

KINGS Artist Run acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we operate. We offer our respect to Elders both past and present and extend this offer to all First Nations people.

KINGS

Thomas Stoddard



EMERGING
WRITERS PROGRAM

Artist Run

Established in 2003, KINGS Artist-Run provides a location for contemporary art practice, supporting distinctive experimental projects by artists at all stages of their careers.

Open 12-5pm Thursday,
Friday, Saturday, Sunday
69 Capel Street,
West Melbourne VIC 3003

♪♪♪♪♪

[low rushing]

[solo melancholic humming]

Verse 1:

♪ Suspension ♪
♪ In amber, and in oil ♪
♪ A herculean grip ♪
♪ Below my oesophagus: in concretes, and in soils ♪

♪ Putty ♪
♪ Spheres we pass between each other ♪
♪ Under thumbs ♪
♪ Pressing shapes, but with the weight our fists drop... ♪

Pre-chorus:

♪ what sits in a mournful sound? ♪
♪ (sitting) ♪
♪ what sits in a mournful sound? ♪
♪ (condensing) ♪
♪ what sits in a mournful sound? ♪
♪ (un-catching — stricken with absence, charred like olives and figs, a jacket of dust, was the walls of a home, was the hands of mothers, brothers, all the gifts that were given and the jealousies that frosted the glass with their condensation, dripping, then evaporating, absent physically — but you're there in my memory... all full of blood and your voice is so loud and it's a beautiful sound?) ♪

Chorus:

♪ Oh no ♪
♪ is a moment of tipping over ♪

♪♪♪♪♪

[melancholic humming continues]

[dulled sound of the sun's surface, channeled through strings and brass and wood]

Spoken Aside:

For sam, sadness is a state of arrest. That arrest comes unexpectedly: the body plucked out of the air, then stuck in the falling state, stomach dropping, then dropping further still. To capture the fall, sam acts as conductor (or perhaps orchestrator) of three musicians improvising on a theme, a mournful minor key traded between voice and strings, bowed and strummed. Artist and musicians meet each other in this state, a collective tripping into stuckness. Beginning and end are unclear; markers of time are distant notions while the pain is the point. When we are sick, how can we imagine ourselves outside of sickness? Do we remember our sadness once we regain our faculties? Does our separation from our sadness illuminate the contours of our happiness? I think of Romanian aphorist Emil Cioran, who offers:

Guest Verse:

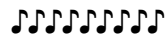
♪ “To be “happy” you must constantly bear in mind the miseries you have escaped. This would be a way for memory to redeem itself, since ordinarily it preserves only disasters, eager—and with what success!—to sabotage happiness...” ♪



[dull whine and drone]

Spoken Aside:

To be happy requires labour. It requires scaffolding and reinforcements, so flighty it is. To be sad forces one to stop, and rarely is there a choice in the stopping. Within the stoppage, Cioran luxuriates in his nihilism. Contradictorily, he seems to work more than most at his misery, seeing and recording its application across all his actions (and inactions), his relationships (tenuous that they are), and dreams of time before birth (as being born leads to nothing but trouble). What he does articulate however, is how grief can infiltrate all our senses, and in doing so, render our previously diurnal world unknown. What is left but to trade notes (!) with oneself, folding and unfolding and refolding the sadness to try and understand the shape of the emptiness that lies in the gaps between words and sounds, intentions and actions. The aphoristic journaling of *The Trouble With Being Born* (1973) is Cioran’s own bitter drone hummed outwards to the world, testing what actions one can throw at depression to make it wince. The results can often appear meagre. sam teases at this tension within her own work — what action is there in sadness? Does action only exist outside the immediate confines of sadness? Is the action of sadness just the behaviour of peripheral coping? Song, as a channel for the intangibility of sadness, is a critical choice of medium for the testing of these questions, in particular as the audience listener is allowed to be entirely passive in the exchange. Listen, or don’t. Feel, or don’t. The music will pass through you regardless.



[Dolly Parton and Sunn O))) attempt to trade notes]

Verse 2:

♪ Bow pulled in an archer's arcing ♪
♪ A ring of lips is a target open ♪
♪ The fridge is empty but I look again ♪
♪ Sound struck ankles give way for the floor boards ♪

Pre-chorus:

♪ what sits in a mournful sound? ♪
♪ (quavered rests like a heart beat) ♪
♪ what sits in a mournful sound? ♪
♪ (resignation detuned for a bass clef) ♪
♪ what sits in a mournful sound? ♪
♪ (un-moved — ...) ♪

Spoken Aside:

Chantal Ackerman misnames her film *Portrait d'une Paresseuse* [Portrait of a Lazy Woman] (1986), because I know *depression* when I see it. The film, alternately titled *La paresse* [Sloth], does hint at some deeper darkness, but still leaves the threatening malaise of the piece unspoken. Ackerman wakes at noon, and briefly surveys her surroundings.

Isolated back-up vocal (solo):

♪ "I'll get up in a minute," ♪

Aside resumes:

she says in French. While a minute passes on the clock, it is hard to say exactly what amount of time passes in this acknowledgement. She has not undressed from the night before, so there is no need to get dressed this morning. There is no food in the fridge, so there is no need to eat. There are creams to apply to one's skin to preserve one's youth, but she looks into the camera, knowingly. She lights a cigarette, and is unhurried, disinterested, in enjoying it. The bitten fruit on table is on the precipice of rot. And rot is a sadness left unchecked. Crucially, Ackerman is accompanied by music. Her partner Sonia Wieder-Atherton sits in their living room, alternately bowing and striking at her cello. The music and the motion of Wieder-Atherton's body is virile and athletic by comparison to the tar-drip slowness of Ackerman, and further accentuates her non-interaction with her domestic scenes. Considering these scenes, the tensions in sam's performance work becomes ever more evident. Even in the sadness of music, the body is in motion, defying the inaction

supposed by grief. Performance academic Alexandra Pirici, writing on Tina Stefanou's exhibition *You Can't See Speed*, offers:

Guest Verse:

♪ “As song, voice becomes choreography. Essentially a form of movement — a vibrating wave propagating through a transmission medium — sound is then organised in space and time.” ♪

Aside resumes:

When a depression pushes us back down into the bed, a singing voice is form of movement, a pin pushing upwards, a life-affirming motion.

Chorus:

♪ “oh no” hurts like swallowed coal... ♪

♪ see my chest illuminated ♪

♪♪♪♪♪

[no music]

Verse 3:

♪ ... ♪

Spoken Aside:

While in an Israeli prison in 1966, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish was visited by his brother Ahmed, and his mother, who had brought him ground coffee. Recalling the experience, Ahmed describes how a prison guard took the coffee from his mother's hands and poured it out in front of them, much to the mother's anguish. The sight of her tears haunted Mahmoud, who wrote the poem *To My Mother*.

Guest Verse:

♪ “Dearly I yearn for my mother's bread,
My mother's coffee,
Mother's brushing touch.
Childhood is raised in me,
Day upon day in me.
And I so cherish life
Because if I died
My mother's tears would shame me.” ♪

Jordanian writer Saad Eldeen Shaheen, speaking on Darwish's poem says:

Isolated back-up vocal (solo):

♪ "I believe stories are always the seed that precede an action." ♪

Aside resumes:

One of those actions was made by Lebanese musician Marcel Khalife, who set the poem to music. A personal song of desperate yearning became another's, and in turn, a song of yearning for many. Khalife's voice swells gently against the plectra-ed string of an oud, with a timbre that glides between earthy and airy. It is a mournful song, embellishing Darwish's expressions of isolation and absence. But (to play with Shaheen's words) sadness can be the seed that precedes an action. While sam teases the notion of emotional suspension, the performance of music and motion reveals the possibilities beyond cessation. That sadness is shared to another, passed between hands, and in turn, is a sadness we carry together, to unburden each other — to inhale for another song.

♪♪♪♪♪

[low rushing]

[choral melancholic humming, in complex shifting harmony, in minor tones,
in ascending scales]

Chorus:

♪ Oh no ♪

♪ is a moment of tipping over ♪

♪ and catching one another ♪

♪ Oh no ♪

♪ is a moment of tipping over ♪

♪ and finding voices in another's body ♪

♪ Oh no ♪

♪ precedes our embrace ♪

Post Chorus:

♪ embrace me ♪

Thomas Stoddard is a writer and curator.

The Emerging Writers Program was established in 2015 with the aim to provide publishing opportunities for emerging arts writers. This program is run in partnership with unProjects and in 2025 is supported by Creative Victoria and City of Melbourne.

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