchanted by the whole project of *Stories* ..., had nothing to do with making it, didn't go anywhere near the tour (admittedly he had the responsibilities of a new family to juggle), and liked nothing from that album enough even to *refer* to it in the *Quietus* interview. But that doesn't mean that the choices made on *Stories* were anything other than Harvey's own. In the end Parish's case for *Is This Desire?* being 'compromised' boils down to the omission of 'Nina In Ecstasy' and the reworking of some of the demos, and both seem to have been Harvey's decisions. We will come back to those matters later. If James Blandford's account is right, Harvey never intended 'Nina' to start the album off at all. She simply told *Q* in 2001 'When I came back to the songs in 1998, they changed quite a lot ... [Earlier] the songs weren't ready and nor was I'.²²

Strangely, Caroline Sullivan suggests that *Is This Desire?* sounds different from Harvey's earlier recordings because she didn't re-record her vocals but simply transferred them from the demos.²³ As we've seen, this isn't so: in fact, her practice hadn't altered, and her approach depended on the track. On *To Bring You My Love* tracks are sometimes rerecorded for the album (very obviously 'The Dancer') but sometimes not – on 'I Think I'm a Mother' you can hear the tape hiss and the tick of the metronome. Similarly, some finished versions of the *Is This Desire?* vocals are audibly different from the demos, and we will discuss examples later.

Harvey did change her approach in one respect – by working collaboratively with trusted friends on some tracks. She herself characterised her first band as 'a dictatorship' in which she felt responsible for absolutely everything, an unstable situation which the older and more experienced Rob Ellis, as a creative individual in his own right, felt increasingly hard to cope with as time moved on. She still exercised control on *To Bring You My Love* but allowed her performers to have a bit more input into their own parts. On *Dance Hall at Louse Point* she was of course working with someone she knew very well, but between 1995 and 1998 she also collaborated with Nick Bicat, Pascal Comelade, and Tricky – a classical composer, a French maverick, and a Bristolian trip-hopper – which may have helped her realise she didn't have to be quite so controlling. We are not yet in the territory of *Let England Shake* or *Hope Six* which were very much cases of an *ensemble* trying to realise Harvey's ideas in the most effective form, but not far away from it even if all she did on *Is This Desire?* was ring-fence a couple of songs for others to work on. Rob Ellis

took on 'The Garden' while Mick Harvey, who had joined the *To Bring You My Love* tour on loan from the Bad Seeds probably through the good offices of Flood, managed 'Angelene'.²⁴

There were other technical credits listed on 'The Sky Lit Up' and 'The Wind'. Additional producer and programmer Marius de Vries had worked with Flood on U2's 1997 album *Pop*; mix engineer Andy Todd seems to have been the fellow with the same name who was a member of mid-90s electronica band Republica; assisting programmer Pete Davis shared some credits with Marius de Vries and worked with a variety of artists; while programmer and percussionist Steve Sidelnyk ('one of the UK's unsung heroes') has had a long list of credits for film, TV, and pop.²⁵ This is a lot of people to be involved with putting together two short songs, and 'The Sky Lit Up' isn't even all that complex, unlike the layered soundscape of 'The Wind'. None of the additional contributions seems to have materially altered the recordings, and these individuals don't appear to have been imported by Island to nobble the album: there was a sound reason for each of them being there, even if you wonder why Flood couldn't have handled it all himself.

That fits in with a picture we have been assembling of a singer-songwriter who is not being bullied by record industry executives or beaten hither and thither by the waves of her own personal life. At the time, James Oldham, writing for the *NME*, referred to the rumoured difficulties behind the album's production, and summarised it as 'wilfully uncommercial'; he didn't like it all that much, but I concur with his final judgement:

[It] shows a unified (and desperately uneasy) continuity of tone. At no point does it reek of hasty compromise or lack of confidence; it appears to be the record Harvey wanted to make from the outset. Its occasionally gruelling uncommerciality might not be what people wanted (or expected), but it remains the sound of PJ Harvey staking out her artistic territory and choosing a path.²⁶

2. Modes

i. Darkness

We'll begin this section with the quotations.

An unflinchingly morose experience.²⁷

'A Perfect Day Elise' ... is the most accessible song here and yet still jet-black and teeming with ghosts.²⁸

A ghostly vibe as the main characters are often dead, close to death, or talking about a dead person.²⁹

The darkest, most depressive album I've ever heard.³⁰

Darkness runs through the whole album like a river.³¹

Asked by a journalist what the new material she was working on was like, ... [Harvey] described it as "just depressing, slash-your-wrists music as usual".³²

It's interesting that 'dark' is the word people reach for most readily when describing *Is This Desire?*, and we could multiply instances almost endlessly. Yet the quote from the singer herself reminds us that this can't be just to do with the *subject matter* of the album, as disturbing topics and expressions were hardly absent from her previous work. The hideous imagery of 'Plants and Rags' on *Dry* – 'Plants and rags/ Ease myself into a body bag' – the escalating insane rage of *Rid of Me*, the vampiric scenario of 'Hardly Wait', and the whole of the abject blues of *To Bring You My Love*, shot through with stories of blasphemy, obsession, and even infanticide, all make the point that 'dark' material was nothing new for her, something so obvious it barely needs stating. Even a little-talked-about song on *Dry*, 'Water', seems to be about someone drowning themselves. So what did everyone *mean* when they said *Desire* was 'dark', and appeared to think that was new?

One clear difference between *Is This Desire?* and Harvey's earlier recordings is that it is without humour. The extremity of many of her previous songs is at least partly offset by an exaggeration that edges into camp, and some tracks (notably 'Me-Jane' on *Rid of Me*) are out-and-out jokes. Even when songs are deeply serious they are still affected by the cumulative mood of the recordings as a whole, which includes humour, however black it might be. *Is This Desire?*, on the other hand, contains nothing that is even grimly funny: the closest we

get, I think, are the mischievous background flourishes on 'The Wind'. Fun is a mode which Harvey clearly feels she can leave behind at this point. Although James Oldham's 'unflinchingly morose' rather ignores the upbeat 'The Sky Lit Up' and moments of gentleness on the album, there isn't anything that defuses its overall *seriousness* (and even 'The Sky' has an uncertainty to it). So the description 'dark' arises out of the sense of the album's mood being *unrelieved*; it is dark, because it contains nothing 'light'.

The album's *form* is also part of the explanation. We'll discuss later the specific ways Harvey deploys electronic music, but for now we'll note the way she incorporated trip-hop mechanisms pioneered by other West Country musicians and used them to tell her own stories. Trip-hop was so called because it was trippy: the mainly Bristolian early practitioners such as Massive Attack and Portishead took standard breakbeat samples and snippets of movies and other sources and slowed them down against heavy, bass drumbeats, dislocating them and surrounding them with distorted vocals. It was downbeat as against the upbeat emphasis of hip-hop, and took listeners to a dreamlike, meditative place. Portishead's recordings tended to get even slower as their career went on. Although it's also a dreamlike recording, nothing on *Is This Desire?* can be described uncomplicatedly as a trip-hop song, but the style is so powerfully used that it tends to become the keynote of the whole thing.

What trip-hop musicians were largely *not* doing was marrying their techniques to specific human narratives in the way Harvey would. As an example, look at the track actually called 'Darkness' by London performers Pressure Drop from the 1997 album *Elusive*. One stanza refers generically to a relationship break-up, but as a whole the track doesn't address a definite situation and is instead a mood piece, an exercise in fashioning musical 'darkness' out of typical trip-hop materials, including an echoey soundscape and low, slow motifs played on piano and strings. In contrast, although many of the narratives on *Is This Desire?* are ambiguous and indeterminate – 'and there was trouble taking place', 'The Garden' tells us, but never what kind – there's still no doubt that *something* is happening, or has happened, in these texts, often something baleful and violent. They are about *events*, not just moods, even if we don't know quite what they are.

The combination of specific stories linked to identifiable (if imaginary) people with a musical form that emphasises the downbeat and meditative is, I think, what leads so many listeners to experience *Is This Desire?* as 'dark'. And *still* nothing on it is as unsettling as *White Chalk* would be. Now there's a *properly* dark album.

ii. Queerness

When Harvey and Parish appeared at the Fleece and Firkin in Bristol to perform *Dance Hall at Louse Point* in October 1996 – the singer’s birthday, as it happened – Glyn Brown was there to review the gig for the *Independent*. ‘Poll closed black-shadowed eyes and opened a mouth like a Eurostar tunnel’, he would write, ‘and a chap beside me almost swooned. “Ah, she looks fantastic, she’s the greatest gay icon there could be”’.³³

That iteration of the Harveyan image was still at the tail-end of the drag-act presentation she adopted for *To Bring You My Love*. Early in her career, severe in black jeans and a leather coat, Harvey had been roped in as a *feminist* rock pioneer, before she explicitly scotched any such identification, and began wearing a dress so awkwardly that drag became the best word for it; the idea that she might represent *gay men* was new. At that stage, it was about style; *Is This Desire?* brought substance to bear.

We’ll talk about the way the album was received and what it meant to listeners later, but a short leap ahead is relevant here, because its queerness is seldom discussed and its reception is part of the argument that we should.

In later years Harvey would become good friends with actor Ben Whishaw after asking tour director Ian Rickson to introduce them, but as a gay teenager in late 1990s Bedfordshire he found reflections of his feelings in the homoerotic suggestions of *Is This Desire?*: ‘there wasn’t a lot of queer or gay culture around, and weirdly ... I find the music has got this most extraordinary mix of male and female energy in it’, he told Rickson in conversation in 2020. ‘The Garden’, in particular, became a song he would return to again and again over his life, part of his personal ‘medicine cabinet’, Rickson suggested. It drew him into its scenario, the hazy encounter between two male figures, its very ambiguity allowing him space to explore himself in a way he found hard to define. Then in 2024 a comment was posted on the official Youtube video of ‘Catherine’: ‘I remember being suicidal as a young Mexican Gay Man. This song got me through. Thank you Poly Jean’ [sic].³⁴ There is clearly something here which is worth addressing.

It’s very striking that so many critics, from the music press journalists who first reviewed *Is This Desire?* in 1998 to more thoughtful commentators in later years, interpret its vague narratives in heterosexual terms. The fact that so many of its songs focus on a female experience but one filtered through the language of a speaker commenting on them leads to an assumption that this voice is *male* and that the scenarios being described fall into the usual patterns of male-female dynamics represented in popular music and culture more widely. We will lay out some of the more misogynist interpretations later, but

although Jeff Terich, writing for Treblezine in 2024, is far from that, he automatically reads the violent fantasist speaker in ‘Catherine’ as male, just as another Youtube commenter finds in the situation of ‘My Beautiful Leah’ ‘the original “bad guy” right here’.³⁵ These assumptions are easy enough to make because most pop music does indeed describe heterosexual relationships, and therefore that’s what we’re used to; and because we are also too often used to narratives in which male characters harbour jealous and murderous intent towards females. I made these assumptions myself. It remains true that Harvey may have intended just such a scenario; but it’s not in the *texts*. When we look carefully, we find the texts often don’t specify the sex of the speaker. Instead, as Melisse Lafrance comments in an essay in *Disruptive Divas*, these are ‘narratives ... that seek to unravel contemporary gender constructs and the forms of desire produced by such constructs’. Critics, she goes on, ‘who find themselves unable to make Harvey’s work “mean” in heterosexual terms resort to clumsily representing it as thick with mystifying tropes of heterosexual love and melancholy’.³⁶ Lafrance and Burns definitely understand ‘Catherine’, for instance, as describing a fraught relationship between two women. We’re just not used to hearing a woman consumed with sexual jealousy and murderous rage towards another.

Looking at the album’s songs individually, ‘A Perfect Day Elise’, ‘The Garden’, and ‘Is This Desire?’ are uncomplicated third-person narratives, with occasional reported speech from the protagonists. ‘Joy’ and ‘No Girl So Sweet’ are also third-person descriptions but incorporate statements from the characters, who are definitely female; ‘No Girl’ includes a male speaker as well. In all these songs the narrator doesn’t seem to be part of the situation described, so we wouldn’t expect them to be gendered: they are the external, observing ‘authorial voice’. Of the first-person narratives, ‘Angelene’ is clearly sung by a woman who has some sort of longing for a man (though it isn’t necessarily a sexual feeling); to judge by the reference to the length of their hair, the speaker in ‘The Sky Lit Up’ is female (though they might not be), also fixating on a male figure; and the voice describing the plight of Catherine in ‘The Wind’ must be presumed to be female given the context of the legend of St Catherine’s Chapel at Abbotsbury and their talking to a mother figure at the end of the track. But the speakers in the other three – ‘Catherine’, ‘My Beautiful Leah’, and ‘Electric Light’, are very much ungendered. Finally, ‘The River’ has sections which are third-person and first-person, and while it’s easy to assume the couple in the scenario is male-and-female – maybe by analogy with Dawn and Joseph in ‘Is This Desire?’ – all we *know* is that one is male. So might the other be. At the very least, we are not justified in simply and unreflectively assuming that these songs are all stories of heterosexual longing.

Of course the converse is also true: although Melisse Lafrance describes *Is This Desire?* as ‘a work laden with homosexual connotative value’³⁷ it achieves whatever it manages in that respect not by explicit statement but by its inexplicitness and openness to interpretation. Even the gayest song of all, ‘The Garden’, which ended up bringing such comfort to Ben Whishaw, does no more than hint at the erotic in the kiss between its two characters. These songs, these narratives, could be one thing, or they could be another. It’s in their masterly ambiguity that their queerness, their boundary-crossing and -blurring, precisely lies: the album invites us into possibility, and we can decide for ourselves what possibilities we pursue through it.

iii. Place

Before *Is This Desire?* Harvey had used the imagery of the natural world and a sense of place sparingly in her work. Only rarely would the listener discern a particular *setting* in a song. The protagonist of ‘Water’ wades into the sea and describes it rising to their ankles and knees; the speaker in ‘Down by the Water’ drowns her daughter under a bridge (and the wateriness of these places may be significant as we will see). But on this recording landscape and location assume a new importance.

Here, we have a song set in a garden, and one by a river; one whose scene is a walk at sunset through a landscape of trees, and another describing the night sky seen from a city street; one located in a seaside hotel; and, most vividly of all, one inspired by an identifiable real-world place, ‘The Wind’, with its daring inversion of the legend associated with St Catherine’s Chapel at Abbotsbury. This is new for Harvey: a couple of the tracks on *Dance Hall at Louse Point*, ‘Rope Bridge Crossing’ and ‘Urn With Dead Flowers in a Drained Pool’ may well have arisen out of specific places she had visited or seen images of, but those locations are treated just as jumping-off points, and in the latter song the drained pool in question doesn’t even appear. Instead, fully half of *Is This Desire?*’s songs have definite settings which form an important element of each piece.

This use of precisely described locations develops the sense that the songs embody stories, even if we are only given insight into a fragment of them, not merely moments in the inner lives of the speakers. Tracks that fall more into that latter category still occur on *Is This Desire?*, of course, but when taken as part of the recording as a whole they can’t help but draw a certain energy from the examples that do have particular settings.

Writing for *The Solute* in 2015, Matthew Crowe thought that the album represented a kind of *rapprochement* between Harvey and the natural world. ‘On the cover ... we see Harvey standing by the riverbank that she so engulfed herself in on her previous (solo) album. The kind of river that represents the nature that she has so battled against in previous albums ... Harvey seems to somewhat come to terms with nature on *Is This Desire?*’³⁸ ‘The Wind’ reveals something of this, perhaps, if we think about the echoes between it and a track on *Dry*, ‘Fountain’ (yet another watery title). In that song, the wind (‘a big boneshaker’) blows away the speaker’s clothes and their sense of shame involved in a broken relationship. But it doesn’t work, and at the end of the song they are still longing to be cleansed: ‘on my hill I wait for wind’ to come and complete the job. The wind in ‘Fountain’ is violent and implacable, stripping away bad memories by force. For Catherine in her hilltop chapel, the wind performs the same redemptive office, but is gentler, bringing a sense of being washed – ‘ssshh’, murmurs the singer, mimicking the wind’s sound but also the shingle on the Chesil Beach below the real Chapel Hill, and urging calm and quiet, all in one syllable. We might not be fanciful in seeing this shift as an analogy for the whole project of *Is This Desire?*, a recording made by an artist who is no longer battling outside forces that constrain her, but only her own ability to create the art she can envisage in her mind.

iv. **Masks**

In the past, Harvey had expressed disdain for song lyrics written in the third party, arguing the habit was timid and cautious, that it distanced the artist from the art in a way which suggested a lack of commitment to whatever the project was: she wanted to take a riskier route. And riskier it definitely was as she suffered the indignity common to many female songwriters, especially, of everyone assuming their work was uncomplicatedly autobiographical. This led to her well-known complaint years later that ‘There are people who will listen to “Down by the Water” and believe I have actually given birth to a daughter and drowned her under a bridge’.³⁹ Even as her approach softened – *Is This Desire?* consists about equally of first-person and third-person narratives, depending how you understand a couple of lyrics – you can still find this attitude in some of the critical discourse around the recording. Writers sometimes couldn’t get past the succession of female names. *Spin*’s reviewer’s word-painting went well beyond what we actually hear: ‘unapologetically Brontë goth in theme ... Compositions that are, nearly without exception, odes to dubious/libidinous yearnings felt whilst walking the craggy rural streets and fog-snaked country groves of some nameless, old-world town that’s been haunted by a coven of darting, ghostly, beautiful women.’ Jeff Terich

believed that ‘none of the women who appear throughout the album are named Polly, but they’re all proxies for the very real feelings of depression that overcame her as she began writing. These women aren’t PJ Harvey, and yet all of them are.’ In the same sort of vein, when interviewing Harvey for *Q* in 2001 David Cavanaugh summarised the album as ‘sounding like an insomniac at breaking point who was systematically dialling the emergency services disguised as a different woman each time’, which is a very good line indeed but I think bears only an oblique relationship to reality.⁴⁰

There are a couple of points where we might, perhaps, glimpse some sort of identification between Harvey and the characters she sings about. Angelene in that song has green eyes (opening out of the Salinger line), as the singer does herself. It’s a physical characteristic Nick Cave drew attention to in a song with that title on *The Boatman’s Call*, and Harvey already replied to that track in a similarly-titled lyric about Mary Magdalene written in collaboration with Pascale Comelade, so it was a trait she *owned* quite consciously. Then there is the ‘Catherine’ of ‘The Wind’ – not *quite* the saint – connected to a site close to Harvey’s own home and to which she would return many times over the years. In the dreamlike video accompanying the song’s release as a single, Harvey drifts around New York in a white fur coat (‘a woman of the city’), and then the camera follows a similarly-dressed figure also with curly black hair but who turns out not to be her at all. It’s almost a perfect analogue for how we should and should not understand the relationship between the *maestra* and her music.⁴¹ More broadly, though, wearing a mask, vocalising other experiences and thoughts from her own, was a normal approach for Harvey, and on *Is This Desire?* she carries on doing it. These figures are not her.

Many critics, thankfully, are well able to grasp this. Shan Fowler for *Pitchfork* noted that the mode of *Is This Desire?* was only one of the ‘masks’ the singer had worn thus far, and described the album as ‘a collection of bleak short stories’. Reviewing the album on its 20th anniversary for *Paste* Annie Zaleski noted that the subjects of the songs ‘are relatable characters in various states of emotional disrepair, unmoored by forces beyond their control. Anyone listening to *Is This Desire?* could be a Joy or a Dawn or Elise’.⁴²

But we ought also to note the distance the songs often put between themselves and the characters. In ‘The Wind’, the Catherine figure does not speak, nor does Catherine de Barra in the song named after her. The subject of ‘Electric Light’ is silent too. The statements of Leah, Elise, Dawn, Joy, and the unnamed woman described in ‘No Girl So Sweet’ are all reported by someone else. Only Angelene and the narrator of ‘The Sky Lit Up’ speak clearly for themselves (assuming that the latter is indeed female). This album is not following one simple form applied across the board at all, and critiques that

summarise it in that way do it an injustice. Harvey wears her masks as usual here, but they are not simply swapped from one song to another, nor are they all depicting the women who are so often at the centre of these vignettes of desire, as the succession of names leads us instinctively to suppose. Sometimes they show someone else.

v. Liquidity

The cover photograph of *Is This Desire?* wasn't, as Matthew Crowe thought, taken on the bank of a river, but at Henleaze Lake, a popular swimming site in Bristol. But there's no avoiding the echoes of the track entitled 'The River', which thereby perhaps dominates our thinking in a way it wouldn't otherwise do. The unnamed protagonists of the song are also walking along a road, echoing in its turn the road Angelene imagines following, but that moves into the background next to the watery presence referred to in the title.

An entire separate essay could be written about PJ Harvey's apparent affinity for the imagery of water, from 'Water' and 'Fountain' on her first album all the way to 'River Anacostia' on *Hope Six*. Seen in that sequence, *Is This Desire?* isn't an especially watery recording: only 'The River' has a liquid setting, and though 'Angelene' refers to 'the coast', you can argue that's more land than sea. This makes it all the more remarkable that people reach so often for watery metaphors when they describe the album, both in terms of its sound, and the experience of listening to it.

It calls for gray skies and trees stripped of their foliage, a rhythmic patter of raindrops sequenced in time with the delicate piano ...

This is music for being on an overheated train travelling through South Lanarkshire on a cold November afternoon looking at the rain.

On a rainy day, I take my CD player out on the verandah and listen to this album, full-bolt. For me, it enhances the experience that is this masterpiece.

Every moment of [this album] brings me back into that rainstorm.

[Already quoted] Darkness runs through the whole album like a river.

It all flows seamlessly, like a cool river of sweat winding its way down your neck.

Unlike her past albums, this one slowly finds its own sound ... it explodes ... then it eases to a warm rainfall.

Her increasingly aquatic arrangements have the delicacy of Debussy.⁴³

We will return to a couple of these descriptions later. For now, it's interesting to wonder how they arise; I suppose the cover art, reinforced by the presence of 'The River', so dominates listeners' impression of the album as a whole that they come to experience it in relation to images of water. When analysing the individual songs, I found myself automatically reaching for watery metaphors too.

This isn't unreasonable. A river is a contradictory entity. You can indeed, like the couple in the song, imagine the water carrying away your pain; but it also carries away everything else. The river is relentless time, forever moving into the future. In terms of the album's central theme, we *desire* the healing and redemption the river offers, but we also know that surrendering to its healing implies a kind of oblivion. If you don't have an actual river anywhere to hand, you may have the rain: that too washes and cleanses, but it also erases, fills the air outside your window, converts everything to wateriness. It's the river writ small. More than any of the album's much-discussed female characters, *the river* is the central presence in *Is This Desire?*.

This means that the song 'The River' epitomises the whole album even more than the final, title track does. The endless, indeterminate nature of flowing water is the key mood, the essential quality of the whole recording. The song's swooning, dreamlike progress intensifies moments found throughout the album, and gives it a gravity it exerts over the rest of the music, so you never quite forget it no matter what you happen to be listening to, and we'll discuss how it does this below. Its power makes it all the more paradoxically striking that it was never performed during the album tour, and we'll come back to that matter too.

vi. Fuzz

It was not as though Harvey had ignored electronic sounds before *Is This Desire?* but the album marked a change. The sound she got out of the Yamaha QY-20 workstation was miles away from the evocative hum of the Hammond organ that appeared so often on *To Bring You My Love*: instead she used it to generate harsh, inorganic noises, a new turn in her search for the 'extreme'. The low-frequency throbs that emerged from the machine form another thread sewn through the recording that affects our experience of the whole thing, even on tracks where they don't occur. 'My Beautiful Leah', 'Electric Light', and 'Joy' are the main examples but the dense soundscape of 'No Girl So Sweet' may include a contribution from the Yamaha as well. This seems

intended as deliberately confrontational and challenging, and even some long-term fans have found these tracks a tough listen. And not just those: ‘Catherine’ has none of these sounds, but one Gardener complained about the ‘overbearing’ bass on the song, wondering whether either the monitoring speakers were incorrectly placed during the recording, or were just inaccurate, leading the engineer to overcompensate.⁴⁴ It seems more likely that everything we’re hearing on the album is Harvey’s conscious choice, and where sounds are muddy and indistinct, it’s because she intends them to be.

We mustn’t overstate this point. Harvey’s extremity was not taking her in the direction of Throbbing Gristle or abstract industrial noise. It’s rather the *contrast* between *Is This Desire?*’s harsh electronic elements and the often gentle and soulful material around them that makes them feel more savage than they really are, and Harvey’s skill lies in producing that contrast and making it seem emotionally coherent. The experimental is contained within a framework of basically conservative musical forms shaped by the desire to communicate in a way that most listeners will understand. That’s exactly what generates the sense of shock when we hear it.

3. Outputs

i. 'Angelene'

The album begins reassuringly, easing us in. 'Angelene' is the kind of song which, if we aren't familiar with Harvey's work, isn't going to be alienating. It's approachable, bluesey, swinging, guitar-based softish rock of a kind which, even though it may be a departure for her in 1998, is going to become somewhat standard for the next album a couple of years later. The basic premise, the prostitute who dreams of escape, doesn't seem groundbreaking either, but the strange crack that gives Harvey's voice its dramatic quality lends the simple idea an intensity. And although Angelene appears at first to pin her hopes of liberation on a man 'two thousand miles away' who will treat her differently from her clients, by the third stanza she's imagining a 'joy untold' which seems more general – something genuinely redemptive at the end of the road that stretches ahead of her, could she but reach it. The future isn't *just* a man, though we as listeners to Angelene's longings may doubt she will ever get there. The song is in the optimistic key of E, but the two thousand miles that separate the speaker from her longed-for future could be a distance she will never cross: the music and Harvey's vocal together express more yearning than fulfilment. The album's overarching theme of the instability and insolubility of desire is established right at the start.

For the first three lines it's just Harvey's voice and her guitar; ever-so-soft piano notes appear at 0.21 – suggesting perhaps the vulnerability of the speaker – drums join at 0.36 and bass a moment later, with synth finally coming in for the chorus at 1.16. That's as loud as the track is going to get. 'Angelene' may be one of the more straightforward songs on *Is This Desire?*, but close listening reveals a great deal going on. The demo is built around a drum machine loop, rhythmically exactly the same as that of 'My Beautiful Leah', on top of which Harvey rests her guitar and vocal, but on the album version instruments dip in and out and weave their apparently simple patterns around one another, forming a much more complex whole. Having fallen silent, the piano appears again at 2.02, just as Harvey moves on from lamenting the endless sequence of birth and death in which the world seems trapped and turns to 'joy untold'. As she hits the word 'until' her voices rises to G⁴ (a feature already present on the demo) and pedal effects on the guitar swoop and rise along with her, providing the song's hope-filled climax before everything goes quiet again, and Angelene restates her name, accompanied this time by the bass, piano and organ, ending on a final chord D³ F³ F⁴ on the

bass and two synth lines. This has a slight instability to it: can we believe Angelene is going to make it?

ii. 'The Sky Lit Up'

Having drawn us in with yearning, Harvey now pummels the listener with not-quite two minutes of post-punk thrash, the shortest and most frenetic song on the album, albeit far from the most violent. Instead, written, like 'Angelene', in E, it has an ecstatic quality: maybe the speaker *is* Angelene, finally achieving her lift-off from her old constraining life. Certainly 'The Sky Lit Up' is the closest point any of *Is This Desire?*'s characters gets to actual fulfilment. She (assuming it *is* a female voice) walks the night-time city 'thinking of nothing and the shooting stars', and revelling in a single, joyous moment, as sensual delight in the trees, moon and stars morphs into something spiritual: 'Shine on my own beautiful prayer/ Shine on my own beautiful love'.

The demo is a classic Harvey four-track recording of vocal, guitar, bass, and drum-machine line imitating maracas, but the song really needs the propulsive power of the drums to make its point. They come in at 0.14, crash to the front for the chorus, and never fall back again. This is not a song concerned overmuch with vocal clarity; guitars are played to fuzz and feed back, and at 1.20 there's a crashing noise in the background which seems again to be produced on a guitar. In live performances 'The Sky Lit Up' became riotous, Harvey and the rest of the band hugely enjoying themselves making as much noise as possible: at the Omega Studios in Rockville, Maryland, in November 1998, Harvey seemed to be channelling Patti Smith's 'Gloria' in the introductory bars.⁴⁵

It's in the last stanza that a note of doubt creeps in. 'And I'm dancing with him ... I don't care what he's thinking of', Harvey sings, 'Just take the car, just take my hand'. This abandon is not mere joy, we fear, it's recklessness, desperation. What *might* he be thinking of? Where might he take her in that car? Harvey's sung before about going for car journeys – think of 'Driving', 'Working for the Man', and 'Taut' – and it never ends well. As she sings those lines, the bass plays an ominous motif (A, G, D, F), the drums begin rolling frantically, and eventually she shifts to a higher register, finishing the song virtually on a shriek rising audibly from E to F. This feature is present in live performances and (just) on the demo, showing that it wasn't a fluke, but planned. Given the way the rest of the album works, we can't help but see something uncertain and baleful here.

iii. 'The Wind'

Is This Desire?'s third track marks a departure for the *maestra*, one that would point forward to options she would take up later. For the first time she builds her work not on other music or movies, or the Bible, but folklore, and folklore based on a specific place. She buttresses this with another first for her, a detailed soundscape constructed from fragments that can only be fully appreciated with careful listening on headphones. She would work in the same vein on a far larger scale a quarter-century later to produce the poem cycle *Orlam* and the album *I Inside the Old Year Dying* (2023).

Many readers will already know the story behind 'The Wind', but for those who don't, it builds on the legend of the early Christian martyr St Catherine of Alexandria. I tend to think Catherine existed historically, almost certainly being killed in the early 4th century, but legends filled the gap left by the absence of any authentic details about her life. We don't have to go into these in any depth, and need only note that she was said to have been offered, and refused, marriage to the Emperor Maxentius, as a result of which she became the patron saint of unmarried women.

The cult of St Catherine seems to have reached the British Isles no earlier than the late 11th century, and by the time it got going most parish churches had already been dedicated, so the features of medieval Christianity in England that bore her name tended to be altars in larger churches, guilds, bells, and freestanding chapels, especially – recalling the original site of her cult on Mount Sinai where her body was supposed to have been found – on hilltops. One of these, perhaps the most charismatic surviving, is the chapel at Abbotsbury in Dorset. Visible from miles around, this 14th-century structure with walls feet thick is famous for its barrel-vault roof and dramatic acoustic, and is one of the symbols of the county. There's no evidence, but I would think that Harvey knew the place long before *Is This Desire?* was written, seeing that I'd been visiting it since childhood while growing up on the other side of Dorset. Certainly she has returned to it over the years since. When John Harris came to interview her on the release of *White Chalk* for the *Guardian* in 2007, Harvey took him to the Ilchester Arms in Abbotsbury and then on a little tour of the village, pointing out the chapel: 'Patron saint of spinsters', she smiled, forestalling any temptation the journalist may have felt to venture into the *verboden* territory of her private life.⁴⁶ Maybe St Catherine was another figure she felt close to.

Commitment to celibacy was one of the points of St Catherine's story, so it was peculiar that across the whole of Europe she became a figure whose heavenly help young women would solicit to avoid just such a fate. The Abbotsbury

chapel was one place where this could happen. By the time the custom first appears in collections of Dorset folklore, it's turned into a wishing ritual, and sometimes includes leaving the traditional offering of a bent pin in a niche in the chapel doorway. Visitors are then supposed to recite the rhyme,

*A husband, St Catherine,
A handsome one, St Catherine,
A rich one, St Catherine,
A nice one, St Catherine,
And soon, St Catherine!*⁴⁷

This is what Harvey incorporates into 'The Wind', but she strikingly inverts the whole motif: instead of the speaker coming to the chapel to ask Catherine to intercede in her own search for a husband, she (if it is a woman) imagines finding a partner for Catherine herself.

The key is melancholy E minor. A blush of bells over a single bass note and rapidly-plucked strings give way to a conventional guitar motif and a rhythm tapped out on cymbal, and a barely-identifiable rushing noise which is probably the cymbal being scraped with a brush: we have all these sounds in the first few seconds even before the vocal joins. When it does, when at 0.12 Harvey's whisper begins with 'Catherine liked high places', it's electrifying, deeply intimate, even creepy, a choice which brings the listener into the experience intensely and inescapably. At 0.27 the bass returns and, though the whole track is quiet, by this stage we have – if you listen carefully – a texture of sound so thick it's almost overwhelming. Suddenly at 0.51 there's a punctuation point, an aural semicolon where everything drops out and, after a moment, the drums lead back into the music and the statement of Catherine's desire to 'listen to the wind blow'. From 1.07, as on the demo, the singer's voice splits into two mirroring lines, a soprano for the main lyric and the whisper picking up on key words. Driven on by the drum rhythm, this pattern will persist through the rest of the song, but that understates the sheer amount going on beneath the surface. From 1.56 to 2.29 the vocal falls silent, but nothing else does. This passage begins with Harvey sighing 'Ah!' and, although a list of everything that's happening would be tedious, it includes at 2.23 what sounds like cutlery being dropped and a drawer shutting. Later, at 3.00, there's what seems to be a simulated shriek, just as there was one at 1.22 following the words 'torture on the wheel', the saint's emblem.

Repeated motifs make the point that we're listening to more than just a random assemblage of noises, but a carefully gathered soundscape. The mysterious reference on the album credits to 'elements from the soundtrack of *Planet of the Apes*' relates to the two-note downward inflexion, a drop from G

to F[#], which we first hear at 0.28 – apparently a musical rendering of the lyrics’ ‘noises like the whales’ – and again at 3.17 and 3.27. Mirroring this motif is an *upward* pair of notes on the synth (D to E), which appears repeatedly and especially in the fade-out. The initial bells are there again, right at the edge of audibility, at 3.20; at 3.04 Harvey ‘ssshhes’ again, and sighs ‘Ah’ a second time a few moments later (apart from a final sustained guitar note, the demo ends on a sigh). This is all delicately organised.

Harvey had never produced anything like this before, and wouldn’t do again for 25 years. Obviously nothing remotely like the album version of ‘The Wind’ could be performed live, and on tour the song was subjected to a reworking almost as radical as that inflicted on ‘Joy’, as we will discuss later.

Words most often used to describe ‘The Wind’ include ‘eerie’ and ‘haunting’ – and, in a term which didn’t even exist when *Is This Desire?* was written, ‘ASMR’, the mid-2010s coining for the pleasurable shiver the body experiences from certain gentle, repeated stimuli; full of sounds at the very margins of hearing, the song delivers plenty of those. For years it was hard for me to get past my delight at recognising the setting of the song, and I certainly didn’t find it disagreeable: eerie was not a word I’d’ve used. Now I can appreciate its unsettling intensity, and ambiguity. Ambiguity, because ‘desire’ in the track doesn’t seem to reside where you might initially think. The speaker regards Catherine in her hilltop chapel as a lonely figure, and dreams of finding a husband for her; but the anchoress has fled the city where she was ‘a lady/ Of pleasure and high-born’ by choice, to go to her remote retreat where the wind will ‘wash’ her of her past. Maybe she has run away from her martyrdom. She dreams of contradictory things, ‘of children’s voices/ And torture on the wheel’ and perhaps wants to escape both: in any case, it seems absolutely clear that her isolated chapel is exactly where she desires to be. The line ‘Patron saint of nothing’ sounds dismissive, but perhaps Catherine has striven precisely to divest herself of ties like that, in contrast to the ‘real’ St Catherine who has quite a busy range of responsibilities, ranging from scholars to milkmaids to wheelwrights. The speaker’s inversion of the Abbotsbury wishing-ritual could be read as ‘a sweet and empathetic gesture’, or alternatively the impulse to find the hermit a mate might be ‘less Catherine’s desire than that of her onlooker, the suggestion almost a violation of Catherine’s sacred chosen solitude’.⁴⁸ A piece this complex and involving is the first reason we have for thinking this album is not going to be merely good, but something extraordinary.

iv. 'My Beautiful Leah'

This song made me feel ill at first listen – the music, the lyrics, were sickening.⁴⁹

From the playfulness of 'The Wind', Harvey plunges her audience straight into the very pit of disturbance that had threatened to derail her in mid-1996: thematically, if not sonically, 'from a whisper to a scream' indeed. Her skill lies in creating a short piece of music (less than two minutes) which is not in itself extreme, yet manages to convince so many people who hear it that it's something almost unbearably nightmarish. Apart from that deeply unsettling idea, *so* unsettling that it unnerved the singer herself, of the thoughts someone practices distorting their physical appearance, the actual *words* of 'My Beautiful Leah' are another masterpiece of inexplicitness. It's easy to read the song as a depiction of a man looking for a woman who's left him to seek her own romantic or sexual fulfilment, but that says more about our expectations than what's in the text. 'She went looking for someone', says the narrator – but for what purpose? In so far as Leah herself is given any words to say, she fails to define the object of her desire as any more than 'it', even if she thinks she'd rather die than not find it. She doesn't *tell* us she's seeking a person, rather some abstract quality which we can be sure she'll never locate. Any definiteness dissolves the more we look. 'Black hair, brown eyes' isn't much to go on as a description, and when the narrator starts listing the months when Leah might possibly have come by – Harvey singing in a higher register to accentuate the vagueness – we seem to be drifting away from any certainty at all. Does Leah even exist? Or do her ambiguous reported desires actually reflect those of the narrator, who has made her up? Are *they* the one wandering in search of something they can never have, waylaying strangers like the Ancient Mariner to fantasise about it?

In contrast, the soundscape Harvey constructs for these indefinite musings is anything but uncertain: it's the album's first foray into sonic ugliness, but of a very controlled kind that never becomes in any way untethered. It remains *music*, as opposed to noise, just about retaining its hold on Harvey's bluesey anchor however far below its surface that may rest. The chief impression is percussive: the demo is built around just the original drum machine rhythm and the vocal, and the other elements – the angry battering of cymbals that comes in at 0.59 and 1.15, the high-pitched synth lines that move around the main rhythm, even the high vocal way down in the mix at 0.30 and 1.48 that mirrors the principle one and represents Leah's own words – all just complement the basic structure rather than add to it. This simplicity was what lent 'My Beautiful Leah' to solo performance on the *White Chalk* tour, for instance at the Royal Festival Hall on 29th September 2007 when Harvey did

the whole thing with just the aid of the recorded drum machine, her Yamaha QY-20 and a cymbal. Then and on other occasions she replicated the little vocal ‘kicks’ which occur twice in the song’s last stanza and which both form part of the rhythm and add to the sense of tension and strain.

But the most striking element of the whole composition is the bass synth line that appears right at the very start; it’s innocuous enough at first, then quickly becomes intensely distorted and at points threatens to overwhelm the entire song. If anything it’s even uglier and rougher on the demo. It’s this sound, doomy, confrontational, savage, that sets the tone for the track as a whole. The title is dreamy and romantic: the bass rasp threaded through it keys ‘My Beautiful Leah’ into a kind of rage that the lyrics themselves don’t really express, and affects everything else we hear (or think we hear). In 2014 Angus Andrew of the band Liars told *The Quietus*

I distinctly remember turning to someone when listening to the track ‘My Beautiful Leah’ and asking, ‘How on earth do I make that sound?’ It’s really the first time I can remember as a musician wanting to try and exactly emulate a sound I heard on a record. To this day, I don’t think I’ve ever been able to achieve that.⁵⁰

These techniques turn ‘My Beautiful Leah’ into a muddy aural pool into which we listeners are sucked. Just as we’re going under, the song ends suddenly on the full stop of the word ‘dead’, as though we’re being spat back out of the turgid waters to face whatever may come next.

v. ‘A Perfect Day Elise’

And what comes next is the biggest hit Harvey has ever had (so far), even propelling her onto *Top of the Pops* of all things. On the broadcast, presenter Jayne Middlemiss appears suitably awestruck and Harvey allows herself a big grin at the end of performing the song, a surreal situation that sadly would never arise again.⁵¹ It’s plain enough why ‘Elise’ did so well: it’s the simplest and most accessible track on the album, musically and thematically. There’s no ambiguity about the story: it’s hard to read it as anything other than a narrative of a man who ‘got lucky one time’ with a woman at a seaside hotel, and shoots her after she dumps him, madly imagining the murder will restore the day to perfection as the bitter title suggests. This jilted-lover-takes-revenge tale would border on the commonplace were it not for some striking word-painting – the sun scattering across the sea, ‘the water soaked her blonde hair black’ – and the relentless orchestration powering the story to its violent conclusion. To the drum machine and the distorted synth growl of the demo,

the album version adds actual percussion, high-pitched shimmery effects which could be synth or guitar, and doubled or echoed vocals (which in some places are so subtle as to be almost inaudible), creating a texture whose embedded hysteria builds until it explodes in the single-line chorus basically sung on the one note C⁶ (I think), with a bit of scooping. If ‘Leah’ is a drowning pool, ‘Elise’ is a gathering coastal storm. However, although the album version is violent, it’s still more listener-friendly than the positively brutal demo, with just the rhythm and low synth notes accompanying Harvey’s voice. It’s the difference between a ‘beautiful melodrama’ and something ‘wonderfully ugly and barren.’⁵² The success of the single makes the point.

In the song’s concluding lines the higher vocal is not just repeating the main lyric: as far as I can tell, the words are ‘He’s a lucky man/ And the sky/ As you turn away/ Just tell me why’, but that last phrase is especially hard to make out. There is one oddity: in both demo and album version a word seems to have been cut at the start of the third stanza: the extant line ‘Got burned by the sun’ doesn’t scan, and in live performances Harvey stretched the word ‘got’ to cover the missing syllable (or two). We could have great fun speculating what originally went there, though the answer might be nothing and she’d just decided to roll with the awkwardness.

Harvey’s *To Bring You My Love* guitarist Joe Gore maintained that the characters’ names were lifted from his wife and himself: ‘Polly just borrowed names from friends in her circle ... It’s awesome to be name-checked in a great song.’⁵³ Joe is also one of Harvey’s most favoured male names: ‘Is This Desire’ has a Joseph, and there’s another Joe on her first album, *Dry*. Any relation to her first boyfriend Joe Dilworth is *probably* a coincidence!

vi. ‘Catherine’

Like ‘Angelene’, ‘Joe’, and ‘Elise’, there’s probably nothing to be gained from wondering where the name Catherine de Barra came from: the West Hebridean island of Barra seems to be a very red herring and the title almost certainly emerged in a quite arbitrary way. In any case, the character of the title isn’t the focus of the song: the woman herself is barely there, present only in her remembered hair, smiling eyes, and singing mouth. Our attention isn’t on her, but on the narrator who nurses such contradictory feelings towards her. And what feelings they are: the obvious absurdity of envying tarmac and pillows only emphasises their strength when the speaker admits to violent rage against whoever it is who now has Catherine’s affections. But the second half of the song turns to a gentle regret so achingly bereft that, even if we may feel

a tremor of discomfort at the narrator continuing to fantasise that they'd have persuaded Catherine to accept their love given time and 'wile', it can't entirely efface our sympathy for them.

'Catherine' draws us in to an interior moment: hostile critics have repeatedly reached for the idea that Harvey's writing resembles 'diary entries', and this song does rather read like the kind of thing someone might confide to a diary. Certainly Catherine herself isn't listening, and the lyric doesn't seem to assume anyone else might be there to overhear, as 'Angelene' does. Part of the song's power derives from its two contrasting halves: the taboo-breaking confession to 'murderous envy' balanced with the wistfulness of remembrance, each intensifying the other. The baleful lines at the end of each stanza are emphasised by a series of notes flattened or sharpened off the key. The transition comes at 2.23, by which time the drum machine pattern which has been there from the start and the quiet, repeated guitar line have been joined by a high, mellow synth tone (from about 1.20), but the actual tonal variation is so subtle it's hard to pick anything out, apart from the vocal: the 'percussive pulse which sounds like a languidly beating heart'⁵⁴ is there throughout. In both sections Harvey's voice is surprisingly gentle and light; she avoids any temptation to *act* rage, for instance by singing the 'murderous envy' line through clenched teeth as she did on 'Man-Size Sextet', as that would have skewed the track towards melodrama rather than quiet truth. It's testimony to her skill that I used to think that's exactly what she *did* do, when it's clear she doesn't. The final fading section of the song is backed by a repeated, plaintive ascending pattern of guitar chords, submerged in the mix but more prominent in live performances, while the synth line gently descends instead, and the vocal follows a separate melody. The fact that the elements of the song are all doing such different things suggests an instability, a hint that, yet again, we're in a realm of unrealistic, damagingly deceptive desire.

vii. 'Electric Light'

Here the Yamaha workstation is employed not to overwhelm but to hint, not a single, harsh sound battering the listener, but a slow, hypnotic, insidious phrase of seven notes repeated throughout the track (F B C F B C F) which some listeners have likened to a buzzing light or 'fluorescent tubes in an empty hallway'.⁵⁵ At first it's just this and Harvey's voice, until flickering, echoey drums join in from 0.41. There are also other elements way, way down in the mix, impossible to hear unless you're wearing headphones: something like water comes in on the left from about 1.02, joined later by the sound of an untuned radio on the right which develops into and alternates with a series of

indistinct ticks like tangled audio tape. When Harvey's voice rises for the line 'Siren rising/ Cross the sky' the change is startling. The uneasiness is accentuated by a vocal echo which is higher and slightly off-pitch compared to the main line, like a siren wailing through the early dawn. The demo is almost identical to the finished track, less the effects, suggesting that what we're listening to is the drum machine rather than Rob Ellis.

The song's soundscape is enclosed, urban, but indefinite, as though something is about to happen which we are not sure of. What could it be? The lyric is too simple to offer much in the way of explanation. The narrator describes a woman whose beauty is apparent in the unreality of artificial light, as opposed to the dawn waiting outside the building; what's she doing there? Is she held, trapped? Do the final lines refer to a police siren – has the bleak, light-filled room become a crime scene?⁵⁶ Whatever is 'actually' happening, the picture is yet again one of someone being bewitched by the unreal, a falsified experience which only exists in the glare of a light bulb in the small hours while the world goes on outside.

In 2012 PR Newswire sent out a report that 'Electric Light' was among music being used by engineers at motor company Ford to set the sound system in the Ford Escape, 'to make sure the instruments don't modulate the vocals and the bass doesn't shake the door'.⁵⁷

viii. 'The Garden'

Whatever 'The Garden' is about, it's not a cat. This was a diversion introduced by Harvey herself when she told Caitlin Moran in the 1999 *Observer* article about a cat she'd encountered while staying with John Parish and Maria Mochnacz: she named him 'Garden' because that was where he would appear. He was apparently a stray, because she claimed she took him with her when she left. The reference to 'songbirds' in the lyrics might suggest feline interests, but equally cats don't kneel, make promises, or kiss: we're definitely in the realm of human rather than animal experience. Instead, the reference to the central figure 'thinking of his sins' and 'praying for his life' introduces a spiritual element and the night-time garden setting sends us in a different direction. I think the starting-point for the song is an inversion of the Garden of Gethsemane, the thought of what might happen if Judas were to be kissed by Jesus instead of the other way around. Or maybe the figure who approaches the protagonist is the Devil, promising him 'gold and mountains' in the same way that he makes (empty) promises to Jesus during his temptation in the wilderness? I stress the song isn't a straightforward description of what such an event might be like; rather it builds around the idea, in the same way

Harvey uses her literary sources as the armature for other compositions, and the track is shaped into something a variety of listeners can make sense of for themselves. One writer suggested the central figure might be meeting with his 'Jungian shadow', making the song a narrative of an internal experience, an encounter with repressed desire (that would explain why the lover seems to disappear).⁵⁸ Everyone has shadow selves, so it belongs to all of us.

In this case, the demo version of the song (which John Parish so preferred) is wildly different from what's on the album: it consists just of Harvey's voice, a very light drum rhythm, and a guitar line which batters awkwardly against the vocal as though it's trying to twist away into a different composition entirely. Rob Ellis's arrangement firstly brings drums to the forefront, and replaces the guitar with a low, simpler line on what might be synth or bass guitar. This produces a muscular sense of forward movement, building up excitement – but then at 0.52 a Hammond organ sound and piano come in which completely alter the feel of the track. We're now in a dreamy, indistinct landscape in which the keyboard and vocal signal differently from the rhythm and yet all combine, absolutely right for the song's ambiguity and openness. From 1.47 the vocal and the piano start divergent motifs which, although they aren't dissonant or uncomfortable, create a sense of instability; by the time that an organ tone joins in at 2.38, mimicking the wind mentioned in the lyrics, the strengthening of the piano line makes the mix positively foreboding. From 2.50 to 3.00 the drum beat is left alone; once everything else has come back in, at 3.27 Harvey begins the fadeout with a three-note motif that's appeared earlier (F#-A-D), repeated by a second piano line, *out of time with the voice*. The effect is gentle, dreamlike, but odd, inconclusive, no more resolved than the hint of undefined 'trouble taking place' in the lyrics.

ix. 'Joy'

It is very Harveyan to proceed from a gentle dreamscape to an assault on the ears and sensibilities, but she never takes the bend as sharply as the transition from 'The Garden' to 'Joy'. The hideous irony of giving that name to a protagonist who finds herself trapped in a constrained, loveless life and preferring blindness to abandoning hope, a hope that the lyrics explicitly state is empty, is undisguised and bitter. In this song, the sky – usually that image of possibility and escape – is 'hollow'. There's no way out, for Joy or for us.

The track begins like the demo does, with a clashing cymbal-like rhythm on the drum machine and then a brutal, distorted synth loop which seems to be D-F-C-D-F-F#. In the background are what sound like jingles and a ticking noise. The synth motif carries on throughout, but just when we're sort of

getting used to it and wonder whether it might not be quite musical after all, Harvey flattens or sharpens notes or turns the volume up producing a more abrasive tone so we have no chance to get complacent. From 1.03 a new high clashing rhythm joins followed by tom-toms and other percussive sounds at 1.54. The noises become gradually louder and more oppressive until a single note at 2.17 introduces a beat of silence before Harvey shrieks 'No hope'. From then on the battery is relentless, the synth more discordant, the vocal more strained and despairing, until the final word 'No' at 2.53, and we are swept towards a dead stop at 3.31. She might have ventured into the raging and grotesque many times in the past, but Harvey had never been as simply nihilistic as this, and as willing to signal nihilism. If this was an exercise in how she might express despair, it succeeded. The album version submerges her voice a bit but surrounding it with these supporting noises makes the song a dreadful achievement.

It has always been too dreadful for some; occasionally even long-term fans could admit to finding it 'unbearable'. 'My Beautiful Leah' would prove that Harvey's heaviest compositions *could* be translated into live performance, but with 'Joy' she chose not to try, and for the tour it underwent a transformation even more radical than 'The Wind's', and we will talk about that later.

'Joy' also seems to have been repurposed in another way. In 1998 Rob Ellis assembled the second iteration of his project Spleen and produced an album called *Little Scratches*. The track 'In a Silent Violent Way' was sometimes referred to as a 'reworking of "Joy"'. I used not to be able to see how it could be as, at first listen, the two songs share not a single feature, but eventually I realised that the central motif of the Spleen song is indeed the horrid synth loop of 'Joy', played much, much slower and on a piano. The vocalist of 'In a Silent Violent Way' was credited as one Pinkie Maclure, and some people alleged this was a pseudonym for Polly Harvey. Not only does the voice sound nothing like her, but the attribution was rather unfair to the real Pinkie Maclure, who had made a number of experimental post-punk records from the 1980s on and became an accomplished stained-glass artist. It could well be Harvey hissing the words 'it's telling me nothing!' in the background of the track, though.

x. 'The River'

From the savagery of 'Joy' Harvey performs another handbrake turn to a track in melancholy B-minor which recalls the dreamlike qualities of 'The Garden', but in its way it's as hopeless as its predecessor. This time the percussion remains low down in the mix, nearly swallowed as the song progresses by bass

guitar and synth: we're not being propelled on by a beat, but carried forward by a slow current of sound. Occasionally a piano, and from 2.34 almost dulcimer-like metallic percussion, tinkles like the lyric's white light scattering on the surface of the water. If the river is indeed the main character of *Is This Desire?* this song should be crucial, and its dreaminess does seem to inflect the rest of the recording.

This vocal was definitely re-recorded from the demo: on that, Harvey sings 'the sun explodes' at the end of the final stanza rather than 'the sun sets low'. This gentler and less dramatic image fits in better with the inexplicit quality of the rest of the song, and the vocal on the album is generally less strained and tense than the demo. The structure of the song is the same, with more instruments and effects added to reinforce the sense of flowing movement, including Terry Edwards's trumpet at 1.48. The music is dominated by downward cadences, such as the synth's descent from G to F# in the right aural field which is then copied by the bass at 1.10, and the sensation of foreboding grows from about 2.50 where the music starts to increase in volume. There is almost the same device as the silent beat in the middle of 'Joy' (although here a synth note persists rather than there being complete silence), marking a transitional point.

As already mentioned, although one of the couple in the song is male, we don't know the sex of the other, and the nature of their conflicting dreams is also undefined: 'he' wants the sun, while the other wants 'the whole', whatever that might be. They are both unachievable, anyway. The very first line begins 'And', making it clear this is a scenario we're only seeing part of; so do most of the others, which only adds to the ambiguity and lack of certainty. All we know is that the couple desire different things, that they can't talk about it, and the river emerges as a possible site of resolution, or at least a place where pain can be cast, the dirt of the road washed away. But the somnolent, drifting music suggests that this river is Lethe, the site of the obliteration of memory rather than any kind of redemption. If this is 'a relationship scorched by conflicting, greedy wants'⁵⁹ there is absolutely no reason to think finding the river at sunset is going to make things any better.

Very oddly, 'The River' was the only track on *Is This Desire?* that was never performed during the album tour itself; information about seventeen live dates in 1998 is missing, but it would be remarkable if the song had only been played at those. It didn't feature in Harvey's live sets until 2008, and got most exposure during the *Hope Six* tour (2016-17) when it was played twenty times. Given what was done to other items to make them work live, 'The River' can't have been left out because of any similar doubts. I wonder rather whether its dreamy, swirling mood is in fact so powerful that it would have unbalanced

the live performances which had to incorporate material from Harvey's earlier career as well. It's interesting to note that, encores aside, concerts during the *Hope Six* tour always ended with the song 'River Anacostia'.

xi. 'No Girl So Sweet'

To describe 'No Girl So Sweet' as 'just another distortion-filled pop-rock song'⁶⁰ would be reductive, but it is indeed close to several more of Harvey's compositions – not so much that she had written up to this point, but would do over the years until her next great *volte-face* with *White Chalk*. We probably shouldn't read too much into the fact that it's built around the same chords as 'The River', although the basic picture of two protagonists who seem to have different expectations of their relationship is similar. Yet again, what's actually happening is indistinct, although we seem to have an unequivocal female-male pairing involved in this case. The woman bombards the man with desperate questions, including the very ambiguous 'how much more can you take from me?' which could mean either 'what else can you *remove* from me' or 'what more will you let me *do to you*'; but he only replies with a cliché about his lover coming from heaven. In this context, the would-be romantic statement is empty and unsatisfying. Even as he watches her sleeping he can't come up with anything else.

Where the demo leads straight in with the vocal, the album version allows a few seconds of drum machine (though not actually drum sounds) before the voice joins. The texture of the sound eventually becomes quite complex though so intense there seems little reason to pick out anything in particular: Richard Hunt is credited with a violin part, but I struggle to hear anything that sounds like one. By the end all the instruments are 'pummelled into submission'⁶¹ or rather are pummelled by each other. The most striking element is the way Harvey distorts her voice at 1.12 by singing very close to the mic, blurring the distinction between the natural vocal and some electronic treatment or noise as she shifts from singing the line 'And I love you' to merely articulating two B notes an octave apart: this is a technique she wouldn't use again until *I Inside the Old Year Dying*. There's also a second vocal line doing the same just audible behind the main one, and it's copied on a shrieking guitar at 2.16, making it all the more difficult to tell where human ends and machine begins.

That kind of interest notwithstanding, for me, this is the closest *Is This Desire?* gets to a track that doesn't quite work. Its violence expresses passion – the kind of dramatic, intense desire the woman seems to feel who wants to 'take you inside my head/Take you inside of me' – but it also has to encompass the

strange distance of the man who sees her as an ‘angel’, not quite real.⁶² It struggles to do both. Live, ‘No Girl So Sweet’ was played very much slower, and on occasion took up to a minute longer to perform: that made for a different, and arguably more successful, way of building tension.

xii. ‘Is This Desire’

For a second time on the album, we join a couple on a walk as the sun sets. This is enough to make us wonder whether Joseph and Dawn are in fact the same pair we’ve already met on ‘The River’, now confirmed as mixed-sex. Whatever we conclude about that, they too are finding their way through what desire means, and what they want. We automatically tend to understand the word ‘desire’ in sexual terms, and that might be true here, although it could be read more generally, referring to what the couple want from life as a whole. Joseph and Dawn find any erotic thoughts, at least, declining as the evening grows cold, and maybe Dawn’s suggestion that they build a fire is an attempt to rekindle that flame as well. What actually happens is that they seem to fall into a tender and pensive mood. It may be reassuring that Joseph maintains ‘I’m not scared’, but we wonder why he should be in the first place. Is it that he isn’t scared to face the possibility that desire *isn’t* enough to ‘lift [them] higher’, towards some sort of lasting fulfilment? If so, he’s more realistic and self-aware than any of the other characters on this whole recording.

The contextlessness of Joe and Dawn’s wandering leads us to wonder whether they might be more than just a random imagined couple: are they, in fact, the *first* couple? There’s no apple in this song, but we can’t help but recall the one Harvey offers us on the album cover and the inevitable resonances of the Garden of Eden, which we’ll discuss later. Are Joe and Dawn disguises for Adam and Eve, heading away from Paradise into the uncertain world, not knowing what they will find, and, therefore, asking questions not only for themselves, but on behalf of us all?

The understated orchestration of ‘Is This Desire?’ is not that much altered from the demo, though on the recorded version the staccato drum beat and the vocal begin simultaneously. The guitar only joins at the end of the first stanza at 0.46,⁶³ and is definitely there to accompany and accentuate the dominant voice, rather than provide the major part itself: the isolated chords are more like punctuation than a tune. After 2.05 a very submerged synth note appears which from 2.19 goes much higher and becomes more prominent. In the last stanza, as the question ‘Is this desire enough?’ is repeatedly asked, that synth note becomes a kind of subtle, slightly discordant noise alongside the drum, strummed guitar, and bass, a bit like a distant, howling wind. Behind the

gentle, quiet music, then, there is a deeper layer of uncertainty, an uncertainty that concludes the entire album with an unanswered question.

Iai on *rateyourmusic* judged that ‘Is This Desire?’ managed ‘the highwire act of making [Harvey’s] blues influences as blatant as they’ve ever been while simultaneously sounding like the album’s most modern moment’,⁶⁴ even if the whole track is so low-key it’s hard to describe any element as clearly bluesy. The delivery of the line ‘I’m not scared’ calls to mind ‘I give up he said’ on ‘This Wicked Tongue’, the bonus track on *Stories* – though I mention this only as the resemblance struck me, rather than ascribing any weight to it.

xiii. The out-takes

If we didn’t have James Blandford’s and others’ accounts of the making of *Is This Desire?*, we would still know that more songs than the twelve that survived went in and out of consideration for inclusion on the album because of a list Harvey teasingly incorporates into the sleeve art. They would all appear as B-sides to the album’s single releases, or be used in different contexts. With the sole exception of ‘Nina in Ecstasy’, none have ever been performed live.

In each case, you can see why they ended up being excluded. Whatever their virtues, ‘Sweeter Than Anything’, ‘The Northwood’ and ‘The Bay’ are further towards the blues or folk ends of the musical spectrum than would be comfortable in the context of *Is This Desire?*, and their lyrical content is either more conventional than the album’s or doesn’t fit well with its concerns. The latter’s also true of ‘The Faster I Breathe the Further I Go’. Even if musically it’s a good fit, slow, shimmery ‘Rebecca’ encapsulates a blissful mood which, again, is out of sympathy with the album’s ambiguity, while the weird, uncomfortable ‘Nina’ ’s fate is sealed by its quote from ‘Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep’, a step too far towards whimsy – however queasy – for this collection of music. Fans, and John Parish, may nurse fantasies about the album that might have been, but I reckon *Is This Desire?* is the stronger for the omission of all these pieces, however interesting they may be in themselves. Still, it’s worth dealing with them briefly in turn, as they are part of the album’s story.

‘Instrumentals’. These three short guitar pieces, none amounting to what you might describe as a tune and all less than two minutes long (in fact #1 and #3 are barely 1.10) never developed into songs, and are perhaps best seen in the context of Harvey’s later interest in writing incidental music for radio and stage: in fact, she recycled two to use as background music to her friend Sarah Miles’s short film *A Bunny Girl’s Tale* in 1999; #1 occurs at 4.12, and #2 at

9.20. Otherwise, #2 was a B-side to ‘The Wind’, and #3 to ‘A Perfect Day Elise’ while #1 only ever appeared on a promotional CD until formally released among Harvey’s rarities in 2022. #1 and #2 feature heavy reverb, and #2 is *so* distorted it sounds almost damaged, like ‘The Northwood’. If you listen very carefully to it, you can even hear a ‘shadow’ song way over in the left audial field, as though the music has been recorded on tape previously used for something else and the old sound is still ‘bleeding’ through. Fan consensus is that this is ‘Send His Love to Me’ from *To Bring You My Love*.⁶⁵

‘*Nina in Ecstasy*’. Or, ‘Nina in Ecstasy 2’ to give it its full title; this implies that there might have been a v.1 somewhere, though it surely cannot be a coincidence that German punk singer Nina Hagen came out with an album called *In Ekstasy* in 1985. This reticent, odd piece about a girl gone to the bad played on a tinny organ was, Harvey later stated, a favourite among her bandmates: bantering between tracks at the Hay-on-Wye Festival in 2006 she expressed surprise that ‘all these strapping men’ should be so fond of such a slight, delicate item. By then she’d performed it live several times, and, although it never appeared during the *Is This Desire?* tour, Harvey told *Rolling Stone* in 2022 that the song was deliberately placed in the live set after the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 as a moment of reflection on loss – although it had no direct bearing on the events ‘everything everyone did had a completely different resonance’. It cropped up repeatedly from 2001 onwards, and the total number of renditions finally reached 42, more than ‘The Wind’, ‘Joy’, ‘The River’, and ‘No Girl So Sweet’, which actually *were* on the album. ‘Nina’’s last outing was at the Royal Albert Hall on Halloween 2011. It, too, appears on the soundtrack of *A Bunny Girl’s Tale*, at 1.21, and was released as a B-side track on ‘The Wind’. On the *White Chalk* tour in 2008 Harvey told a Warsaw audience that the song, or at least its title, arose when she accidentally stumbled on a pornographic film while channel-surfing on a hotel TV, but her later statements were less definite: ‘It’s hard to remember where that song came from. It was, “I’ve got a feeling,” ’ she said to *Rolling Stone*, and mused that the title just ‘implied something more like a porno movie’ hiding a real, vulnerable individual. When the song was finally released among her *B-Sides, Demos and Rarities* she wrote “‘Nina in Ecstasy’ sounds like a porn film, maybe it was, but my Nina is also a lovely, sad, lost lady looking for her mum’.⁶⁶ The high, childlike voice she uses for ‘Nina’ prefigured where she would go a few years later.

‘*Rebecca*’. Released as a b-side to ‘The Wind’, clearly some work had already been put into ‘Rebecca’ by the time it was discarded. It has a piano line and a kind of echo behind the drumbeat far into both left and right audial fields, but the most memorable element is the shimmering, watery, reverbed guitar loop matched with the high-pitched vocal. It conveys the sensation of walking

along a sunny beach with the light glinting on the waves rather well, but despite this polish, and a piano motif introducing some slight uncertainty, the narrator seems uncomplicatedly happy as she (presumably the eponymous Rebecca) imagines being in love by the seashore, and so the track was understandably left out.

'Sweeter Than Anything'. Like 'Rebecca', the version of 'Sweeter' we have has been significantly built up from whatever the original demo might have been like, with a high-pitched vocal line submerged beneath the main one and plangent guitar effects adding to the basic drum, guitar and synth elements. It's a plaintive vignette of a relationship gone sour, but while it's effective enough at what it does it arguably counts as one of Harvey's least consequential pieces. Certainly it seems minor compared with the complexity of the ideas that did make it onto the album. 'Sweeter Than Anything' was a B-side to the 7" version of 'A Perfect Day Elise'.

'The Bay'. A super little Gothic melodrama assembled from a snarly vocal and its high-pitched backing, bluesy guitar, synth hums and a muscular drum beat, 'The Bay' would have stuck out a mile on *Is This Desire?* and so remained just a B-side track to 'A Perfect Day Elise'. Its near-camp over-the-top quality belongs instead on *To Bring You My Love*: a song that begins 'A dead man came calling my name and in need' is the epitome of a perfectly valid incarnation of PJ Harvey, but not one for this album. One suspects she could almost do this kind of thing in her sleep.

'The Faster I Breathe the Further I Go'. In 2017, not-that-well-known drummer Ted Parsons put up on Soundcloud.com 'three PJ Harvey songs unheard for nearly twenty years'. And, rather astonishingly, so they genuinely were: the vocals of 'Life on Mars', 'Eyes' and 'Idea of You' were definitely hers, and she had indeed registered all the song titles. They were all presumably recorded while Harvey was in New York in 1999, but what she was doing working with Parsons's then band, ambient trip-hop outfit Teledubgnosis, is anyone's guess. It was a glimpse into her hinterland. The Soundcloud links were removed within a couple of days, so presumably Harvey's management were being relatively vigilant (they weren't always).

'The Faster I Breathe ...' bears a definite family resemblance to those Teledubgnosis pieces, and not very much to anything else in Harvey's *oeuvre*. A relentless, pounding drumbeat punctuated with punishing strikes on the snare is strengthened further by a guitar line so distorted it almost sounds like a kazoo. Was it recorded with the New York band? Brutally urban in tone ('I'm walking outside and the headlights are blinding ... The panic, the laughter, the stink of disaster') the lyric name-checks Bleecker Street in New

York, and its evocation of chaos and collapse made it the ideal fit for the soundtrack of Hal Hartley's 1999 movie *The Book of Life* in which Harvey starred as Mary Magdalen alongside Martin Donovan as Jesus. It's a claustrophobic, pitch-perfect psalm for a city (not just New York) on the brink of Millennial apocalypse.

The problem with what I've just told you is that the credits on *The Book of Life* date 'Faster' to 1996, before Harvey's Stateside sojourn. Perhaps there was an earlier version, to which a New York street reference was added and a recording made with Teledubgnosis just in time to be put out as a B-side to 'The Wind'. The months Harvey spent in New York were pretty busy.

'Faster' pummels and belabours the listener with a kindred ugliness to 'My Beautiful Leah' and 'Joy', but, brilliant though it may be, its keynote is disgust rather than desire. It stands alone, rather than as part of *Is This Desire?*.

Finally, '*The Northwood*' is a menacing, folk-inflected love song about which all sorts of rumours circulate thanks to the presence on the recording of a male singer credited as 'James Lynch'. Some people argue that 'James Lynch' was in fact Nick Cave; others, conspiratorially, that it is Harvey with her voice slowed down. One of the Gardeners played about with the recording to try to prove this theory, and did, to his own satisfaction. There's a Somerset-based artist called James Lynch, so perhaps it's him. The released recording is so rough – it starts with a squeak and trails off in the middle of the song – it might have been taped in the back of a pub and then rediscovered a couple of years later at the bottom of a holdall, so it could be that James Lynch was just somebody Harvey grabbed from the *front* of the pub. Everyone involved in the recording may be less than sober by the sound of it. James Lynch is Harvey's urban legend, and the track is the sonic equivalent of Maria Mochnacz's washed-out polaroids used in the film of 'Angelene'. 'The Northwood' appeared as a B-side to 'A Perfect Day Elise', and in a tidied-up version as part of Harvey's *Rarities* collection in 2022.

4. Usages

i. Packaging

By the time *Is This Desire?* was released Harvey had been collaborating with Maria Mochnacz for a decade. Mochnacz had moved naturally from devising the artwork for her partner John Parish's band Automatic Dlamini to playing the same role for her friend. The artwork they'd come up with for Harvey's previous albums had been sometimes witty and occasionally disturbing, but it had been straightforward in the sense that it basically depicted the singer and the other band members, when there were any. The current project would break some new ground in that respect.

The album insert, in all formats, has two sides, words on one, and images on the other. The former were a new departure in their own right. Harvey stated that for the first time she felt her lyrics were strong enough to be printed and so they appeared alongside the usual credits, copyright details, and thanks; but they appeared obscured by handwritten notes, sometimes of the lyrics themselves, and sometimes *aides-memoires* for the instrumentation, as though Harvey was subconsciously trying to erase them even as she revealed them. In case fans should get excited none of these notes are especially informative, though they do show that 'The Garden' didn't emerge fully-formed from the *maestra's* mind but required some revision along the way: Harvey refers to 'lots of flapping noise – (his 'escape', his thoughts of freed[om])' which, probably all to the good, didn't make it through Rob Ellis's arrangement. There's also what seems to be an alternative track listing including some of the out-takes listed above, from which it seems Harvey made a selection at some point. That's all relatively straightforward: the pictures, on the other hand, were more intriguing, though not necessarily more enlightening.

There is a portrait of the artist, which we will return to, but also other pictures. 'Images by Polly', the notes tell us, implying that she brought them along and then she and Maria Mochnacz made something of them. Not all of them appear in all the album formats, vinyl, cassette, or CD. They are as follows:

1. Harvey's torso (presumably), monochrome, in a black bra far too large, superimposed on a phantom image of two women who are, an eagle-eyed Reddit commentator spotted years later, the characters Maddy and Donna in *Twin Peaks*,⁶⁷ and with a wash effect across;

2. A stranded steamship from what looks like about 1880-1910, coloured lilac;
3. A dead tree against the sky, coloured purple;
4. As already mentioned, a collage of Mary and Joseph from a child's Bible-story picture-book, with words cut out to form the phrase 'They saw fire';
5. A portrait photo of Harvey with hair straight, rather than the curls she wore at the time the album was made;
6. A seashore with a superimposed post-it note reading 'Lyrics to songs printed or written';
7. The headless corpse of a bird on a shingly beach;
8. A sepia photograph of a lighthouse in a plastic pouch, and the typewritten caption 'Dorset';
9. The album cover itself – Harvey at Henleaze Lake in a T-shirt bearing a picture of a pair of lips, and holding an apple.

Harvey's note-to-self about song lyrics aside, these enigmatic images seem so enigmatic that there is probably little to read into them as such. The Bible picture may bear some relationship to the scenario of 'Is This Desire?', but it's a remote one at most. The lighthouse photo forms the back cover of the album, so we might think it has a particular significance, but strangely the building it shows isn't any of the three lighthouses that have existed in Dorset: all those are set on clifftops rather than rocks on the seashore (possibly Harvey didn't realise this). Instead, what these images tend to produce is not meaning, but *dislocation* – a *destabilising* of meaning. The ship, the tree, and the dead bird all indicate a previous violent or calamitous event, but one which we, the onlookers, haven't witnessed. Harvey's mis-clad body, her head replaced by ghostly forms, and the mangled, repurposed child's picture both step into surrealism: they deconstruct what's normal and expected. The snap of Harvey looks unremarkable compared to the images she and Maria Mochnacz concocted for her earlier albums, but her unreadable expression raises questions of its own: again, rather than a composed artwork, this is a glimpse into a moment whose context we don't know. In this company, the potential homely comfort of the Dorset reference in the lighthouse picture fails to connect. The succession of images is like a series of fragmented instants seen in a dream; that's how it relates to the album, rather than providing us with clues how to understand it.

And so we come to the cover image. This is a monochrome double-portrait of Harvey, placed back-to-back on the bank of the lake, in the lips-print T-shirt and holding the apple in her right hand. The pictures were taken with a pinhole camera, adding indistinctness and distortion which, yet again, puts

them in a dreamlike place. The assembly makes it look as though Harvey is offering us the apple in the left hand picture, and then snatching it away. A woman holding an apple can't help but recall the myth of the Garden of Eden, and, on listening to the album, we might remember that when we come to 'The Garden'. The T-shirt was a deliberate choice on Maria Mochnacz's part, but the fruit, an emblem of desire, was only there because Harvey happened to be hungry, and then became not just set-dressing but a key element of the composition. In 2019 Harvey said of Mochnacz 'I trust her and follow her inspiration wherever it takes us as I know that is where magic can happen'; certainly *serendipity* was at work in this case. Artistry and happenstance coincided to produce the perfect summary of the album, as the singer invites us into a watery dream of fragments and desires fated never to be fulfilled.⁶⁸

The Henleaze Lake photoshoot provided the main packaging for the singer herself: those images appeared repeatedly in press coverage and publicity from Island Records. The chief exceptions were the photography for the single of 'A Perfect Day Elise' which was shot on another occasion by Maria Mochnacz in a Brutalist car park somewhere, showing Harvey in a hooded white garment and carrying a bag of apples that picked up on the accidental imagery of the Bristol pictures; and a set of photos taken in the New Forest by established music industry photographer Anton Corbijn, where she wore heavy eyeliner and a sheer black top, or, in one, just trousers and a bra, about as close to nightclub Goth as she ever got.⁶⁹

ii. Envisioning

Both singles from *Is This Desire?*, 'A Perfect Day Elise' in September 1998 and 'The Wind' in January 1999, had accompanying official videos; 'Angelene' was never released as a single, but Harvey and Maria Mochnacz put together a film to go with it which eventually saw the light of day in 2020 when the *Demos* was released.⁷⁰ The last of the three is completely home-made and only required a few outfits for Harvey to wear (including a headscarf printed with red lips like her cover-photo T-shirt), curtains to mimic a passport photo-booth, a Polaroid camera and the cooperation of Ben T; the others needed location shooting in Worthing and New York, and a number of cast members, including apparently a New York cop in 'The Wind', but neither Harvey nor Mochnacz have ever said much about them. 'Angelene' is very simple, a montage of still images and short snatches of video,⁷¹ and 'The Wind' is not much more complex, as the camera looks down from a skyscraper across the city or the streets, and Harvey tours around in the back of a car, stands among neon signs, or against windblown plants. 'Angelene' has a tender, regretful feel

while ‘The Wind’ manages to be mischievous as we are misled into thinking we’re following Harvey along a street only to discover how wrong we are, and finally the cop, to the singer’s visible chagrin, orders her to move along while a street preacher proclaims somewhere off-screen. Both are fun, but slight pieces.

The queasy ‘A Perfect Day Elise’ is in an entirely different league in its mood and complexity, well exceeding any of the filmed work that Maria Mochnacz had produced with Harvey since their first made-on-a-shoestring video for ‘Dress’ in 1991. It wouldn’t have been all that costly to record, but it aims at holding its own in interest and polish alongside anything the music industry might have put up at the time. The setting is the Burlington Hotel in Worthing on a nondescript day, met via an establishing shot across a pebbly beach, though a Gardener found on a visit that the corridor scenes must have been shot somewhere else. Harvey, in a red top and blue floral skirt, navigates through the hotel and around its inhabitants who regard her, and us the onlookers, suspiciously or vacantly – she moves, while they are virtually static. Action is slowed down or sped up; at one point Harvey appears slowly turning while Ben T in a chair is accelerated, meaning she must be moving *very slowly indeed*, and the camera gradually approaches a young couple eating at a table in the dining room in what seem to be still images but which when you look closely you see are actually live shots – they’re just trying not to move. Fish-eye lenses and muted colour, close-ups of faces and eyes, add up to an eerie, dislocated experience which has been described as ‘Lynch-on-Sea’, the uneasy visions of David Lynch translated to the English coast; we are in danger here of overusing the word ‘dreamlike’, but must employ it again. It’s a skilful use of limited resources to produce something which could have been done more expensively, yet still not turn out as good.

It’s almost *too* good. The purpose of a music video is to promote the associated single. The respective release dates of the record and the video of ‘Elise’ might give us a *clue* as to how effectively Mochnacz’s composition did its job, but we still wouldn’t really know how far consumers were influenced to buy the first as a result of seeing the second (Annie Clark – St Vincent – certainly was; see pp.59-60 below). A film with some artistic interest was going to do its work more effectively than just standard shots of a band performing, so art and commerce are not necessarily at odds here. The problem is for fans rather than casual consumers of Harvey’s music; maybe I am unusual, but I find the ‘Elise’ video is a secondary artwork so striking it risks absorbing the meaning of the primary one. It doesn’t mirror *exactly* what goes on in the song, but it’s close enough to make it hard to listen to the music without thinking of the film. Like it or not, the *mise-en-scène* of the song ‘A Perfect Day Elise’ is now inescapably an out-of-season hotel full of strange individuals in an English

seaside town. Any of their stories might be as interesting as Joe and Elise's, from the blurred figure with the bag we meet on the seafront to the ladies in swimming costumes standing menacingly in the lift. The video threatens to have a life of its own, and I'm not completely sure it opens the song up rather than closing it down.

iii. Performance

It has become a tradition that PJ Harvey album tours always begin with a warm-up gig somewhere near Bridport, advertised by just a single poster that appears at dead of night in Buckydoo Square and for which you can only get tickets from Bridport Music Centre. In 1998, though, that had only happened once so the tradition was just getting established. In 2004 the West Dorset town's residents complained so much about the noise of the rehearsals that the *maestra* decamped to Oxford, but now one suspects they wouldn't dare.⁷²

Stephen Dalton of the *NME* travelled to the converted chapel that is the Bridport Arts Centre on August 3rd 1998, and started his gig review for the paper as he meant to go on by describing 'sleepy Bridport' as 'perched on a rocky coast in deepest Dorset', when in fact it's two miles inland in a flat river valley. The actual song descriptions are so misjudged (he calls 'The Wind' a 'murder ballad') you wonder how much attention he was paying, but they do at least allay the suspicion that he went to Lyme Regis by mistake and just made his review up. We will (I fear) return to this article later. At least the correspondent of the *Western Gazette* made it and described a crowd very different from the ones Harvey would encounter elsewhere, including 'an earplugged baby and the beaming parents of contemporaries who probably knew her when she played a long time ago in the local youth club'.⁷³

The *Is This Desire?* tour spread from that date in August to 19th December, concluding at the Manchester Academy.⁷⁴ There were 49 concerts open to the general public (counting the 200 locals at Bridport), and another 11 performances for TV and radio programmes in the UK and US. From the initial Dorset show Harvey and her band – John Parish, Rob Ellis, Jeremy Hogg and Eric Drew Feldman – took in a sweep of British and European music festivals, moved to the US in October for quite an intense succession of 22 dates of different kinds across just short of a month, before a final swing through Europe and the UK in November and December. No fewer than 18 performances took place before the album was released, so audiences would not yet have had a clear idea of the shape of the piece being promoted. In years to come a PJ Harvey tour would have fairly rigid setlists, but at this stage the songs varied considerably from concert to concert. Quite surprisingly for a

tour by such a well-known artist which took place less than thirty years ago, as we've already mentioned we have no setlists for fully 17 dates, more than a third of the open concerts; the extant ones, however, make clear that the album material was fairly mixed in with earlier songs, especially from *Dance Hall at Louse Point* which Harvey clearly wanted to own as part of her *oeuvre*, worthy of being incorporated into performances for her fanbase. Recordings (however muddy) of nearly twenty gigs are available on Youtube as I write, as well as some photographs, giving a reasonable idea of what was happening.

Live music performance necessarily provides a different experience to private listening. Many of *Is This Desire?*'s tracks had to be revised to be played in front of an audience. 'My Beautiful Leah', for instance, was made a bit gentler with a plangent guitar line, but the most thoroughgoing reworkings involved 'The Wind' and 'Joy'. The former was stripped of its effects and, if you'd listened to the album but hadn't attended a concert where the song was played before, as Rob Ellis led in with a staccato rhythm tapped on tom-toms you'd have had no idea what was coming – that's how different it was. Harvey spoke, rather than *whispered*, the initial lyrics which also removed some of the track's oddness. The duet between the drums and Harvey's voice continued before Jeremy Hogg joined in with some delicate slide effects on the guitar and then finally Harvey picked her own instrument up to lead out, ending on a dead stop. Her contribution was the closest element to anything on the recording. The treatment made 'The Wind' sound somewhat thin and inconsequential, though it was still performed fairly often. Like the album version, however, 'The Wind' live was still quiet; 'Joy', on the other hand, was nearly unrecognisable. The song was rendered almost jazzy, its discordant synthesised noise replaced by a muscular, repetitive guitar riff. Harvey's vocal, in contrast, was pretty much unaltered from the recorded track, generating the very odd sense of listening to two different pieces which coincided with one another almost by accident: whenever her voice and Jeremy Hogg's guitar hit the same note it feels like it comes as a surprise. The band carried on tweaking 'Joy' at different points in the tour; at Berlin in November the guitar line was much lower down and there was more feedback even than on the record, while early on, by the Bizarre festival at Cologne in August at any rate, the song was rearranged so that the word 'No' that originally finished the lyric introduced forty seconds of John Parish wobbling his tremolo bar followed by a reprise of the verse and then a final 'No' to conclude. At the very last performance at Manchester, where Parish's atonal wavering is even more prominent and Ellis positively attacks the drums, it was as though they'd all managed to produce something they finally found completely satisfying (Eric Drew Feldman is playing off to one side throughout but it's hard to hear any keyboard). This version of 'Joy' had a forceful, even angry energy to it, but it was nothing like

the record's vicious negative power, and it really needs to be treated as a piece in its own right. These two heavily-recast songs, together with 'No Girl So Sweet' (also much altered), were the only ones from *Is This Desire?* that Harvey never played again once the tour was over.

In fact, it's instructive to look at the afterlife the album's songs have had in Harvey's live appearances. As Appendix 2 shows, from getting only moderate exposure during the 1998 tour itself, it's the wistful 'Angelene' that's notched up the most performances, not the towering 'Elise', Harvey's most commercially successful track. 'The Sky Lit Up' was played a huge 65 times during the long *Stories* tour, and then never again after 2011, while 'Elise' topped even that with 67 renditions as part of the *Uh Huh Her* tour, and has not been played since. 'My Beautiful Leah' and 'Electric Light' formed a pair in the late 2000s, exactly tracking each other, and have both disappeared since 2009. 'The Garden' was low down on the list in 1998, and only really came into its own a quarter-century later during the *I Inside the Old Year Dying* tour. It's not our concern here particularly, but these choices reveal both the dynamics of particular sets of music – what goes with what live – and Harvey's changing relationship with her work over time.

As was now becoming her custom, Harvey had accompanied the new work with a new look, and this persisted through the tour. I wonder whether her New Forest photoshoot with Anton Corbijn reflected her trying out which direction to take before abandoning the Goth option in favour of understatement: in fact, the *Is This Desire?* tour style would be more 'normal' than anything else she would ever go for. What survived was the hairstyle Stephen Dalton described for the *NME* as a 'King Charles Spaniel frightwig' and anyone else would call a curled long bob which occasionally got a bit *too* long to be characterised as one. The basic outfit was the 'lips' T-shirt from Henleaze Lake, or a strappy top (often red recalling the 'Elise' video), coupled with a calf-length pencil skirt, usually black but sometimes red, and now and again a black jacket. At Philadelphia in November, she had just a black bra top under the jacket: perhaps it was particularly hot. Harvey's footwear was usually a pair of high-heeled black boots, but at Stockholm in August she wore gold court pumps. The details varied, but the outline remained constant.

What did this mean, if anything? If I am right about the Corbijn images, Harvey's *ensemble* for the tour represented a deliberate turning-away from anything extreme or artificial in favour of the relatively ordinary and everyday. On stage, she usually looked like a young woman you might plausibly meet in an art gallery café, or a serious secondary-school English teacher in her first year. The image was low-key, while all the theatrics went into the voice and movement – such as the moments during 'Joy' when

Harvey made odd ducking motions as though she was trying to avoid a bird. Sharon O'Connell at Avenches in Switzerland referred to Harvey 'throwing what weight she has from perilous pink heel to pink heel' while Barry Paddock thought her dancing at the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York 'unhinged ... By set's end she'd contorted herself into every position possible'.⁷⁵ This alternation between repression and release – an apparently locked-down woman opening into possibility – seemed an appropriate way to present a text that was about desire and its frustration, even if, live, many of the album's subtleties were inevitably submerged. Some reviewers got the point exactly right: Sam Taylor for the *Observer* reckoned Harvey gave the impression of 'a virginal librarian letting her hair down at a Hallowe'en party'.⁷⁶

The way people received the concerts was naturally coloured by what they thought of the album itself, and we have to be quite disciplined about discussing these responses as what we are interested in here is not critics' or even audiences' attitude to Harvey overall but the reception of *this* album as mediated through its live performances. The difficulty is that the *Is This Desire?* tour wasn't a 'clean' experience of one album, but items from across Harvey's career were intermingled. The *New York Times* veteran pop critic Robert Christgau, one of Harvey's longstanding champions, complained about the singer's 'rather annoying' habit of varying the volume of songs on an album, and of course this was very much the case with *Is This Desire?*; Jason A. Dour, who ran the pjh.org fan website, found audiences reacting to items in the sets according to whether they were raucous or quiet, rather than responding differently to old and new material. At Washington DC 'Snake' from *Rid of Me* 'had the crowd screaming along' while audiences listened carefully to quiet numbers, knowing what was expected of them. At the Glasgow Barrowland in December 'you could have heard a pin drop' and for much of the concert the audience barely made a sound. Harvey's ability, as Stevie Chick writing about the concert at the Shepherd's Bush Empire put it, to 'create scenarios in which her loyal audiences can place themselves' generated quite an intense, emotional experience that required and rewarded attention.⁷⁷

Yet, even if the tour was not simply a presentation of the album, Harvey's new style and the stage set helped the album force the older material to incline in its direction; following the band round several venues in the USA, Jason Dour thought the simple staging created a very different feel from the last time he saw Harvey during the theatrical *To Bring You My Love* tour. He also found concertgoers who had only encountered the singer a few days before as a result of hearing 'A Perfect Day Elise', and had his own rather spooky interaction

with the world of *Is This Desire?* when he checked in at his hotel in Atlanta to discover he'd been allocated – Room 509.⁷⁸

iv. Reception

Most critics recognised the quality and power of *Is This Desire?* but felt decidedly uneasy about it, detecting heartache and desolation both in it, and behind it. Interviewing Harvey for *Dazed & Confused*, Bidisha decided that 'each track sounds like the score to a different genre of movie'. There was 'nothing anyone would dance to unless under extreme duress', but the *New Yorker's* verdict was that the album showed Harvey's 'genuinely literary talent, the kind of tough-minded self-examination almost no rock singers these days seem capable of'. As we've seen, Sarah Vowell in *Spin* was bold enough to compare her to Debussy. The *NME* was slightly more numbed, using words and phrases such as 'wilfully uncommercial', 'shocking', 'brutal', 'tormented', 'oblique and intermittently harrowing' and 'unflinchingly morose', only the last of which was unfair: it wasn't morose *unflinchingly*, just *often*. *Q* gave the record four stars out of five, but still claimed that 'five more minutes would have destroyed it as surely as it would have sapped the will to live from anyone listening to it'. Caroline Sullivan in the *Guardian* was divided between cringing at 'breathhtakingly embarrassing' bits including 'lyrics that sound like an arty 17-year-old's diary entries' and announcing that 'these flaws don't prevent *Is This Desire?* from being provocative and often beautiful'. *Rolling Stone* decided the tracks were 'twelve dark jewels' over which Harvey 'struts her stray-cat stuff', while *Entertainment Weekly* suggested the record might be 'her most musically daring and fully realised effort ... *Desire* seethes with hypnotic power'.⁷⁹

Harvey's negative reviews often tell us as much as the positive ones, and, as usual, the most hostile commentators either just didn't like her, or didn't like what she'd *become*. Tim Perlich in *Now Toronto* was reliably vicious: 'collaborating with producers rather than musicians' had produced 'anaemic', 'lethargic', and 'laughable' results that 'could've been performed on a Casiotone and recorded on a telephone answering machine'. Eric Weisbard was reviewing a US live performance for *Spin* but still made it clear what he thought of the album: "'mature" art song is a lesser genre than Harvey's earlier undefinable punk; this transition has sapped her strength'. 'Fans now spend their time at her shows waiting for drops of precious rock'⁸⁰ (no they didn't). These treatments make it very clear that the writers are responding to the maker rather than the music, and proposing a hierarchy of musical styles in which rock is felt to be more valid and authentic than other forms. Even

positive summaries – such as Vernon Reid’s ‘imagine Portishead not just clever but driven. Star-crossed and damned’ – are often more about a vision of who Harvey is, as opposed to what she’s producing. When Stephen Dalton ventured to Bridport in August he suggested visitors might ‘half expect to encounter the voodoo sprites and feral banshees who haunt [Harvey]’s fevered lyrics’, yet I struggle to think of any referred to there, or indeed in the folklore of Dorset. That, again, speaks more about expectations of the singer rather than reality – and, indeed, metropolitan stereotypes of the West Country.⁸¹

A recording that *seemed* to focus on a succession of female characters in extreme situations which were *viewed* as representing aspects of its author’s own outlook brought out misogyny in some critics, and not just male ones. Melisse Lafrance describes how the women in the songs ‘were almost invariably viewed by mainstream critics as gendered cultural misfits: witches, hysterics, spinsters, or simply confused and desperate women’. Caroline Sullivan discerned the presence of, successively, ‘a cocktail croonstress’, ‘a howling witch’, and even ‘a mental patient spookily mumbling to herself’. Gina Arnold in *Village Voice* thought Harvey’s characters were ‘warped’, and the reviewer of *Request* magazine believed the Catherine figure spoke with ‘the self-pitying fervour of a nut-case’, even though in the lyrics *no Catherine ever does speak*. Some reviewers went further, taking the opportunity to lavish their verbal talents on their imaginary version of who the singer was, elided with the women they thought she was singing about. Robert Sheffield in *Rolling Stone* characterised *Is This Desire?* as a series of ‘deranged fantasies of feminine evil’ and Harvey as ‘a demon stewardess on her very own astral plane’ (ho ho); another critic saw her as ‘a tease ... She knows what we want from her ... and exactly how long she can toy with us before she has to deliver ... It’s an effect she lands with all the subtlety of a slasher leaping out from behind the door in a horror flick’. Transforming as they do a mere musician into a lurid and murderous dominatrix, these accounts are little less than disturbing. Presumably the authors don’t quite know that’s what they’re doing.⁸²

The most perspicacious critics of *Is This Desire?*, then, are those best able to put their ideas about the singer herself to one side. It isn’t until she’s been around for 17 years and the undefinable strangeness of *White Chalk* hits that this becomes general rather than a welcome exception.

v. Responses

Annie Clark was 16 in 1998, living in Dallas. She’d been learning the guitar for some time and was nine years away from releasing her first album as St Vincent, a name she would take from a reference in Nick Cave’s song ‘There

She Goes My Beautiful World'. The songs in that collection would be written in her late teens and were still in the future when she saw the video for 'A Perfect Day Elise':

This was my introduction to PJ Harvey, on *120 Minutes* on MTV. ... I saw this video in '98 or something, and I was just like, 'What the fuck is this? This is so cool. This scares me'. I went to the CD store the next day and I bought [*Is This Desire?*], and I bought *To Bring You My Love*, because the cover was like a fucked up Ophelia. I was like, 'What is this?' At first I listened to *Is This Desire?* and I was like, 'I don't know, this scares me. There's something that really scares me here'. And then it became one of my absolute favourite records ever.⁸³

Being simultaneously scared and enraptured was a typical experience for *Is This Desire?*'s audience, especially perhaps those who were coming to Harvey for the first time and didn't know what to expect. Over and over again, listeners related how *intimate* an encounter their meeting with the music was, and also how it might be unsettling: 'This album is best listened to in a darkened room alone', but 'I almost have to be careful when I listen to it'. 'The fact that PJ Harvey put her entire soul into *Is This Desire?* feels so evident', reckoned Casey Epstein-Gross, that 'listening to the album makes me feel like I should be undergoing a life-altering, personal revelation in real time ... if only so the moment in question would feel worthy of Harvey's soundtrack'. Again, 'when I listen to it, it always forces me to undergo a period of self-analysis, it's that good'. Jeff Terich bought *Rid of Me* and *Is This Desire?* the same week, but whereas *Rid of Me* 'entered constant rotation', the later album 'could only be played at night. And even now it doesn't seem right to hear it on a sunny, summer afternoon. It calls for gray skies and trees stripped of their foliage, a rhythmic pattern of raindrops sequenced in time with the delicate piano of "The Garden" and "The River"' (back to the imagery of water again).⁸⁴

Like Ben Whishaw in 1990s Bedfordshire, but for different reasons, Nietzsche666 felt Harvey was singing for them. They suspected the hostile critics' privileging of rock and accusations of self-indulgence and pretention really reflected discomfort with the subject matter of the album. Instead they believed 'there is not a glimpse of non-authenticity to be found on this record, and the overall gloom just had a delightful cathartic effect on me'. Fans appreciated that close listening to 'every word and every guitar chord' was necessary for the album to have its full effect; 'it demands time and attention to truly get into its dark, creepy groove'.⁸⁵

The narrators of 'Angelene', 'The Sky Lit Up', 'My Beautiful Leah', and 'Electric Light' address the listener directly, and 'Leah's actually asks us

questions, but the strong impression of intimacy and enclosure *Is This Desire?* provokes in its audience also perhaps comes from two other sources. Firstly, each song develops a distinct picture, with individual techniques, to tell its own short story, and to a degree the listener has to recalibrate when moving from each to the next, like walking from one room into another: and they are also, to continue the metaphor, rooms without windows to the outside world, each concerned only with its particular vignette. Secondly, the complexity of the soundscapes and the way they are built up from electronic elements and traditional instruments which are never allowed to attract attention to themselves and away from the song as a whole contributes to the muted, strangely distant feel of the album: nothing has the scope to open out, even an ecstatic song about the sky. The album's series of images drift in front of us; it takes a while for your eyes to get accustomed to the dark, and one is not sure, really, whether it's completely safe.

vi. Art

In 2026, Polly Harvey is approaching the fifth decade of her career in music. She's been around for so long, and achieved so much, that, as well as being sought out to contribute to projects that you wouldn't necessarily associate with a post-punk musician from a tiny village in Dorset – Professor Brian Cox's popular-science *Emergence* tour being the current example – her own work now has such cultural gravity that it bends the spacetime of the artistic discourse around it. In 2017, for instance, a radio drama, *On Kosovo Field*, was framed around the demos she put together for *The Hope Six Demolition Project*, while the dress she wore for *White Chalk* was donated to the Victoria & Albert Museum and displayed in 2022.

Is This Desire? has had more limited influence in fields beyond its own, but playwright Ben SantaMaria's 'outrageous LGBTQ+ dark comedy about the illusions and delusions of love and lust, inspired by music icon PJ Harvey' sounds compelling:

When Leda shoplifts a love potion from a Brighton pagan shop to stop her girlfriend leaving, she's shocked to find it actually works. It's also the only genuine bottle – and some dangerous forces want it back. As the precious potion keeps changing hands, it triggers a chain of wild erotic entanglements between mismatched partners at a London queer club and Hampstead Heath pagan party, before an explosive final showdown on Brighton's Palace Pier.

It's a shame that this OTT hoot of a play hasn't got farther than a dramatised reading at the Omnibus Theatre, Clapham, in June 2024. Ben SantaMaria is clearly a fan, photographing themselves in a T-shirt bearing the album's cover image and taking snaps of Harvey from the front row when she performed *I Inside the Old Year Dying* at the Roundhouse the previous year.⁸⁶ Their treatment of *Is This Desire?* shows the capacity the album has to spark imaginative responses, especially to its fluid treatment of sexuality and gender.

Carya Gish was so inspired by 'The Wind' that she moved to Dorset to write a novel involving St Catherine's Chapel and the Abbotsbury landscape, but life intervened and writing has only just restarted fully eight years after the book, *The Right Place*, was supposed to be published. Other artworks referencing the world of *Is This Desire?* with varying degrees of arbitrariness range from Staffordshire-based Cherianne Dawn's paintings *Catherine Liked High Places* and *Electric Light* (2017) and Brooklyn artist Loretta Lemanto's interpretation of St Catherine as *Patron Saint of Nothing* (c.2010), to photographic sequences and even a 2019 shoot for Spanish fashion magazine *Vanidad* apparently randomly entitled 'A Perfect Day Elise'⁸⁷ (that doesn't even end in violent death).

Concluding, I'd also like to mention, and in fact quote wholesale, two imaginative responses from listeners. The first is Leomelancho's entry on RateYourMusic in 2024. You can't call this a review; rather it's a word-painting which attempts to replicate the mood of the album, or maybe the experience of listening to it.

A quiet, windless night in the city. Walking home all alone from an exhausting party on a subtle comedown. An open sky above, autumn leaves rustling under the feet. Passing a desolate stranger in the park, unsure whether they pose a danger or need help. Desire and pity, fear and resigned indifference arise and subside. An empty avenue with flickering street lights. Another stranger on the homebound bus mumbling something obscure. A dog barking in the distance. A homeless person playing loud music from their phone on the other side of the road. Footsteps approaching from behind, no one to be seen after turning around. Taking two steps at once on the way to the apartment only to sit down at the top of the stairwell and watch the night pass through the window.⁸⁸

The second treatment is Ivy Nelson's for *Pitchfork* in 2025, which is part of a more orthodox album review, although it may as well stand entirely alone:

A woman lives in a garden surrounded by high rock walls. Moss and lichen grow like the hair and skin of something ancient over the cobblestone. Everything in the garden is old, and even new things are aged by the air

inside of it. No one can come in, nor can she get out. She sees a figure passing outside between the cracks in the wall and wonders who they are, what life might be like if they were together in the garden. When the wind blows through the cracks in the wall, she mistakes it for the figure's voice, crying out to her in a language beyond sense. She longs to know whomever it is, but she can never know them, she can only know what she imagines—her ideas and dreams of the person, which are just refractions of her, broken mirror pieces in which she's just as likely to appear as disappear.⁸⁹

In both these texts, it's the indeterminacy and uncertainty of *Is This Desire?*'s varied scenarios that the authors are picking up on – a kind of situational queerness rather than one related to sexuality alone. Ben SantaMaria's play, and Leomelancho's and Ms Nelson's fantasies, are all fairly recent works, and for a recording which was never much more than a niche interest to inspire others after more than a quarter-century is not bad going. There's plenty of space for more.

Conclusion: A Question Left

Every song ... is a story ... They're loops, cycles without end: If they dried up and died in the winter, they might blossom again in the spring, their longings renewed in the thaw. They progress from chorus to verse as if they were taking meaningless daily walks, always in the same direction, always accompanied by the same obsessive sequence of thoughts. The only change is in intensity, a desperation to remain or even just briefly appear in the sight of the one they're longing for. Here I am. Can't you see me? Don't you know who I am?⁹⁰

Is Ivy Nelson right that all of *Is This Desire?*'s songs are stories? I have used that idea myself, but there's only one – 'A Perfect Day Elise' – which actually comes to a conclusion: the others barely even depict *events* let alone *logical sequences* of events. But she's correct otherwise; the inconclusiveness of the separate scenarios is reflected in the album title, a question which is only half the one the protagonists ask in the song whose name it shares. They want to know 'Is this desire enough to lift us higher?' but it isn't clear what the album itself might be asking: that depends on the tone you imagine for the words:

Can I be sure what I'm experiencing, what's come over me, is what people call desire?

You. Answer me: does this look like desire to you? Is this what you want?

This? Really? This mess is what people want with their lives? You're joking.

And doubtless we could come up with other formulations. By the end of the album we have been alternately pummelled and soothed, and are nevertheless presented, not with an answer, but a question that doesn't know what it *is*. We have to provide the meaning even for that. The skilful ambiguity of the recording, its deft deployment of its contrasts, is what haunts: what allows space for listeners to introduce their own ghosts.

With the exception of 'Elise', where we do indeed witness a narrative with a conclusion played out before us, *Is This Desire?* invites us into the dreams of people we can imagine, different in each room in the audial hotel. Even at their most extreme – the narrator of 'Catherine', for instance – they are not campy grotesques, but souls we are asked to listen to and invited to try to understand. In this way the album is a deeply mature and humane work which moves on from the cathartic outpourings of Harvey's earlier records, from exposition to sympathy. If the river is the key motif of *Is This Desire?*, it's not that we are swept away on it, because that would mean we were being led onwards somewhere; instead, we stand on the riverbank, watching. Here, we

are the observers, the therapists, the listeners. However we understand the question we are being asked, once the reverie is over and the curtains of the final room are drawn back, we have work to do: to fathom this business of being human, which is always to desire, to reach out to what we do not, and often cannot, have.

Appendix 1 – Album Details

Release date: 28th September 1998

Label: Island Records

Total running time: 40:24

Highest UK chart position: 17

Total UK sales: 60,000 by 2013

Musicians: Polly Jean Harvey, Mick Harvey, John Parish, Rob Ellis, Eric Drew Feldman, Jeremy Hogg, Joe Gore, Terry Edwards, Richard Hunt

Producers: Polly Jean Harvey, Flood (Mark Ellis), Head (Howard Bullivant)

Engineers: Marius de Vries, Andy Todd, Pete Davis, Steve Sidelnyk

Design: Maria Mochnacz, Robert Crane

Appendix 2 – Live Performances of Songs by Year

	Angelene	The Sky Lit Up	The Wind	My Beautiful Leath	A Perfect Day Elise	Catherine	Electric Light	The Garden	Joy	The River	No Girl So Sweet	Is This Desire?	Nina in Ecstasy
1998	19	27	21	17	28	20	29	12	28		6	19	
2000	8	6											
2001	32	59											8
2003	11												
2004				30	67	25		22				27	7
2005	1							1					
2006	2			2			2	3					2
2007	9			9			9	1					10
2008	10			12			12	4		2			12
2009	2			2			2						2
2010	1	1								1			
2011	22	19								10			1
2012	1												
2016					12					6		8	
2017										14		9	
2023	27							27					
2024	23							39					
2025	1							8					
	169	112	21	72	107	45	54	117	28	33	6	63	42

Notes

1. Counting in her 1996 collaboration with John Parish, *Dance Hall at Louse Point*, but not *4-Track Demos* (1995), which I see as an addendum to her early work rather than a separate piece in its own right.
2. 'I do think *Is This Desire?* is the best record I ever made—maybe ever will make—and I feel that that was probably the highlight of my career' – a remark Wikipedia says was made to the *Telegraph*, and everyone else just copies Wikipedia. I can't chase down the actual source. Some online references state Harvey said this to the '*Sun Telegraph*', indicating one of a number of regional American newspapers with that title, rather than the UK one. Even then, they don't specify which, or when.
3. *Select* April 1995; N Strauss, 'PJ Harvey on Acid, the Bible, and Singing the Blues', *Rolling Stone* 28.12.1995; C Moran, *Observer Life* 17.2.1999.
4. D Cavanaugh, 'Dark Star', *Q* December 2001; Moran *op cit*
5. *Ibid*
6. C Sullivan, 'Is This Desire? Unravelling the Many Personas of PJ Harvey', udiscovermusic.com/stories/pj-harvey-is-this-desire/
7. [instagram.com/p/CIWEdBQJYhf/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CIWEdBQJYhf/)
8. Although stars are referred to in 'The Garden', which nobody has ever taken as referring to Cave in any way! The speaker in 'The Sky Lit Up' also watches the stars from their city street, but, again, the language is different and very general.
9. Interview with Hilton Als, *New Yorker* Festival Supper Club, 7.10.2006; 'The Complete Works of PJ Harvey', *Filter*, May 2004; J Blandford, *Siren Rising*, 1st Ed, Omnibus: London (2004), 36, 39-40.
10. W Hodgkinson, 'Pleased to Meet Me', *Mojo* n.d. 2004; S Lamacq, *NME* 4.4.1992
11. independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/pj-harvey-and-john-parish-fleece-and-firkin-bristol-1357811.html
12. abc.net.au/triplej/programs/kingsmill-podcast/pj-harvey/103199894
13. As on the French TV network Rapido in 1992: [youtube.com/watch?v=_5eLYVr50BE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5eLYVr50BE)
14. 'Ben T' was part of the music scene in the Bridport district for many years and later was associated with the Silverfish record store in London. He appears in the video for 'A Perfect Day Elise' and in the polaroids that feature in the 'Angelene' one, in the latter case ominously with his face scratched out. Intriguingly when he returned to do a set at the Electric Palace theatre in Bridport in 2013, Bridport

Radio reported that he'd 'worked with PJ Harvey MBE on as yet unreleased tracks', which have not come to light even twelve years later - freepartypeople.wordpress.com/2021/05/25/frequency-oblivion-sound-system/;
reddit.com/r/pjharvey/comments/1fkbl9y/who_is_he_angelene_mv/;
bridportradio.co.uk/entertainment/dub-tech-disco/

15. *Filter op cit*
16. thegardenforum.org/viewtopic.php?f=7&t=31&hilit=bmi#p19192
17. *Filter op cit*
18. The actual name given to the song's central figure has no clear explanation, like Catherine de Barra and Leah, and it's fruitless to search for one.
19. M Boehm, 'Four Star Performers', *Los Angeles Times* 27th September 1998
20. Bidisha, 'Lipstick Traces', *Dazed & Confused* Aug 1998
21. JL Allan, 'A Woman, A Man: John Parish's favourite PJ Harvey recordings', *The Quietus* 3.2.2021, thequietus.com/interviews/bakers-dozen/pj-harvey-john-parrish-interview/
22. Cavanaugh *op cit*
23. Sullivan *op cit*
24. John Parish also told *The Quietus* that Rob Ellis arranged 'Joy', but as there's no credit to this effect on the album perhaps he meant the live version, which differed so radically from the record.
25. www.u2songs.com/discography/u2_pop_album_original_release;
rateyourmusic.com/artist/andy-todd/credits/;
audionetwork.com/browse/m/composer/pete-davis_714;
drumbrigade.com/drumbrigadeshow/the-drum-brigade-podcast-episode-153-steve-sidelnik)
26. J Oldham, *NME* 22.9.1998
27. *Ibid*
28. Jeff Terich, 'PJ Harvey's *Is This Desire?*: a darkly beautiful look inward', *Treblezine* 1.10.2024, treblezine.com/pj-harvey-is-this-desire-hall-of-fame-review/
29. Ginger2882, rateyourmusic.com, 2025
30. Friend567, rateyourmusic.com 2005
31. Fuzzibuttons, rateyourmusic.com 2005
32. Blandford *op cit.*, 1st ed., 111
33. independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/pj-harvey-and-john-parish-fleece-and-firkin-bristol-1357811.html
34. 'What I Love' Apple podcast, 29.10.2010;
youtube.com/watch?v=PbAKMz-Lv7E
35. Terich *op cit.*; youtube.com/watch?v=SVDvC_y&HQY

36. M Lafrance & L Burns, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity & Popular Music*, Routledge: London (2001), 170, 177
37. *Ibid* 179
38. M Crowe, 'The Solute Record Club: PJ Harvey – *Is This Desire?*', 15.7.2015, the-solute.com/the-solute-record-club-pj-harvey-is-this-desire/
39. M Maerz, 'shedding light on British Rock's Electrifying Dark Star', *Spin* 10.2005
40. Terich *op cit*; Blandford *op cit* 2nd ed. 122; Cavanaugh *op cit*
41. The woman on the street looks weirdly like Nicole Keniheart, who years later would play St Catherine in Michael Redwood's disastrously ill-starred 2014 movie about the saint, *Decline of an Empire*. It's not Keniheart, though, as she was about six at the time!
42. S Fowler, *Pitchfork* 10.7.1999; A Zaleski, '*Is This Desire?* turns 20', 28.9.2018, pastemagazine.com/music/pj-harvey/time-capsule-pj-harvey-is-this-desire
43. Terich *op cit*; Redmosquito, rateyourmusic.com, 2009; Dominic, rateyourmusic.com, 2005; Bourbonben, rateyourmusic.com, 2021; Fuzzibuttons, rateyourmusic.com, 2005; C Epstein-Gross, 'Time Capsule: PJ Harvey, *Is This Desire?*', 1.2.2025, pastemagazine.com/music/pj-harvey/time-capsule-pj-harvey-is-this-desire; Blair23, rateyourmusic.com, 2005; S Vowell, *Spin* November 1998
44. thegardenforum.org/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=2746&p=28234
45. [Youtube.com/watch?v=hbv3RR8un6Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbv3RR8un6Q)
46. J Harris, 'Songs of Innocence and Experience', *Guardian* 18.9.2007
47. The earliest written record seems to come in a local newspaper in 1865: JS Udal, *Dorsetshire Folklore* (1922), 102.
48. Zaleski *op cit*; Epstein-Gross *op cit*
49. Shadowboxer, thegardenforum.org/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=1106&p=12773
50. thequietus.com/articles/15020-liars-angus-andrew-favourite-albums?page=11. But then one of the Gardeners claimed they had to replace their car speakers having blown them out repeatedly listening to 'Leah' and 'Electric Light'! (March, thegardenforum.org/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=1795&p=17615)
51. [youtube.com/watch?v=JZb3OIRo4LA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZb3OIRo4LA) – probably Friday October 2nd, 1998, or the 9th. The single stood at no.25 in the BARB chart in both weeks.
52. M Barton, 'Trouble Taking Place: Examining PJ Harvey's *Is This Desire?* and Demos', 4.2.2021 – beatsperminute.com/trouble-taking-place-examining-pj-harveys-is-this-desire-and-demos/

53. Thegearpage.net/board/index.php?threads/pj-harvey-glastonbury-1995.2533901/page-2#post_3843434
54. Sullivan *op cit*
55. Bron31 on rateyourmusic.com, 2005; Epstein-Gross *op cit*
56. The ‘official’ lyrics on pjharvey.net give the words as ‘Dawn’s there waiting’ and ‘Sirens rising’, but that’s not what Harvey *sings* – that is ‘dawn’ and ‘siren’. Of course James Blandford used the ‘Siren Rising’ line for his biography of the singer, which is fair enough but I doubt reflects any meaning of the song.
57. thegardenforum.org/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=1795&p=17607
58. Altrockchick.com/2014/10/16/classic-music-review-is-this-desire-by-pj-harvey
59. Zaleski *op cit*
60. Fastro on rateyourmusic.com, 2015
61. Crowe *op cit*
62. This is opposite to the way the relationship between Harvey and Nick Cave is usually perceived as having worked, interestingly for those fans who interpret this song as being about the two of them.
63. Taking into account that, on CD, the track begins with fully nineteen seconds of silence.
64. Rateyourmusic.com, Feb 2020
65. thegardenforum.org/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=235
66. youtube.com/watch?v=hYLknYDSVw0; K Grow, ‘It Doesn’t Feel Dark to Me’, *Rolling Stone* 28.6.2022; instagram.com/p/CjFbbtqsH1r/
67. reddit.com/r/twinpeaks/comments/81q237/no_spoilers_maddydonna_hidden_in_the_album_art_of/
68. instagram.com/p/B3CdNuvn_AR/; instagram.com/p/B3Cdmc5HahG/

Several of the best-known images of Harvey from Henleaze Lake and some other occasions, including the filming of the ‘Elise’ video, weren’t taken by Maria Mochnacz but another photographer, Julia Hember. She gets a credit on *Is This Desire?* although none of her pictures actually appear in the artwork. Ms Hember was a few months younger than Harvey and came from Warminster, not far away from either her or Mochnacz. She studied photography at Trowbridge College (rather than Yeovil like Harvey, so they weren’t classmates) and became a professional photographer but died of leukaemia aged just 33 in 2003. Several of her pictures of Harvey were shown in a tribute exhibition at Bart’s Hospital, where she had died, in 2013; a book of her images was published, *They Sing to Me With Echoes of Time*, and her parents – a remarkable coincidence given the art of *Is This Desire?* – even registered a unique variety of apple Julia had found growing in their garden as ‘Julia’s Late Golden’.

whatjuliasaw.wordpress.com/memories-of-julia/
 gazetteandherald.co.uk/news/7315485.julia-loses-her-cancer-battle/
 instagram.com/p/CFX-rWDlk90/.

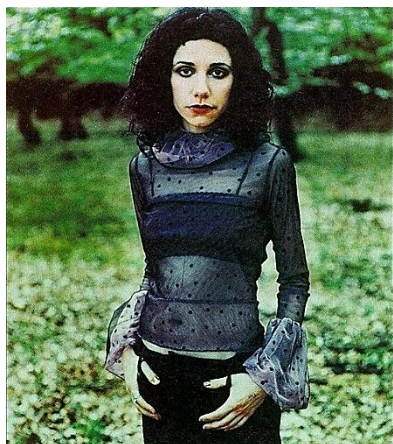
Harvey has been interested in the themes of the Garden of Eden since before her career really began, depending on your definition. 'Heaven', a song she wrote in her mid-teens and recorded as a duet with John Parish for the unreleased Automatic Dlamini album *Here Catch Shouted His Father*, includes the lines 'When she gave that apple to him/ Did she know what she was doing?' – 'Heaven' would eventually emerge as a B-side to the single release of 'The Piano' in 2008. The subtlest track on *Dry*, 'Happy and Bleeding', opens with an Eden scenario: 'Picked the fruit/ Realised I'm naked/ I'm naked too'. The sleeve art for her next collaboration with John Parish, *A Woman a Man Walked By* (2009), plays with the same imagery: in one picture, *he* offers *her* an apple, and she reacts with either mock-delight or mock-horror, it's hard to tell which.

69. [instagram.com/p/DN008OSwkoa/](https://www.instagram.com/p/DN008OSwkoa/)
70. Abigail Gardner doesn't discuss any of these films in her book *PJ Harvey and Music Video Performance*, Ashgate: Abingdon (2015). The 'Angelene' video would have matched some of her concerns best, but wasn't accessible when she wrote the book.
71. Maria Mochnacz wrote: 'We used a combination of video/16ml film and medium format Polaroids, curtains as backdrops to look like a passport booth and a selection of clothes for Polly to wear. I wanted some of the photos to look faded/blemished/discooured. I remember sprinkling some with bleach, and some I folded and put in my jeans back pocket and then put my jeans through my washing machine'.
[instagram.com/p/CIYYWE2A2Qp/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CIYYWE2A2Qp/);
[youtube.com/watch?v=m8XzHhC9czw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8XzHhC9czw)
72. olivergray.com/pj-harvey-a-personal-gigography/
73. S Dalton, 'Homecoming Queenie', *NME* 15.8.1998; 'SB', *Western Gazette* 13.9.1998
74. The Garden forum has done sterling work assembling as much detail on the tour as possible, from which I draw most of my information:
pjharveyshows.thegardenforum.org/1997-1999.html
75. S O'Connell, 'Pollythrilla', *Melody Maker* 22.8.1998; review posted on pjh.org, recovered via the Wayback Machine internet archive.
76. S Taylor, 'Calmer Chameleon', *The Observer* 30.8.1998; Dalton *op cit*
77. R Christgau, 'Back With a Bang after Three Quiet Years', *NYT* 27.9.1998; pjh.org tour diary; *Scottish Daily Record*, 11.12.1998; S Chick, 'Relight My Desire', *Melody Maker* 19.12.1998.

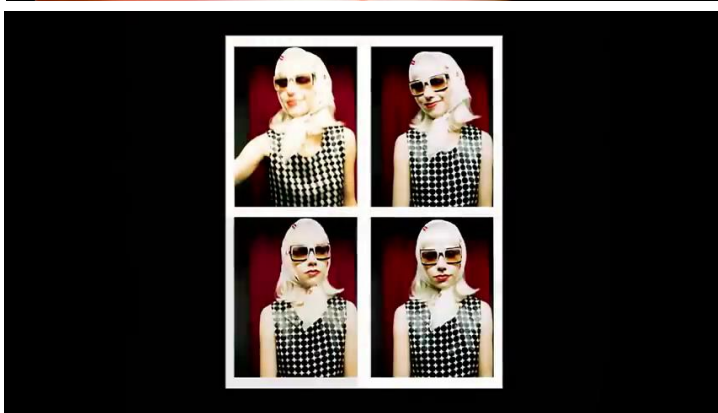
78. Reviews of the gigs at the Vic in Chicago and the Roxy in Atlanta on pjh.org tour diary
79. Bidisha *op cit*; J Anderson, *Uncut Ultimate Music Guide: PJ Harvey*, 2016; E Smith, 'Love and Desire', *New Yorker Magazine*, 28.9.1998; Vowell *op cit*; Oldham *op cit*; C Sullivan, 'Polly's Got a Cracker', *The Guardian* 13.11.1998; Blandford *op cit* 2nd ed. 122; *Entertainment Weekly* 2.10.1998
80. T Perlich, *Now Toronto* 29-30.9.1998; E Weisbard, *Spin* Nov 1998
81. V Reid, 'Revenge Effect', *Bomb Magazine* 1.4.1999; Dalton *op cit*
82. Lafrance & Burns *op cit*, 177-8; R Sheffield, *Rolling Stone* 17.9.1998
83. abc.net.au/listen/doublej/music-reads/features/st-vincent-annie-clark-take-5-steely-dan-pj-harvey-erykah-badu/13377112
84. Yuri_g on rateyourmusic.com, February 2006; MrMagpie91 on reddit.com/r/pjharvey/comments; Epstein-Gross *op cit*; Yakubu on rateyourmusic.com, February 2009; Terich *op cit*.
85. Nietzsche666 on rateyourmusic.com, April 2009, dunya in March 2010, and Gregosaurus in July 2008
86. omnibus-clapham.org/is-this-desire/; [instagram.com/p/C8UDK6TIqXx/](https://www.instagram.com/p/C8UDK6TIqXx/); [instagram.com/p/CxyzeMPoaDs/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CxyzeMPoaDs/)
87. missgish.com/the-right-place.html; [flickr.com/photos/reinadesalem/albums/72157616344165930/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/reinadesalem/albums/72157616344165930/); marcellejoseph.com/artists/161-tereza-vlckova/works/; vanidad.es/editorial-de-moda-a-perfect-day-elise/
88. rateyourmusic.com, Jan 2024
89. *Pitchfork* 5.10.2025
90. *Ibid*



Sleeve art



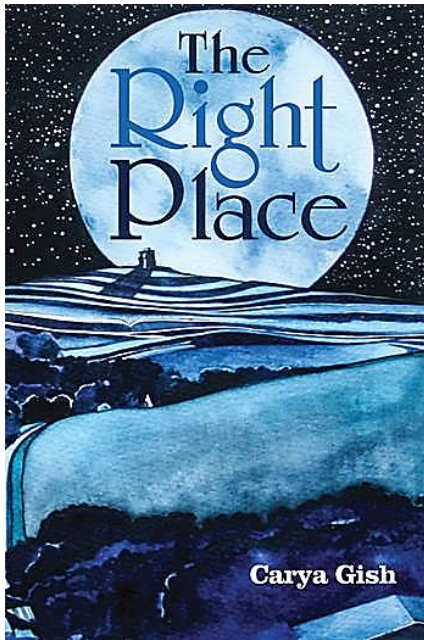
The Anton Corbijn photoshoot, and the look Harvey eventually adopted (photo uncredited but probably by Clive Lawrence)



Video images. Top to bottom: 'A Perfect Day Elise'; 'The Wind'; 'Angelene'.



Live performance. Top to bottom: Top of the Pops October 1998; French TV show Nulle Part Ailleurs, 25.9.1998; Harvey mid-duck during 'Joy' at Route de Rock Festival, St Malo, 16th August 1998



Artistic response. Clockwise from top left: 'Catherine Liked High Places' by Cherianne Dawn; 'Electric Light' also by Cherianne Dawn; 'Patron Saint of Nothing' by Loretta Lemanto; proposed cover for Carya Gish's novel The Right Place, painting by Dorset artist Sam Cannon



Island Records released
PJ Harvey's album
Is This Desire? in September 1998.
The company didn't like it.
The critics were divided.

But the artist thought it her best
to date, and for many fans
it's the recording they feel closest to.
Nearly 30 years later, it retains
its strange, haunting power.

