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T.MUDD

A hyper-caffeinated performance-meditation on messianic themes

BRANDON WOOLF

> That heavenly coffee, heavenly coffee, heavenly coffee.
> (originally sung by Geanne Martin)

***Note**: This work is a live collaboration among at least one human performer and up to thirty-six coffee machines of varying size, make, model and brew method: boil, steep and pressure. The music might be live or prerecorded or a mix. Screens, slideshows and other pedagogical paraphernalia – filmic, phonic or embodied – are welcome in this three-dimensional exfoliation of the Talmud's inherently palimpsestic pages.*[1]

I. WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

On repeat:
Burke and Webster's 1948 song Black Coffee.[2]
Mud machines (mic'd and lit fabulously) brew in all their thunderous glory.
Long pause. Pour. Eventually, a sip. And another.
Then:

II. 'WHAT IS THE MEANING OF "WHEN THE TRUTH IS ABSENT"?'

A friend told me a harrowing story recently that I wanted to share with you. This friend of mine, Rava is her name, has a friend who fled life in New York City a few years back and moved her family – her partner and her two children – upstate. They moved to Kushta – I believe it's called – one of those small, idyllic, suburban river towns where everyone always tells the truth and no one dies before their time. They moved into a house just off Kushta's main strip and started new lives. Doing the best they could considering the uncertain circumstances. But relieved to have gotten the children out of the city's clutches.

One day, a few months into full-time virtual life without any childcare, my friend's friend made a midday coffee and shut herself in the bedroom for a rare quiet meditative moment. Just then, one of their new neighbours called asking to speak to her. Her partner, who answered her phone that she had purposefully left in the kitchen, didn't want to interrupt her midday pause. This noontime break was her only private time for the entire day. A necessary step out of the maelstrom.

The Germans have a great word for this; they call it the *Mittagsstunde*. And as my German partner will tell you, your neighbours should know never – *ever* – to call during the *Mittagsstunde*.

Anyway, not wanting to disturb her, the partner answered the phone and told the neighbour that she wasn't home, said she was out doing some errand, and asked the neighbour to call back another time.

Minutes later, both of their children passed away. They were in their room playing together, and they died right there on the spot. Without any explanation. Just died suddenly. Gone.

Now when Kushta's townsfolk heard about this, they panicked. Desperate to figure out what had happened, a bunch of the town residents came by to question the couple. Trying to make sense of the unthinkable situation and figure out what could have been the cause, the partner frantically recounted the events of the day and admitted what had happened with the neighbour on the phone. Admitted there had been a fib, but a fib for a good reason: the mandatory, the necessary *Mittagsstunde*.

Upon learning this, the neighbours pleaded with the couple: 'Please, please, you must leave here immediately so you don't bring death on all of us.' They were adamant: 'You gotta go. You gotta go now!'

So, the couple packed up their lives – again – and they moved back downriver. This time to Brooklyn.

[1] What's the Talmud? Well, there's the Old Testament Bible. Then there's the Mishnah, which is a collection of oral laws that serve as a kind of extended elaboration on the Bible. And the Talmud is an expansive interpretation of or elaboration on the Mishnah's sixty-three tractates, eventually compiled by a series of editors in exile in Babylonia in about the seventh century CE.

[2] *Black Coffee*, from the soundtrack for the film *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* (1960), recorded on Verve by Ella Fitzgerald. Spotify:

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III. 'HAVE YOU HEARD WHEN THE MESSIAH WILL COME?'

As the German-Jewish philosopher Gershom Scholem famously explained, the messianic idea in Judaism is – different from other cultures – a theory of catastrophe, of apocalypse.

Jewish messianism has nothing to do with the popular concept of 'Messiah' – with a capital 'M'. Indeed, we fail to say *anything* about messiah if we represent them as some divine entity sent to relieve our daily suffering or to put some miraculous end to the world's ills.

It makes some sense, then, that the Talmud is less interested in the question '*Who* is the messiah?' and what shape they will take when they eventually realize a heavenly paradise on Earth after the end of days. Instead, the Talmud's operative question is 'When?' 'Have you heard *when* the messiah will come?' 'When?' is the question that inaugurates the Talmud's extended messianic discussion.[3]

Notice that the question is distinctly not: 'When will the messiah arrive?' 'Arrival' is a verb we often associate with the question 'when', which we tend to follow with a numerical value or temporal designation as an answer: When will we arrive? In five minutes. When will it all be over? Soon. Arrival implies that the destination is in sight, or at least conceivable, that we know what the destination is or should be. But 'to come' is different somehow: it implies a process or journey. Arrival only arrives when the coming itself is finished.

The questions are not then: 'When will it end? When will it all be over?' Instead, 'When will the messiah come?' seems to be a question about time's quality. Messianic time, the 'when' of the messiah, is not some calculable amount, but a certain *social* quality that the world has. And, as luck would have it, the coming of the messiah, messianic time according to the Talmud at least, is filled with suffering. And not only suffering, but with cataclysm on a global, if not intergalactic, scale:

Mudslide:
a surging flow of water-saturated grinds, filters and other debris.

When?
When our eyes fail with sorrow and grief.
When?
When the arrows of hunger pierce our bellies.
When scholars are few in number and our scribes fall into disfavour.
When drunkards and pimps govern our parliaments.
When border inhabitants wander from place to place without refuge.
When public squares are ruled by licentiousness.
When communication between nations is interrupted.
When rains flood one city after another.
When the oceans become uninhabitable.
When the rivers turn to oil.
When the forests are laid to waste.
When entire mountains are flattened.
When cities disappear into huge chasms, shaken by earthquakes.
When?
When plague-ridden air is sent from deep below, killing every living creature, scorching and burning all that is mortal – and all that is not – in huge fires.

Switching off one of the machines, unsettled.
Sip. Slow calm amid the mess.
Then:

I am not a scholar of Talmud. I never went to Yeshiva. My father went to Yeshiva. But he didn't stick with Yeshiva very long. I don't speak or read Hebrew – or Aramaic. And yet, I just can't stop reading the Talmud's messianic musings. I can't stop reading them (in translation at least) for they seem to offer a kind of persistent invitation to ask: What the fuck do we do in the chasm of the coming? In the face of social and epistemological collapse?

Knowledge of the end is hidden. It remains a secret. There can be no preparation for what is to come. Not-knowing, maybe even un-knowing, is precisely the condition of new possibility. Coming is not forward looking per se – towards the inevitable end. But an examination of what to do and how to do it between the now and the then.

[3] The eleventh and final chapter of Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin contains a six-page discussion of messiah (96b to 99a). Somewhat surprisingly, these pages are the only prolonged engagement with messiah in the Talmud's 5,422 pages. And like most Talmud pages, these six bring together a range of interpretive texts, debates, teachings, stories, ethical investigations, philosophical enquiries, bits of folklore, riddles, equations and a healthy dose of (mostly) mystical Dada composed in exile.

PRESENCE / 01

The more I think about it the more I see mundanity engulfing new relationships to my surroundings. A couple of weeks ago I started doing physiotherapy to try healing a knee inflammation I have had for almost a year now. One hour, every afternoon, from Monday to Friday – a new activity to incorporate into my daily routine. I didn't believe the approach suggested would work. I conformed to it, but I remain sceptical. The treatments take place in a small cabinet curtained off from other small cabinets. All of them are arranged around an open space filled with machines and people attached to them. I've been in a few different cabinets so far. They all look the same, though I have my favourite one. Most therapists speak across the cabinets, sending instructions to one another and to their patients. The language is primarily patronising and infantilizing. The radio is always on. Pop music. It's a bustling environment, not what I expected from a place meant to offer possibilities for healing. Initially I only noticed older people, many recovering from strokes, and a few younger ones recovering from accidents. Last time, for the first time, I saw two children. Seeing them saddened me. It hurt me that that place could be part of their mundanity. It also made me realize that I already forgot when exactly it started feeling mundane, on the second, or third or fourth day? I didn't register if it was the repetition of the same new routine, or the undressing and getting dressed, or the actual treatments accompanied by the same questions in the same tone. Two more weeks to go, and mundanity will change again unnoticed.

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EVERYWHERE, ALL THE TIME, 3:42

How bad will things get between now and then? What might we make of the inevitable terribleness to come – or that is already here? What do we do in the face of our lack of comprehension? Of our certain uncertainty? How do we wait gracefully? Or not? How do we come to terms with permanent exile?

IV. 'CORONA'

Radio static atop a curious electro beat punctuates the next pour.
German-Jewish poet Paul Celan reads his own poem:

Aus der Hand frißt der Herbst mir sein Blatt: wir sind Freunde.
Wir schälen die Zeit aus den Nüssen und lehren sie gehn:
die Zeit kehrt zurück in die Schale.

Im Spiegel ist Sonntag,
im Traum wird geschlafen,
der Mund redet wahr.

Mein Aug steigt hinab zum Geschlecht der Geliebten:
wir sehen uns an,
wir sagen uns Dunkles,
wir lieben einander wie Mohn und Gedächtnis,
wir schlafen wie Wein in den Muscheln,
wie das Meer im Blutstrahl des Mondes.

Wir stehen umschlungen im Fenster, sie sehen uns zu von der Straße:
es ist Zeit, daß man weiß!
Es ist Zeit, daß der Stein sich zu blühen bequemt,
daß der Unrast ein Herz schlägt.
Es ist Zeit, daß es Zeit wird.

Es ist Zeit.[4]

V. THE WAITING ROOM

Hypnotic symphony of klings, klangs and spoony Nescafé swirling.

The first coffee vending machine was invented by the Rudd-Melikian Company out of Philadelphia in 1947. They called the machine the Kwik Kafe. The Kwik Kafe ejected a paper cup down a shoot and into a holder and then filled that cup with coffee made from hot water and instant mud. The machine took five seconds to brew a cup. Other industrious outfits caught on quickly. Manning and Lewis, Knapway, and Watson helped propagate a nationwide obsession with the so-called 'coffee break'.

The coffee break as coveted moment of quiet during an otherwise hectic day?
The coffee break as necessary fuel to keep things on track?
The coffee break as means of killing time before a next appointment?
The coffee break as prime procrastination technique?
The coffee break as place of possibility and creation?
The coffee break as collective social space?
The coffee break as desperate interruption of the endless flow of exile?

Visitors to the Danbury Federal Correctional Camp in Connecticut are permitted to bring the following items into the prison's waiting room: life-supporting medications, money that does not exceed $30, no more than two feminine hygiene products. If a child accompanies you, you may bring three diapers, two clear bottles of milk or formula, one small baby blanket, a 'moderate' number of wipes and a pacifier. Any other items must be placed in a small, transparent, plastic bag and deposited in a secure locker outside. These days hand sanitizer is required. And physical contact is forbidden.

We sit knee to knee looking at each other. How long will we have? Visits are often curtailed if the prison's waiting room overcrowds, which it usually does. Random body searches are also likely.

The vending machine hums, providing the soundtrack to our visit. Ready to dispense a caffeinated jolt at any moment. The only material gift the visitor has to give. Just a small paper cup of real warm mud. The rest of the time outside the waiting room is relegated to instant brew and powdered milk – if the commissary has it in stock. For this reason, the looming vending machine is a dramatic upgrade to real milk (refilled weekly) and a caffeinated liquid concentrate. It even comes with a small wooden spoon. I hope I brought enough quarters.

Collective waiting. Here. Together. No sense of when this will all be over. Each new wait lubricated by the machine's heavenly vent. A slice of normalcy. Warm normalcy. Purchased with real money. Proof of an outside. Gifted by a loved one. 'Shall we have another?' 'Definitely.' I definitely brought enough coins this time.

It's the hum I remember. The hum below the din of the surrounding conversations. A constant motor. Ready at any moment. Ready with a salve. But not a solution. A modicum of dignity where so much has already been taken away. But these little wooden spoons are a nice touch. They provide a small sense of luxury and of control. For the nervous system. And the nervous energy. And to sweeten the bitterness of it all. With a swirl of sweet and low.

Much like the coffeehouses of pre-War Europe, here an unintended community of mourners, mourners in exile, gather to sit, to sip, to convene with loved ones and to imagine (in this moment) a moment beyond the horror of the present. A somewhat social space of (limited) possibility in the most unintended of places. A yeshiva of sorts. What unintended beauty arises out of the ashes of destruction? Proof of our fundamental interdependence? Our intergenerational connection? Small but meaningful and tasty practices of generosity. Generosity in exile. A moment out of time. There are no clocks. Just bare concrete. And red plastic chairs. And lower back pain. And the machine. Humming. Humming. We surely can't be sure of any redemption here. We merely sip the freshly vended coffee. Look into one another's eyes. And wait.

VI. 'MAY THE VERY ESSENCE OF THOSE WHO CALCULATE "ENDS" SUFFER AGONY.'

Such radical upheaval and uncertainty can prove pretty overwhelming. Is there nothing we can do to improve our chances in the face of catastrophic disturbance, of destruction, of colossal uprooting, revolution, disaster and death? Must we really sit together in the inevitable discomfort of the vacuum, the abyss, the sludge? How can we possibly sit one more moment with the prosaic, the unexciting, the uneventful, the mundane, the vanilla chai latte without checking our watches? Or our phones? And *without* calculating the end (as the Talmud intimates)?

[4] If you are not a German speaker, perhaps you will permit unmeaning to brew. If not, some translation help does arrive in Section X.

During the song:
Many mud carafes are dressed diligently with bandages.

SONG: WAIT, DON'T CALCULATE[5]

When the tapers tarry, oh
When there's far too much to carry, oh
Wait, don't calculate
Just wait, don't calculate
You need not be afraid
For they won't be delayed
Oh wait, don't calculate
I said wait, don't calculate

To repair those holes and tears
To mend those knots and chafes
Wait, don't calculate
Just wait, don't calculate
To restore those slits and sores
Those cracks and breaks
Oh wait, don't calculate
I said wait, don't calculate

Possibility or pathology?
Redemption or despair?
Condition or symptom?
Prediction or cure?
Catastrophe or dare?
We must endure.
We must endure.

Fortune comes to those who
Wait.
Don't calculate.
The news ain't fake,
Don't calculate.
Wait, have faith,
Don't calculate.
The news ain't fake,
Don't calculate.

[5] Music composed by Daniel Kluger. Sheet music can be found on pages 80–1.

VII. MEME: NO MIRACLES; JUST THE RULE OF LAW

> There is nothing more hypocritical than the messianic prophetism of the comfortable bourgeois. (Emmanuel Levinas)

Wait, don't calculate? Starting in the Middle Ages, Jewish messianists got just a tinge more pragmatic. As the great medieval Sephardic philosopher Maimonides maintained:

> Do not think that the messiah needs to perform signs or miracles or bring about a new state of things in the world. Let no one think that in the days of the messiah anything of the natural course of the world will cease or that any innovation will be introduced. Rather the world will continue its accustomed course.

For Maimonides, the rule of law remains paramount. All grand gestures are waived aside. The revolutionary coming that shakes the very foundations of the world – and all our known categories – is abandoned for progress towards infinite self-betterment, towards that which is already conceivable just not yet attained. No more excessive anger or rage for being terrorized with doubt and abandoned, alone wandering in the desert of permanent exile. Just good, neat and tidy proto-bourgeois norms. And behavioural modification therapy, and a subscription to Headspace™, and a solid Green Party reform agenda to help us all set aside the veil of vile vitriol run amok as we consider just how alone we feel.

And, perhaps *most* importantly, a third wave coffee revolution, emphasizing and expounding upon ways the caffeinated consumption experience can be enhanced and improved through education and a reasonable refinement and regulation of the practices of beverage production. The mythical monsters of mediocrity (and the instant brew) are curtailed by courtesy and manners and innovation on a global scale.

But here's a question for the great Rav-Rambam: What of the psycho-spiritual remainder that refuses to be subsumed by rationality and self-help, a remainder that testifies to the messiness of unresolved contradictions? Can these contradictions be contained (or tamed) by third wave coffee connoisseurship? I wonder.

One time many years ago, when I was living in Berlin, I walked by a new, extraordinarily hip coffee shop on the Reichenberger Straße. You know, one of those cafés with no chairs, hard edges and plenty of thick rimmed glasses and well-manicured beards. This new shop featured Berlin's first fancy pour over station – seven

minutes from start to finish. Out of curiosity, I went inside, ordered a coffee from a list I couldn't really understand, and the barista got cracking. This many grams of beans. This burr width. This many millilitres of double-coal filtered water imported from this particular reservoir poured at this speed from this many inches away from a special spout this many centimetres long this many drips per second for this many minutes. After seven minutes had passed the barista approached the counter with a disappointingly small cup. And just as he arrived, he tripped, stumbled and spilled more than a few milliliters of the seven-minute wonder all over the floor. In a panic, the barista looked up and pleaded with me: 'Please, please, you must leave here immediately.' He was adamant: 'You gotta go. You gotta go now!'

So, I left. But as I walked out of the shop, I wondered: can we afford to be rational? If we lose sense of the absurd or anarchic elements of history, or refuse to acknowledge them, what part of our messianic sensibility is lost?

Wait, *don't* calculate. Wait, *don't* calculate. And yet, sometimes you just can't help it.

VIII. WALLOW/'WÄ-(,)LŌ/VERB

More mud slides.
The dark roasted mess pools, iridescent.
A galoshes-clad child in (projected) silhouette.

How wallowsome daily life has become – again and again *and* again. Stuck, stuck in the mud of self-pity, wheels spinning around out of control. The mud is thick; it's viscous, dirty, slippery. And totally opaque. Like many I surmise, I often try to steer clear of the mud if possible. I prefer the open road. Dry. Smooth. Fast. Efficient. No slipping or swerving.

My 2-year-old, though, my 2-year old is different. She wallows with abandon. There is this one spot halfway down our block where there is an irregularity, a large crack, in the sidewalk – caused by age or a subterranean tree root. The uneven terrain makes things difficult for the stroller. And when it rains, this irregularity becomes a haven, a gathering spot, for an enormous, muddy puddle.

Without fail, my 2-year-old walks towards the mud spot after every rain or melted snow. It doesn't occur to her to avoid it. She walks right into the mud – no matter what she's wearing. And she doesn't merely walk through it to get somewhere else. The puddle is not some necessary impediment to be traversed. Often, she'll walk through, pause and then walk backwards through the muddy puddle again, and then forwards again. And again. Other times, she'll stop and stand right in the centre of the puddle. Not *waiting* for anything in particular. Just standing there. Frustrated if we ask

PRESENCE / 02

The first thing I did was make an entry in my work calendar for the one day in the week when I wasn't obliged to be otherwise obligated at 3:42 p.m. I can't tell you what a comfort that was. But wait! Having made a calendar appointment to observe closely and describe deeply my 3:42 p.m., I realize it is an appointment with myself to, what? It is not mundane to stop and observe my 3:42 p.m.

Thursday, 23 February, 3:42 p.m., a deep description. The time 3:42 is arbitrary, but is it mundane? It was chosen over 7:05 a.m. because mornings hold the promise of the day, if I remember correctly. To anticipate is not mundane. But this afternoon state: the day has done its worst, yet there's still far enough to go that you can't skive off, you're going on.

What about a view of the daily-ness of 3:42 p.m. by slicing through the week? The pattern that occurs to me here is being subject to the demands of others. For large chunks of time, it's like I belong to others. My obligation, compulsive orientation, is to them and their needs. I see my complicity and I also see the structures that take advantage of that. *How mundane*.

(The residue, later, is resentment. Bring to the boil and repeat over weeks-months-years till a nice scum of resentment forms.)

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EVERYWHERE, ALL THE TIME, 3:42

PRESENCE / 03

- Monday: IT appointment to help me embed the new lecture recording software in the new LMS.

- Tuesday: teaching Creating the Arts in the Contemporary World.

- Wednesday: facilitating a focus group for Rebus Theatre.

- Thursday: now!

- Friday: was meant to be P&D Academic meeting, begged off, set aside for complex work with Tuesday deadline.

her to move along. Just standing there. Smiling. Perhaps a slight hop or a splash. But mostly just standing, waiting. There. In the mud.

I think often of a movie from my own childhood. A movie that is, in many ways, *all* about the mud. *My Cousin Vinny* is a 1992 film in which mud is the evidence used to falsely accuse two innocent New Yorkers of murdering a convenience store clerk in rural Alabama. The muddy tire tracks left behind at the scene of the crime serve as proof for the prosecution that the perpetrators visited the convenience store in question. But that same mud, when viewed from a different perspective, and in a different photo, also serves as vindication later in the film. It's all about how we view the mud, how we understand it, says a prophetic Marisa Tomei, who descends upon the scene to teach us all something. About mud. And about automotive history:

> **Mona Lisa Vito (played by Marisa Tomei):** No! The defence is wrong!
> **Vinny Gambini:** Are you sure?
> **Mona Lisa Vito:** I'm positive.
> **Vinny Gambini:** How could you be so sure?
> **Mona Lisa Vito:** Because there is no way that these tire marks were made by a '64 Buick Skylark. These marks were made by a 1963 Pontiac Tempest.
> **D.A. Jim Trotter:** Objection, Your Honour! Can we clarify to the court whether the witness is stating opinion or fact?
> **Judge Chamberlain Haller:** [to Vito] This is your opinion?
> **Mona Lisa Vito:** It's a fact!
> **Vinny Gambini:** I find it hard to believe that this kind of information could be ascertained simply by looking at a picture!
> **Mona Lisa Vito:** Would you like me to explain?
> **Vinny Gambini:** I would love to hear this!
> **Judge Chamberlain Haller:** So would I!
> **Mona Lisa Vito:** The car that made these two, equal-length tire marks had positraction. You can't make those marks without positraction, which was not available on the '64 Buick Skylark!
> **Vinny Gambini:** And why not? What is positraction?
> **Mona Lisa Vito:** It's a limited slip differential which distributes power equally to both the right and left tires. The '64 Skylark had a regular differential, which, anyone who's been stuck in the mud in Alabama knows, you step on the gas, one tire spins, the other tire does nothing.

Rav-Tomei reminds us that under *normal* driving conditions an open or conventional differential system works perfectly well. The open differential allows wheels to turn independently of one another so cars can corner effectively. However, this open differential causes problems off road, or in muddy or other slippery conditions. When wheels experience slippage, an open differential directs all the power to the wheel with less traction. This total power transfer can cause that wheel to slip and to spin. Most passenger cars have open differentials on their rear axles making them highly ineffective in less-than-ideal driving conditions, leaving many of us stuck in the mud, and wishing we had a limited split differential. Wishing we had positraction to get us through.

I find myself wondering about city dwellers *who* sought refuge in cars over the last few years to face the challenges of immobility – and fear of the subway's close quarters – only to find those cars fundamentally and *spiritually* ineffective against the deep mud that surrounds us all? Not only has the traffic become unbearable, but

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2310986: EVERYWHERE, ALL THE TIME, 3:42

we remain stuck. Tyres slipping and spinning continuously out of control and in opposite directions.

But is this such a curse? Tomei says 'no!' – with that deep Brooklyn drawl. In *My Cousin Vinny* it is actually the open differential that saves Ralph Macchio and his companion Stan from conviction and execution. Their car didn't have positraction. They had a plain old open differential. If they had been caught in that pesky Alabama mud, they would've stayed very much stuck. And yet, this limitation is the very feature that proves to be their salvation: stuck in the mud to get unstuck in the mud.

Not unlike my daughter, many species wallow regularly in the mud. Wallowing has many benefits. Thermoregulation, for instance. The mud provides safety and consistency, a space to cool off, to warm up or to find just the right balance. Mud is highly effective at fighting parasites. The dirt forms a protective barrier against the pathogens that haunt us – especially when we are excessively clean. Mud provides relief for a variety of rashes and other skin conditions. It works to combat signs of ageing, stress and lack of sleep. Wallowing is also a form of play that keeps animals connected in moments of isolation and actively promotes social cohesion. According to a 2012 article in *Scientific American*, geophagy – the act of eating or drinking mud – is widespread in well over 200 species, including humans. While the practice is not fully understood, in certain cultures mud is thought to provide important minerals and other nutritional supplements with myriad health benefits. Bats, for example, ingest mud for the purposes of detoxification. It cleans them up and clears them out. The mud's high concentration of zinc also makes it a fabulous immune-o-boost.

Bats, it turns out, also have a particular proclivity for the fruit of the mud plant. And this has caused quite the stir on the global exchange. No more combing through cat or elephant dung in search of the perfect joe, for the bats of Madagascar love to feast on the flesh of the ripe Arabica coffee cherry. As their teeth penetrate the cherry towards the pit – the eventual coffee bean – droplets from their saliva mix with the air, resulting in a still-mysterious alchemical reaction. Somehow the bats mellow the mud and give it a uniquely smooth yet still robust flavour. Something you just don't forget – so I've heard.

IX. A FIGHT SONG OF (IN)ACTION

The Talmud loves bats. One of its more pored over tales tracks an epic debate between a bat and a rooster about the muddy questions of redemption.[6]

What, if anything, should we do to bring it about? And do we really, *really*, want to be there when it comes?

A ballet of baristas:

SONG: NIGHT LIGHT[7]

I once heard this fabulist fable
'Bout Rav-Rooster and Bat-Shmul
Fontaine's ever-prescient farm stable
Talmudic cesspool of cruelty's rules

The cock crows hopeful toward morning
She brews with a prophetic might
Why give up your night crawling, she asks:
What need have you of the light?
What need have you of the light?

Woe unto those who desire the day
Said the bat in a tone cock sure
As if preordained it comes anyway
The mourner's just gotta endure

The weight on us is restitution enough
Fight songs are naught but a sleight
Penitent deeds are superfluous bluff, she cried:
We must make a case for the night
We must make a case for the night

Night light
You've already paid
There's nothing to do
Just get out of the way

No, night light
Harken the day
Down on your knees, and
Pray for the chance to stay

Rav said: Shmul, you're out of your mind
If you weren't a bat, I'd say you were blind
The phones, the polls, the picket lines
There's so much to do, and so little time
Trim those shoots with heavenly shears
Clear that dross with soap divine

[6] Also from that six-page section of Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin.

[7] Music composed by Stew. Sheet music can be found on pages 82–5.

When the ends are near, you'll want to be clear
With the calm repose of repentance sublime
Yes, the calm repose of repentance sublime

Why would you pray for days far away?
You've just no clue how they'll look
Slow as a donkey or with speed like a horse
We're bound by the call of heaven's crook

It's foolish to persist in prodding the throng
We'll never have a handle on lives in the sty
Frankly squawked Shmul, you've got it all wrong
Our surest redemption is to lay down and die
Our surest redemption is to lay down and die

Night light
You've already paid
There's nothing to do
Just get out of the way

No, night light
Harken the day
Down on your knees, and
Pray for the chance to stay

Night light
Harken the day
Relinquish your needs, and
Pray for the chance to stay

No, night light
You've already paid
It's coming for you
Just get out of the way

Night light, night light
Night light, night light

X. 'CORONA' REDUX

I'm sitting in the kitchen. Savouring my own fleeting *Mittagsstunde*. A window is open and the wind blows in. On the radio, Paul Celan reads his poem 'Corona' again. This time he recites the poem in English.[8]

> Autumn eats its leaf out of my hand: we are friends.
> We shell time from the nuts and teach it to walk:
> time returns to the shell.

'Corona' is Latin for wreath. Or crown. As in the crown of a root. The junction point of root and stem. Or a luminous appearance in the ether. Like a halo of white light surrounding a total eclipse. Or a mass of elongated follicular cells surrounding an ovum. Celan reads:

> In the mirror is Sunday,
> in the dream we sleep,
> the mouth speaks true.

In musical terms, 'corona' means and also signals 'fermata'. A pause of unspecified length. A hold. A stay. A stop, make room. But for what exactly? A signpost for improvisation? A signal to watch the conductor? Forward progress halts. We stop the count. Metrical time stands still. History itself perishes. A beam of light intrudes from outside. An onrushing charge halts but also reveals the incalculable. Celan continues:

> My eyes go down to my lover's sex:
> we gaze at each other,
> we speak of dark things,
>
> we love each other like poppy and memory,
> we sleep like wine in the seashells,
> like the sea in the moon's blood-beam.
>
> We stand and embrace at the window, they watch us
> from the street:
> it is time, for this to be known

And this is where it's been leading. If it's been leading anywhere at all:

> It is time that the stone took the trouble to bloom,
> that unrest's heart started to beat.
> It's time for it to be time.

Fermata. Caesura. Corona. Pause. Very long pause.

> It is time.

What happens here? Between 'time for it to be time' and 'it is time'? How might we account for, or give words to this time, in the pause, in the break, in the crack? Celan scrambles the temporality of time itself. The time, it seems, to which we must attend is the time between 'it's time for it to be time' and 'it is time', which are both reality and hope, now and wish fulfillment.

But can it be fulfilled? The wish? Do we want it to be fulfilled? What dark things lie on the other side – if we can even talk sides? The time when things are known? Do we want to know? How might things look differently across the break? Is it a time of return? Or a time in which a new heart beats? A birth or a rebirth? A time of dread or of consolation. Or both?

I'm reminded of an old tale I heard as a child that I couldn't understand.[9] If I remember it correctly, a young child meets the prophet Elijah

[8] In a translation by Pierre Joris.

[9] A version of which also appears in Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin. And which Kafka must surely have read, no?

and asks him: 'When will the messiah arrive?' And Elijah answers: 'Go ask yourself.' 'And where is the messiah?' asks the child. 'At the gates of Germania,' says Elijah. 'Sitting amongst the lepers and others afflicted with disease.' 'And how will I know them?' asks the child. 'All of the others untie their bandages at the same time,' says Elijah. 'But the messiah unties their bandages one by one, because they might be needed at any moment. So they will not be delayed.' So the child goes to the gates of Germania, and asks the messiah: 'When are you coming?' And messiah answers: 'Today.' The child returns to Elijah, and Elijah asks: 'So, what did the messiah say to you?' And the child answers, dejected: 'They lied to me. They said, "I am coming *today*." And they have not come.' And Elijah answers: 'Today, if you heed their voice. They will come only when they are no longer necessary, on the day after their arrival. They will come not on the last day, today, but on the very last day.'

A tale about the coming of the messiah. Not the messiah's arrival. For it doesn't seem to be about arrival at all. Rather it seems to be about the futility of such goals, or of goal itself. Time for it to be time. But will it ever be time? They will come not on the last day, the day that we can understand, the day that we can account for somehow. But after that day, in a time that challenges just how we understand what time could be, a day beyond our ability to calculate. We are brought up against the limits of what can be thought, thought in time, with time. We are left to struggle with and struggle through the not-coming. We are left, and must sit with all the other lepers, in the corona, staring at the event horizon. The messiah sits among us, but never gets too close, asking us, indeed demanding, we examine the seemingly infinite distance between 'it's time for it to be time' and 'it is time', between all at once and one by one. And always also asking:

What shall we do in the meantime?

XI. 'I NEED A COFFEE, I NEED IT NOW.'

Radio static atop a curious electro beat.
On repeat:
Big Passport's 2017 song Macchiato for the Sake.[10]
The Bialetti boils in reverse.
A pour. A pause. A gaze down into the mug.
See yourself, many versions of yourself.
And other selves in the crema of the fresh brew.
Other worlds starkly lit in the mug's black hole.[11]

[10] *Macchiato for the Sake* by The Big Passport (2017). Soundcloud:

[11] This text-based iteration of a muddy work that took on a variety of performance forms along the way owes extra special thanks to: Elad Lapidot, Dennis Johannßen, Lauren Mancia, Isa Spector, Linda Mancini, Matthew Korahais, Daniel Kluger, Stew, Tina Petereit, Jenny Seastone, Ben Gassman, Ronit Muszkatblit, Liel Leibovitz and David Herskovits.

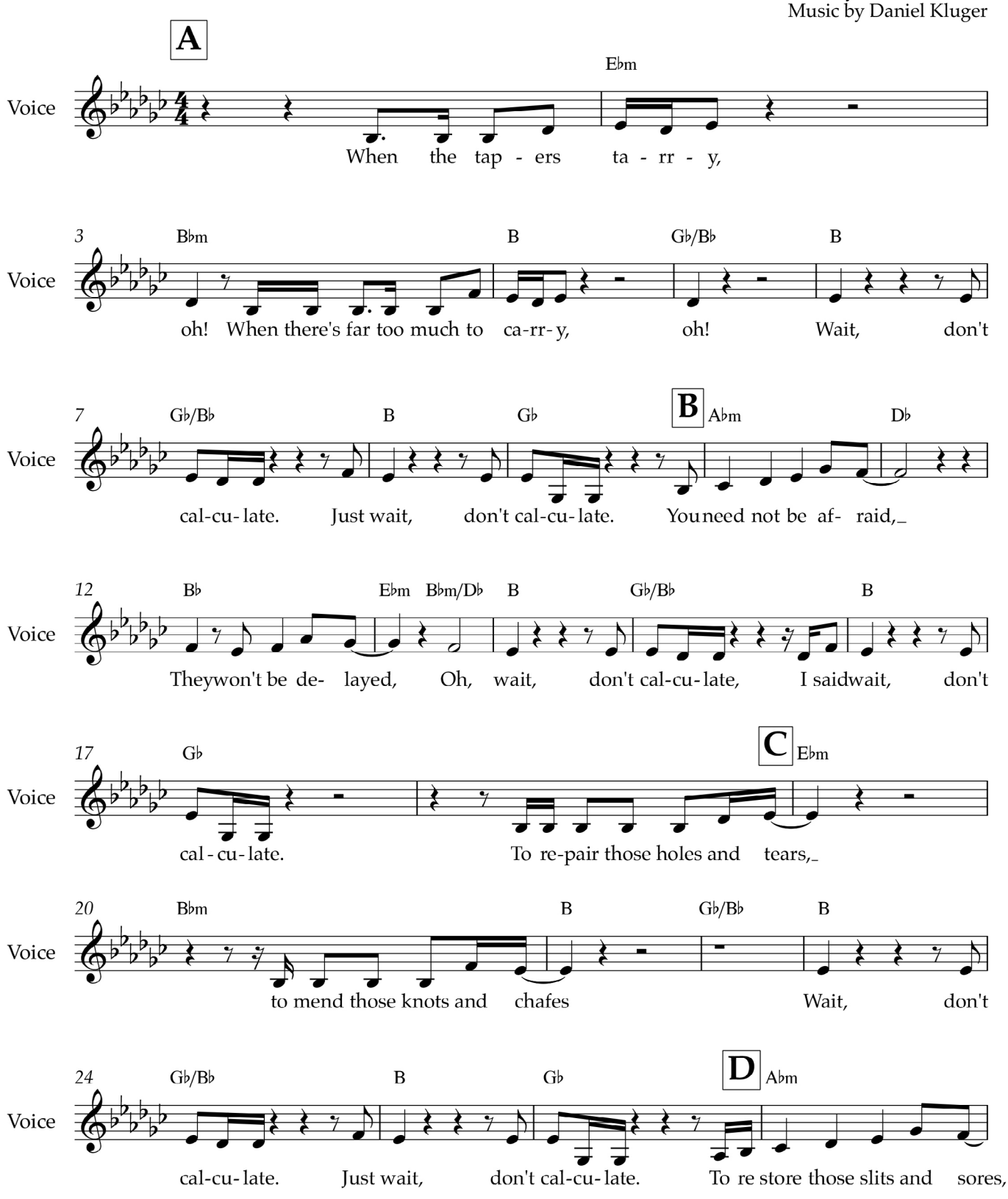
PRESENCE / 04

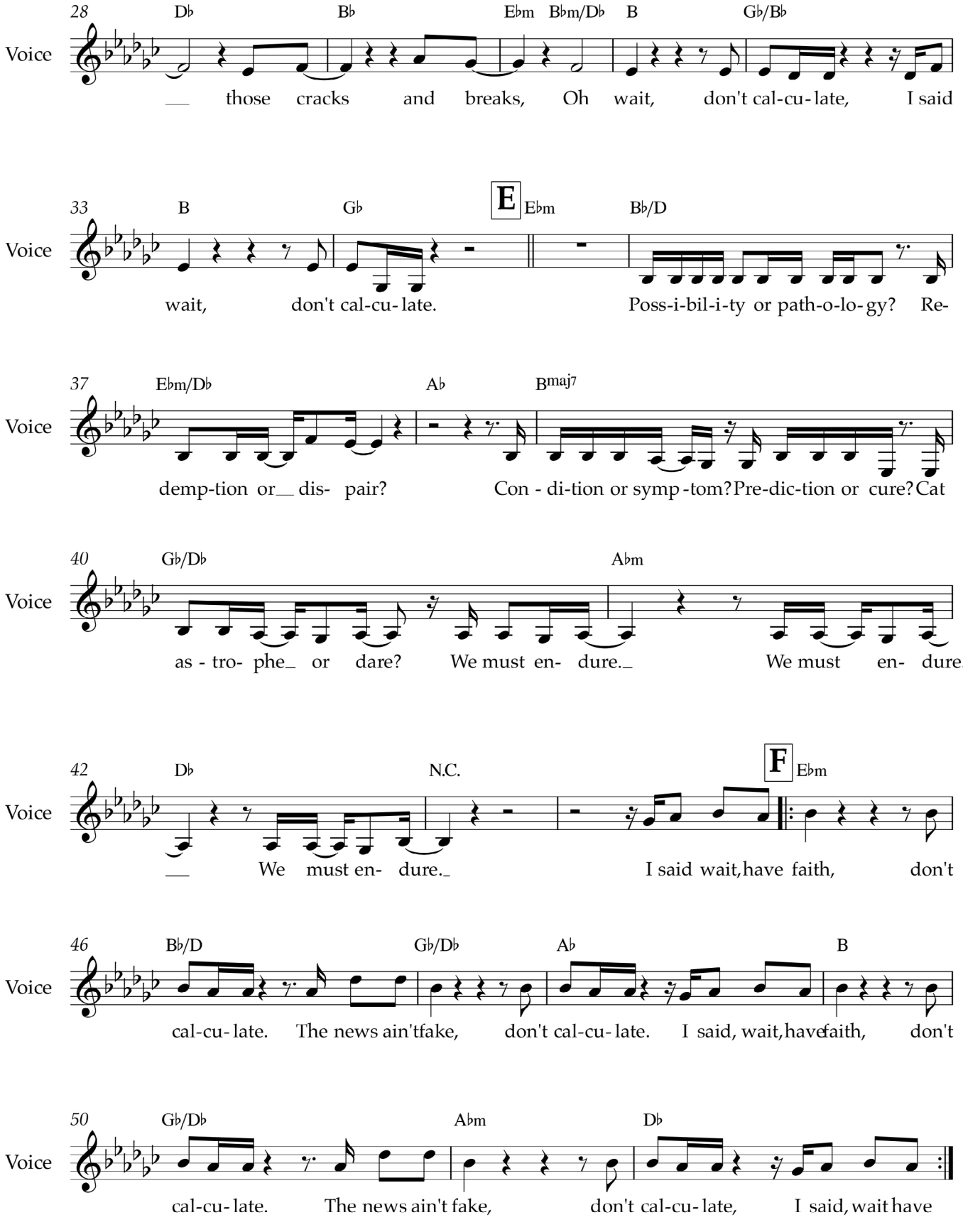
I'm on a Zoom call and I'm looking at a spreadsheet. I'm trying to figure out where some people (who had previously contacted me) are. And I'm searching my inbox for email and I'm trying to remember if they sent me an email or if I owed them an email. We're talking about processes and some are working alphabetically while others want to move down the numbered list one at a time. I am sending an email to a general help desk after trying to ask the same question to the automated assistant on a website. I am supposed to be in a meeting but the person I am in the meeting with is late, or maybe they forgot the meeting? It's not clear. The sun is out. It is bright on my face through the window.

HTTP://DX.DOI.ORG/
10.1080/13528165.2023.2310989:
EVERYWHERE, ALL THE TIME, 3:42

Wait, Don't Calculate

Words by Brandon Woolf
Music by Daniel Kluger

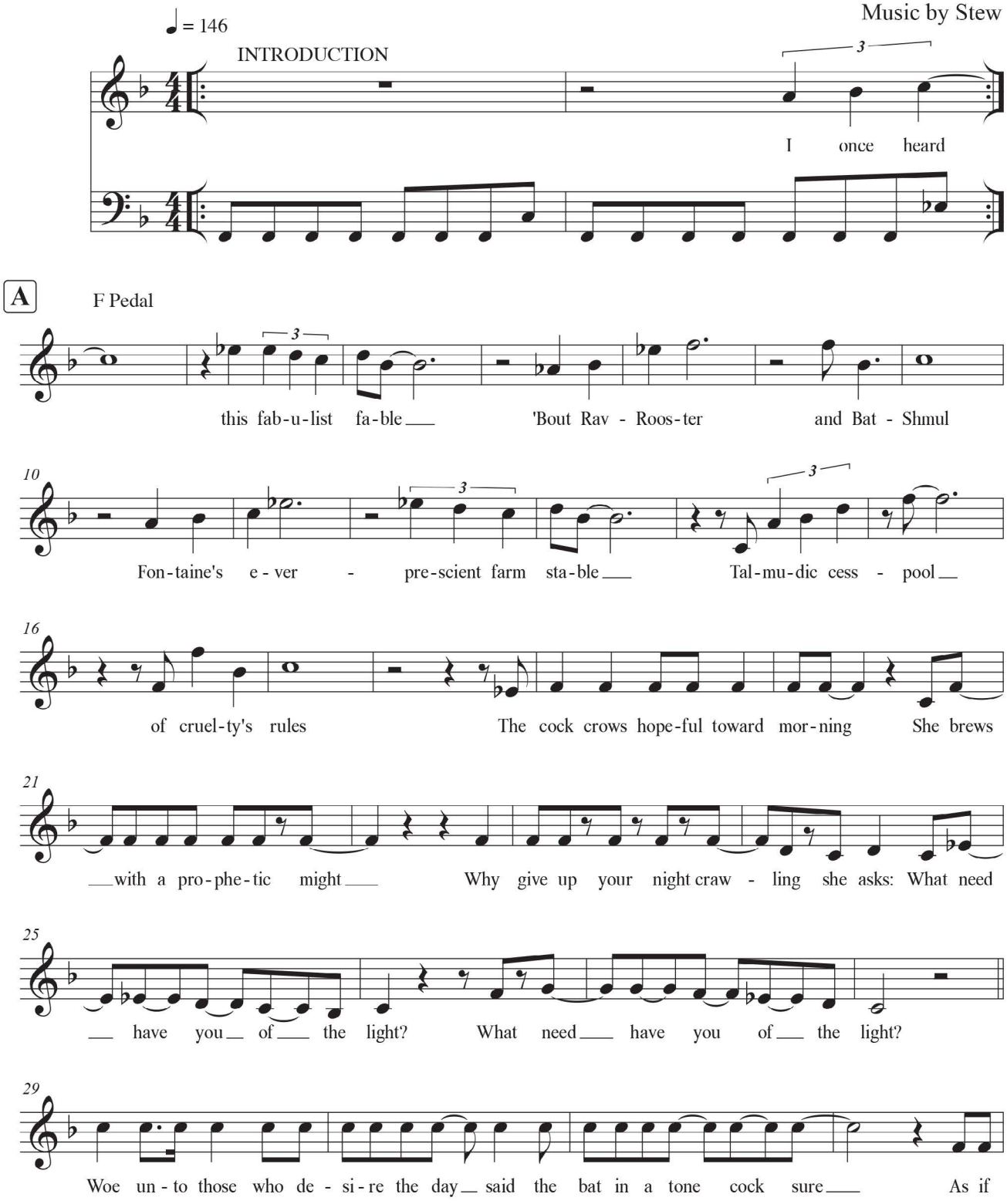


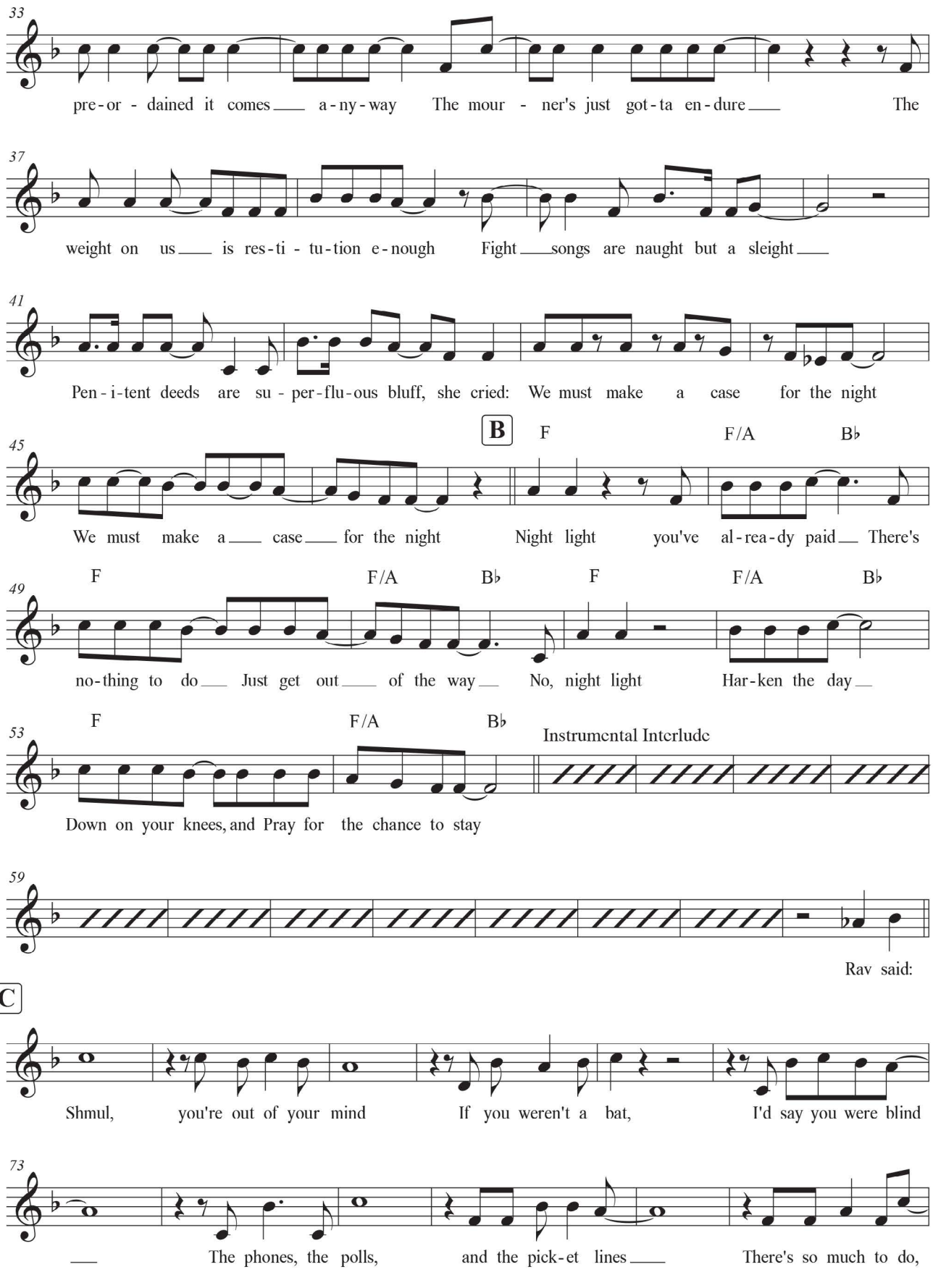

28
Db
Bb
Ebm
Bbm/Db
B
Gb/Bb
Voice
those cracks and breaks, Oh wait, don't cal-cu-late, I said
33
B
Gb
E
Ebm
Bb/D
Voice
wait, don't cal-cu-late. Poss-i-bil-i-ty or path-o-lo-gy? Re-
37
Ebm/Db
Ab
Bmaj7
Voice
demp-tion or dis- pair? Con - di-tion or symp-tom? Pre-dic-tion or cure? Cat
40
Gb/Db
Abm
Voice
as - tro- phe or dare? We must en- dure. We must en- dure.
42
Db
N.C.
F
Ebm
Voice
We must en- dure. I said wait, have faith, don't
46
Bb/D
Gb/Db
Ab
B
Voice
cal-cu-late. The news ain't fake, don't cal-cu-late. I said, wait, have faith, don't
50
Gb/Db
Abm
Db
Voice
cal-cu-late. The news ain't fake, don't cal-cu-late, I said, wait have

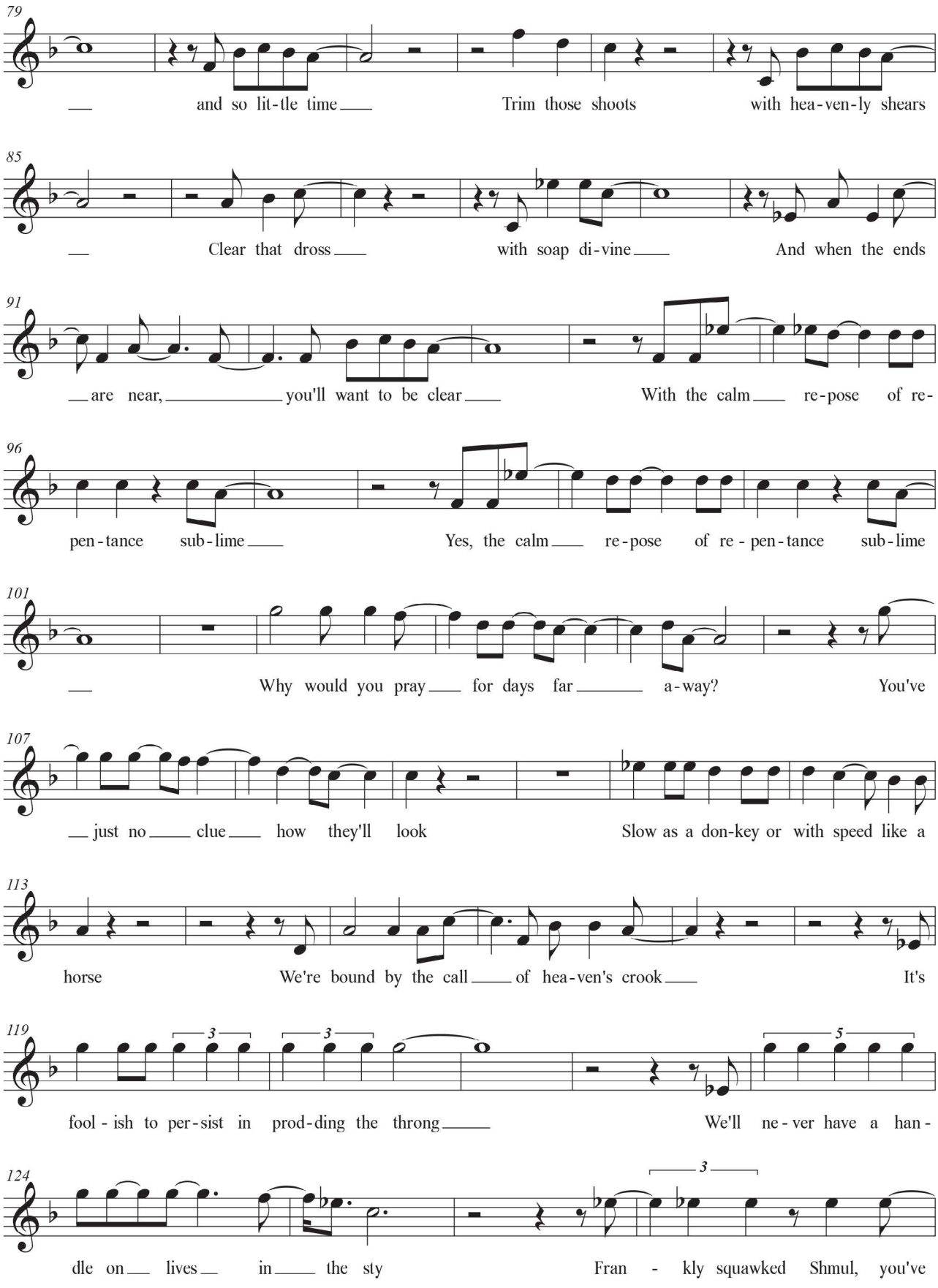
Night Light

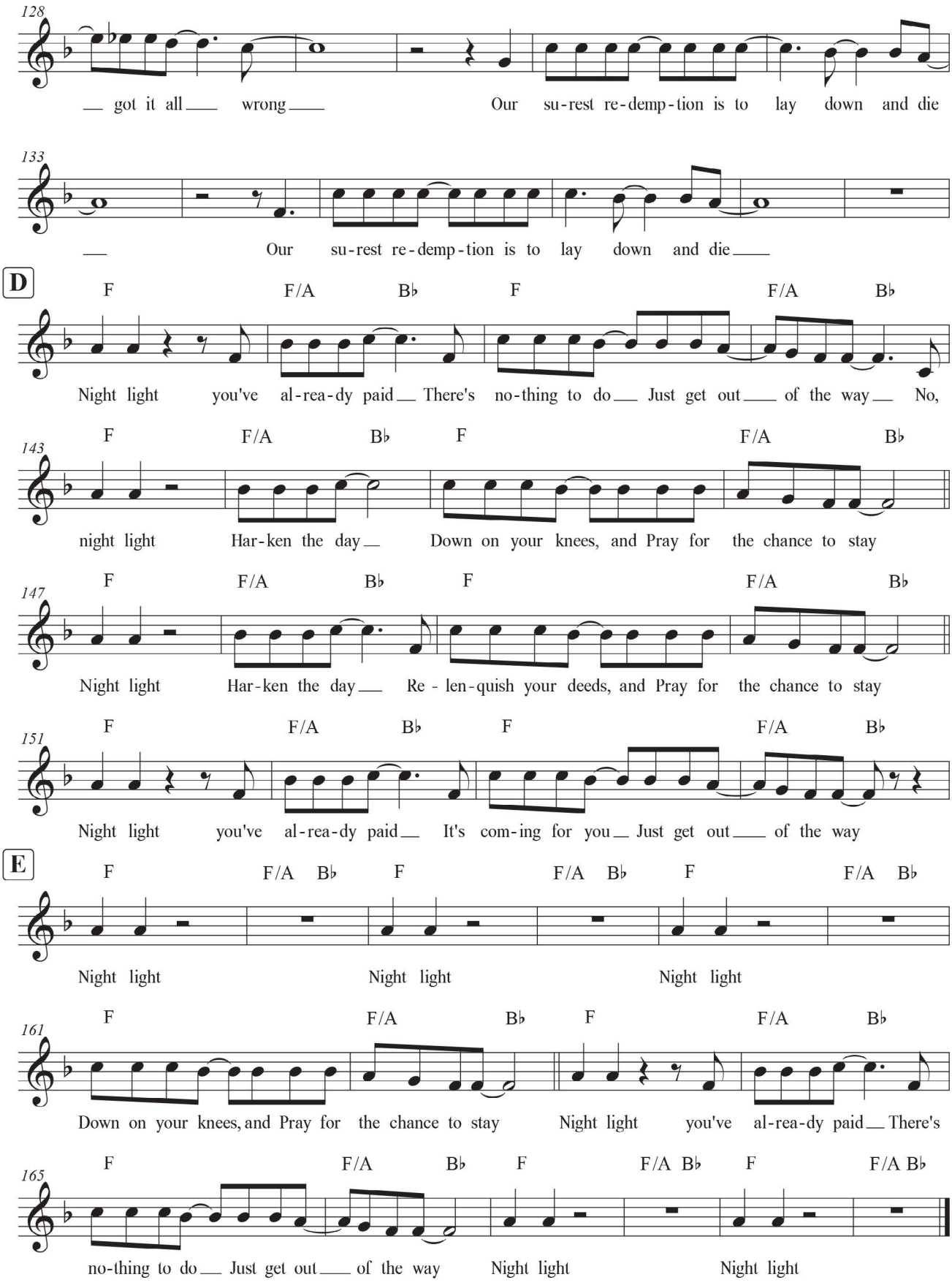
Words by Brandon Woolf

Music by Stew




33
pre-or - dained it comes a-ny-way The mour - ner's just got-ta en-dure The
37
weight on us is res-ti - tu-tion e-nough Fight songs are naught but a sleight
41
Pen-i-tent deeds are su - per-flu-ous bluff, she cried: We must make a case for the night
B
F
F/A
B♭
45
We must make a case for the night Night light you've al-rea-dy paid There's
F
F/A
B♭
F
F/A
B♭
49
no-thing to do Just get out of the way No, night light Har-ken the day
F
F/A
B♭
53
Instrumental Interlude
Down on your knees, and Pray for the chance to stay
59
Rav said:
C
Shmul, you're out of your mind If you weren't a bat, I'd say you were blind
73
The phones, the polls, and the pick-et lines There's so much to do,


79
and so lit-tle time
Trim those shoots
with hea-ven-ly shears
85
Clear that dross
with soap di-vine
And when the ends
91
are near, you'll want to be clear
With the calm re-pose of re-
96
pen-tance sub-lime
Yes, the calm re-pose of re-pen-tance sub-lime
101
Why would you pray for days far a-way?
You've
107
just no clue how they'll look
Slow as a don-key or with speed like a
113
horse
We're bound by the call of hea-ven's crook
It's
119
3
3
5
fool-ish to per-sist in prod-ding the throng
We'll ne-ver have a han-
124
3
dle on lives in the sty
Fran-kly squawked Shmul, you've


128
got it all wrong Our su-rest re-demp-tion is to lay down and die
133
Our su-rest re-demp-tion is to lay down and die
D
F F/A B♭ F F/A B♭
Night light you've al-rea-dy paid There's no-thing to do Just get out of the way No,
143
F F/A B♭ F F/A B♭
night light Har-ken the day Down on your knees, and Pray for the chance to stay
147
F F/A B♭ F F/A B♭
Night light Har-ken the day Re - len-quish your deeds, and Pray for the chance to stay
151
F F/A B♭ F F/A B♭
Night light you've al-rea-dy paid It's com-ing for you Just get out of the way
E
F F/A B♭ F F/A B♭ F F/A B♭
Night light Night light Night light
161
F F/A B♭ F F/A B♭
Down on your knees, and Pray for the chance to stay Night light you've al-rea-dy paid There's
165
F F/A B♭ F F/A B♭ F F/A B♭
no-thing to do Just get out of the way Night light Night light