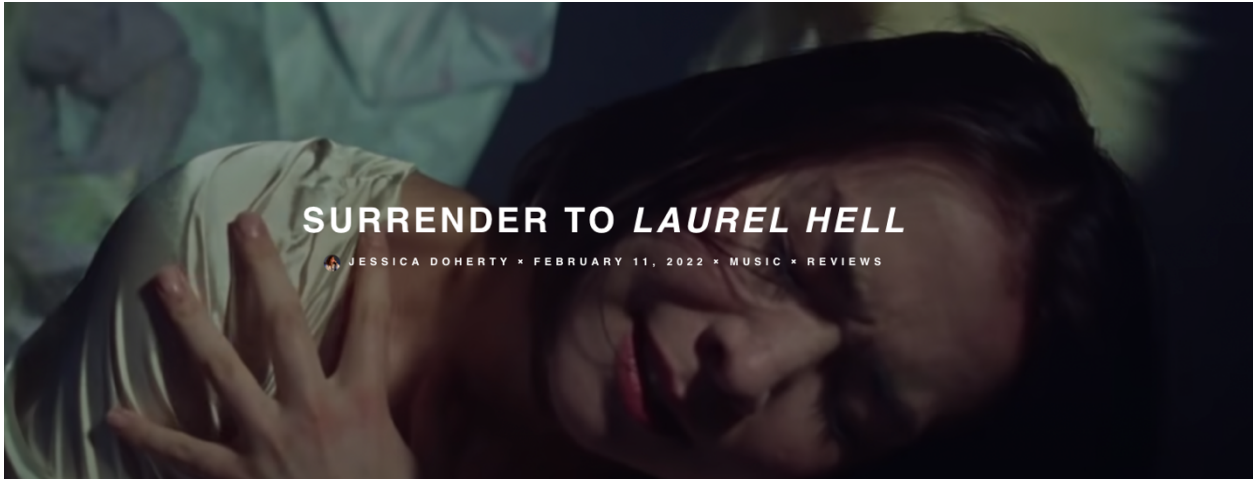


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*Let's step carefully into the dark
Once we're in, I'll remember my way around.
Who will I be tonight?
Who will I become tonight?
I'll show you who my sweethearts never met.
Wet teeth, shining eyes, glimmering by a fire.”*

“Valentine, Texas,” *Laurel Hell* (2022)

Surrender to the sound of Mitski. Maybe, finally, you'll actually hear her. She's here to let everyone know they're not in charge of her anymore. Offline, they never actually were.

Ten years after her self-released debut and college project, *Lush*, Mitski released *Laurel Hell* on February 4th, a long-awaited return from an indefinite hiatus

in 2019. However, the hiatus was never actually indefinite—she contractually owed her label, Dead Oceans, another album.

Much has changed for the Japanese American singer-songwriter over the past ten years. She's received critical acclaim, is set to embark on her own sold-out international tour, will open for a portion of Harry Styles' tour, and stepped away from the spotlight and almost completely ending her career.

The inspiration for the album's title, Mitski [told](#) *Rolling Stone*, is based on the folk term for the poisonous and flowering thickets of shrubs that wind around the Appalachian mountains, which are sometimes named after those who have perished in them. "It was just too perfect," she told the publication. "I'm stuck inside this maze ... I can't get out, but it's beautiful."

Listeners can feel that suffocation and submission throughout the album, like when Mitski croons over a dreamscape of synths in "Heat Lightning":

*"There's nothing I can do,
Not much I can change,
So I give it up to you,
I surrender."*

Despite thematic and contractual bondage, this album is liberating. The slowly building synths in "Heat Lightning" burst with new life in "The Only Heartbreaker." It's her first tune that rivals *Be the Cowboy*'s "Nobody" in dance-ability, which leads straight into another, ("Love Me More") and, as the album progresses, another ("Should've Been Me") and another ("That's Our Lamp").

Dance has always played a large part in Mitski's work, mainly through her live performances and music videos. It is usually not upbeat, joyous dancing (though, sometimes, [it can inspire it](#)), but instead [slow and sensual theatrical](#) hand gestures as she sinks and slinks across the stage, stands on a chair, or slides around a table. This remains true, evident in her [music video](#) for "Working for the Knife," [where her choreography reveals how she is both reluctant and excited to perform again](#). But many of these new songs make you want to jump up and dance like no one is watching. At times, it feels like the ending of an '80s bildungsroman film in the best way possible.

Lyrically, Mitski returns to the many motifs of self-sacrifice, satiation, sexuality, and strife in her earlier works, resulting in almost a call-and-response to her various selves and lyrics over the past ten years of her career. Consider these parallels from her five previous albums and *Laurel Hell*, which highlight the themes and experiences she returns to over the course of her career with new perspectives after personal growth. For fans, it feels as if these are Easter eggs for us to discover—some were quick to begin [tweeting parallels](#) just as the album became available to stream.

“There is a door to me

I’ve never seen it.

Sometimes I get closer to it

But I’ve never found it.”

“Door,” *Lush* (2012)

“I found you

I found the door

But when I stepped through,

There was no floor.”

“I Want You,” *Retired from Sad, New Career in Business* (2013)

“And I left the door open to the dark,

I said, ‘Come in, come in, whatever you are,’

But it didn’t want me yet.”

“Everyone,” *Laurel Hell* (2022)

“I broke our belongings

They’re all on the floor

The room is now empty

Nothing left to throw.”

“Humpty,” *Retired From Sad, New Career in Business* (2013)

“There’s nothing left for you

Nothing in this room

Try and go outside

Nothing waits for you.”

“There’s Nothing Left for You,” *Laurel Hell* (2022)

“So, please, hurry, leave me

Please don’t say you love me

*Mune ga hachikire-sōde.”**

“First Love/Late Spring,” *Bury Me at Makeout Creek* (2014)

*Roughly translates to, “I’m about to burst.”

“ I need you to love me more

Love me more

Love me more

Love enough to fill me up

Fill me up

Fill me up.”

“Love Me More,” *Laurel Hell* (2022)

“All I wanna do is get naked in front of you

So you can look me up and down

And give me your love for being so good,

But little boys hold me, color me, praise me

For a little while.”

“Real Men,” *Lush* (2012)

*“It’s why I’ve arrived, your sex God,
Here to take you where you need to go.”*

“Stay Soft,” *Laurel Hell* (2022)

“What do you do with a loving feeling

If the loving feeling makes you feel all alone?”

“A Loving Feeling,” *Puberty 2* (2015?)

“Cause nobody butters me up like you and

Nobody fucks me like me...

Why am I lonely for lonesome love?

Why am I lonely?”

“Lonesome Love,” *Be the Cowboy* (2018)

“When I saw the girl looked just like me

I thought, Must be lonely loving someone

Trying to find their way out of a maze.”

“Should’ve Been Me,” *Laurel Hell* (2022)

Mitski’s deeply retrospective, personal, and emotional music quickly made her an indie darling with devoted fans. She described one show to *Fader Magazine* where she had to go through the crowd to get offstage and fans kept grabbing her. [She said in the interview:](#)

“It was like everyone’s eyes were glazed over, and they didn’t see me as a real person telling them to stop. And that’s weird. That’s when the whole ‘being a projection thing can be really uncomfortable and dangerous. But I don’t know how to negotiate it, because I also think it’s healthy. I think humans need symbols—or rituals, like

going to a show—in order to organize our thoughts and understand the world. So when I’m on stage, I think it’s really healthy that people are not seeing me as a person. But it’s hard when that doesn’t stop.”

[Accounts like @mitskithoughts](#) began posting screenshots of her old tweets once Mitski deleted her social accounts (a stark reminder of how permanent the internet can be). She’s also been caught in the crossfires of much online discourse while away and has sometimes returned online briefly to address them. After Mac DeMarco announced his album, *Here Comes the Cowboy*, fans attacked him and accused him of plagiarism of Mitski’s *Be The Cowboy*. According to a [Huck Magazine feature of the time](#), she roughly said in a now-deleted tweet that, “it feels terrifying to have lots of strangers acting on her behalf in ways she’d never behave herself.” In 2019, she also returned to deny a rumor circulating Tumblr accusing her [of sex trafficking and abusing children](#). Another widely circulated accusation was that her father was, [“a CIA operative who participated in a violent regime change in the DR Congo in the ‘80s.”](#)

After retreating from the public eye, the internet has written its own version of Mitski into existence. Her music has gone viral on TikTok for multiple songs off of multiple albums—[“Strawberry Blonde,”](#) [“Washing Machine Heart,”](#) [“Me and My Husband,”](#) [“First Love/Late Spring,”](#) [“I Bet on Losing Dogs,”](#) and [“Nobody”](#)—all reimagining, relating to or appropriating her original lyrics and interpretations or using them as underscores for various fandom edits. “Strawberry Blonde” in particular became a love song about [strawberry versions of a variety of animals](#), rather than a representation of the saccharine mask one wears when spending time with someone who will never love them back while dealing with the weight of not fitting in with white American beauty standards. This also sparked discourse about who her music is for, specifically after many white TikTok users began using her song, “Your Best American Girl,” as a way to highlight their insecurities that still adhere to traditional Eurocentric beauty standards, erasing Mitski’s experience as a woman of color in the process. Mitski herself [said in a now-deleted Facebook post](#) that she simply wrote it as a love song, not intending these other proposed meanings. But this was long before the TikTok trend, and it is not like she has an outlet to provide any updated sentiments now that time has passed.

She fits the bill for the ever-popular ‘sad girl’ trope that has gained popularity over the years with [other female, indie singer-songwriters](#). This is also pretty commonplace for musicians, and nearly every public figure today. “Stan culture” has been rampant for years, gaining traction alongside the widespread adoption of social media. Consider the ways in which fans were personally attacked by the news that comedian John Mulaney was splitting from his wife, [despite not actually knowing him and his many jokes about his addiction and struggles](#), or the entire phenomenon of the Kpop group

BTS’ “army” of fans that band together to shut down trolls and [raise money for various social justice campaigns.](#)

Having a steady stream of content from a variety of sources, particularly influencers and celebrities, has left many with a hunger for unrestricted access to the lives of these people and parasocial relationships with creators. It allows for fans to feel a part of something larger than themselves, feel ‘in’ on the memes and jokes they see about these figures online and allow you greater social capital based on what communities these figures are important to. Listeners are also able to put their own experiences onto these songs and relate to them, feeling a sense of kinship with the creator. But these figures are still people, with their own private lives off stage, that fans don’t always deserve to be let into.

“Honey, what’d you take?

What’d you take?

Honey, look at me,

Tell me what you took

What’d you take?”

“Brand New City,” *Lush* (2012)

“I said take it all, whatever you want

I didn’t know I was young

I didn’t know what it would take.”

“Everyone,” *Laurel Hell* (2022)

No matter how intimately personal and, at times, cryptic, Mitski’s lyrics are, they reverberate and resonate with so many different people and experiences. But, just because we relate to her doesn’t mean we actually know her—and it isn’t always about her. Many of the songs on *Be The Cowboy* were works of fiction, like the story of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage in “Me and My Husband.” Others were accessible enough to be about anyone, like someone meeting with an old friend (and, perhaps, old lover) at a diner in “Old Friend.”

Does her lyrical vulnerability mean she owes us her whole self? Even when it seems we only want her *our* way: sad and struggling? How does an artist do that sustainably for ten years or more?

“I will retire to the Salton Sea

At the age of twenty-three

For I’m starting to learn I may never be free

Fuck you and your money

I’m tired of your money.”

“Drunk Walk Home,” *Bury Me at Makeout Creek* (2014)

“I used to think I’d be done by twenty

Now, at twenty-nine, the road ahead appears the same

“Working for the Knife,” Laurel Hell (2022)

“I always wanted to die clean and pretty,

But I’d be too busy on working days,

So I am relieved that the turbulence wasn’t forecasted,

I couldn’t have changed anyway.”

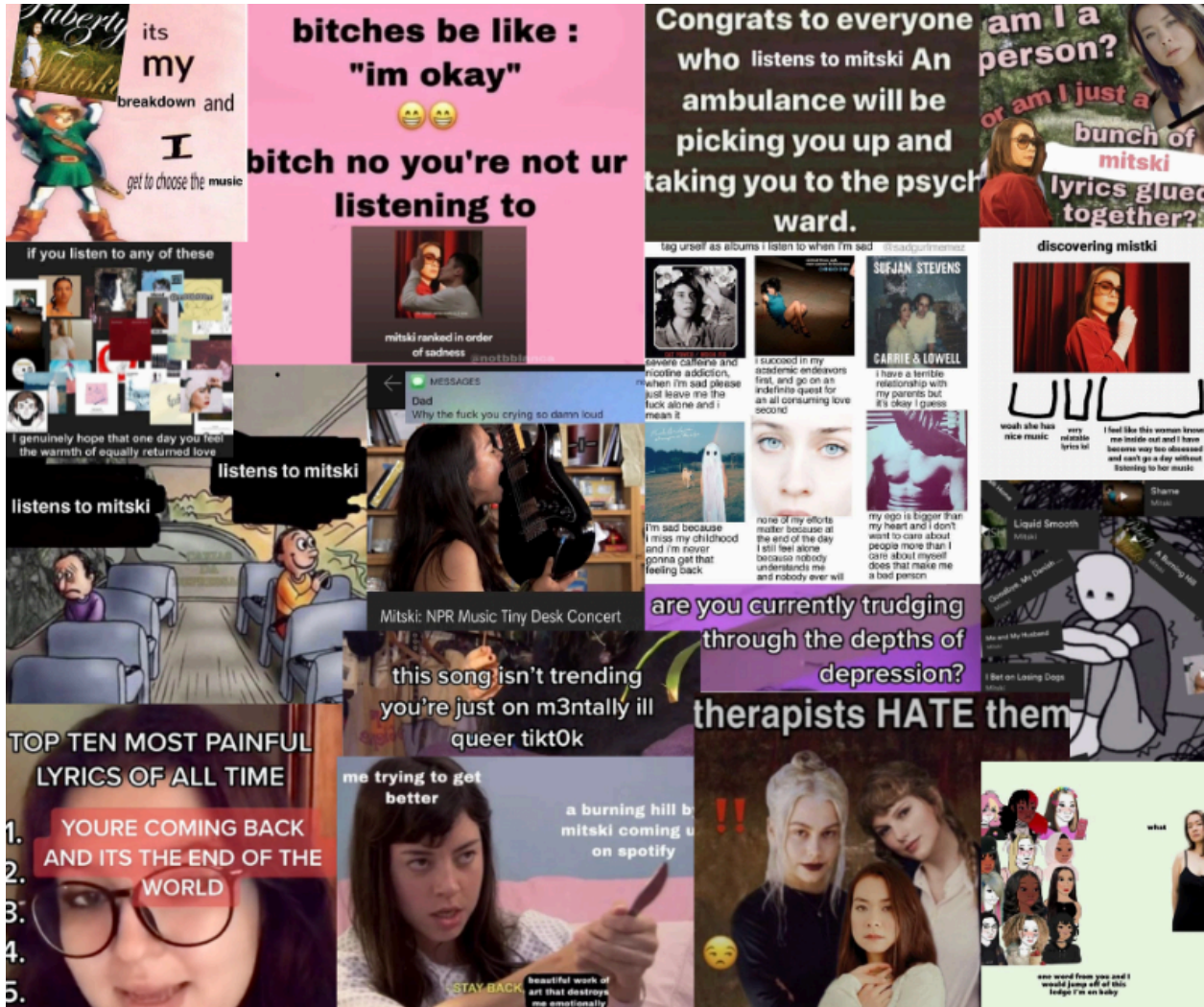
“Last Words of a Shooting Star,” *Bury Me at Makeout Creek* (2014)

Though, maybe at thirty, I’ll see a way to change

That I’m living for the knife.”

“Working for the Knife,” Laurel Hell (2022)

The “persona” created by her fans has overtaken her name, turning it into a tangle of jokes about how sad and unwell she is, with no way for her to respond without being hurt in the process.



“You stay soft

Get beaten

Only natural

To harden up.”

“Stay Soft,” Laurel Hell (2022)

Nevertheless, she returned to say her piece in anticipation of the album.

“The sad girl thing was reductive and tired five, ten years ago, and it still is today,” she told *Crack Magazine* in a video interview where she reacts to memes and social media posts about her. “And I get where they’re coming from and I appreciate them,”

she says, pointing to the camera to address the social media user in question directly,”
But let’s retire the sad girl schtick.”

To be fair, she said she was already “retired from sad,” with her 2013 album title, *Retired From Sad, New Career in Business*. Yet, [fans are still ranking her music by sadness](#), even when the top song is usually off of that very album. (There’s also a trend of tying her music to queer identity, often implying a sense that a part of the queer experience is rooted in suffering and sadness, rather than joy.)

Critics and fans have vocalized this phenomenon as well, but her viral success has made it hard to control the publicly crafted perception of her, not unlike the titular laurel brush or the wildfire that consumes the planet in the music video to “The Only Heartbreaker.”

Despite some problematic fans, she still cares deeply for them. After the release of *Laurel Hell*, her management tweeted out a message to fans from her:

“I learned to bake using the oven mitts you embroidered ‘oven mittski’; I sleep under the quilt you made in Woodstock; I’ve written in every notebook you gave me, held onto your art; I kept the letters you wrote about parents and partners, the older man who connected to Two Slow Dancers. I make myself unavailable to protect my well-being, but it means I can’t connect with you as before...I don’t know you, but knowing you exist, knowing we’re connected through music, reminds me daily to be hopeful, to move with love. I’m happy to be human and alive.”

She has gifted fans this album and stage presence once more, but to the brush of laurel she will most likely return. Maybe, without a contract, this is actually it. Hopefully, it is not.

The penultimate track, “I Guess,” almost felt as if it were the last. She often ends her albums on a somber note, be it singing about being the “last ones out” in “Two Slow Dancers” or literally saying goodbye as her plane crashes on “Last Words of a Shooting Star”:

“If I could keep anything of you

I would keep this quiet after you

From here I can say: ‘Thank you.’”

“I Guess,” Laurel Hell (2022)

But that song wasn't the closer. *Laurel Hell* actually ends with "That's Our Lamp," an upbeat breakup song that develops into a cacophony of "the sounds of people," once mentioned on her hit song, "Nobody," and horns vaguely reminiscent of *Puberty 2's* opener, "Happy."

"We may be ending,

I'm standing in the dark

Looking up into our room

Where you'll be waiting for me,"

She sings as if looking back from somewhere public and exposed.

She repeats,

"That's where you loved me."

It almost sounds as if she's saying,

"That's where you left me."

But, no,

"That's where you loved me."

She begins to fade into the crowd.

"That's where you loved me."

Before she's gone, the crowd joins her,

"That's where you loved me."

Taking us back into the thicket of laurel, returning to silence.

Fans may have built some of the poisonous parts of Mitski's metaphorical 'laurel hell' over the last ten years, but, for thirty minutes, she allows us in to see the beautiful flowers she's made bloom from it. Good luck finding your way out.

<https://www.ampersandla.com/mitski-laurel-hell/>