



Into the Woods

The Dark Passage of the Decemberists

BY CHRIS MARTINS with PHOTOS BY ALICIA J. ROSE



Prologue

They call him
the Underwater Boy.



[Director's Note: This is a five-act play that begins with a bow and ends with an entrance.]

THE CURTAIN RISES, or probably parts, awkwardly and jerkily on account of the small hands doing the work. The frayed rope gets wedged hard against the pulley, between the wheel and the armature, and needing an extra bit of boyhood elbow grease, it intermittently flies forward and stops dead, flies forward and stops dead. The ragged red velveteen has been doing this dance for the better part of three hours, and this is its last clumsy two-step for the night. On the other side is a set blood-spattered and medieval looking: cardboard cutouts of spires and castles, the obligatory mountain painted into the distance, small village accoutrements scattered about. The floorboards are sticky and covered with stage blood (the Evil Ghost won). And standing proudly in the midst of this mess is a boy, 7 or 8, in a crimson-stained suit of unsound armor, fighting the urge to survey the carnage he's wrought while awaiting his time to bow. His left foot slides slowly farther left in the goo, so he clenches his cheeks together to maintain a stately pose. His chin is held high.

They call him the Underwater Boy. Of course that's not what tonight's program, for *The Bloody Knight*, reads. Rather, his heavily credited handle matches the one given him by his parents: Colin Meloy. But Underwater Boy was always a better fit—his head seemed to float a good two feet above his body, and it certainly moved to a current no one else could see. Colin comes from a long line of interesting here in Montana. His

parents are firm democrats and supporters of the arts, and he himself is only the latest addition to a prominent family tree with roots that reach back to the homesteading days. His great uncle Henry paints horses and helped found, with Colin's grandfather, a ceramics center in Helena world-renowned for its rarely given residencies. Colin's mother works in public health, and his father is a legislator who helped ratify the first state constitution to guarantee its citizens the right to a clean environment. His grandmother was a key member of the local historical society.

These days young Colin splits his time between Mom's house next to the capitol building and Dad's small thoroughbred ranch in the valley outside of town (they divorced when he was 5). When he isn't penning, directing and starring in his own plays, Colin studies serial killers, makes his own musical instruments, reads Ray Bradbury, and writes short stories. As this armored child looks out from the gory stage at the small crowd of his peers and their parents on the other side of his spectacles, he knows that one day he will be the singer of a rock and roll band. Colin Meloy was born for the stage. Accepting this fate, he lets his chin drop and bows as extravagantly as any second-grader ever has.

END SCENE.



The Supporting Cast

Chris Funk, guitarist, pedal steel player, banjo and glockenspiel whiz, is wearing yellow. He has an impressive stature, a wary eye, and always looks as if he's leaning back just a little (which gives him the air of a judge). He was raised on music in Indiana by a show tunes-obsessed mother and an opera-voiced mill-worker. Wanderlust brought him to Portland and like Colin, he has a newborn baby.

Jenny Conlee, for reasons obvious, isn't wearing a men's dress shirt. She sports a modern-looking dress of geometric patterns and shoes that are a half-size too small (but she's determined to stick it out). She's been a pianist for nearly all of her life, which has been spent entirely in Portland, and plays anything with keys that the Decemberists need (organs, pianos, accordions). She's fast-talking and friendly, as eager to tell a story as she is to hear one.



Nate Query is in orange. He's tall, as befits a standup bass player, talkative, charmingly geeky, and laughs loudly. He grew up taking music lessons in Portland, but quit piano when his teacher wouldn't let him learn the Beatles. He and Jenny used to work at the Oregon Zoo, and played together for six years in a barroom jam band called Calobo. He learned to play cello in the downtime between the last Decemberists record and this one.

John Moen, the latest in a long line of Decemberist drummers, is wearing red. He has a résumé that reaches back 20-plus bands, his last gig was for Stephen Malkmus' the Jicks, and he looks like a baby-faced Tom Hanks under his grey-shot beard, yet he's entirely self-deprecating. At his audition to join the band, he warned the others that he might throw up on account of weak nerves. He's also an amateur inventor.

Act 1 Travel occurs and the spotlight focuses.

A NEW CURTAIN OPENS on a new scene some 24 years later, what appears to be a small commuter plane. A gaggle of businessmen en route to Portland from Los Angeles talk businessman babble while strapped to mismatched leather seats. They debate the benefits of departing various L.A. area airports. Someone mentions 9/11 as if it were something that happened in a grade-school diorama. This is old hat to them; they might as well be cruising the 110 Interstate in luxury sedans.

As the chatter quiets, the spotlight focuses on a writer (denoted by the oversized microphone in his hand and press-card toting fedora on his head) and a slightly withered but sharp-dressed professorial type. Having little in common with the other characters on the plane, the two shake hands and exchange stories. The elder is a Russian historian who teaches law on the side, off to meet others of his ilk for a salmon fishing expedition in British Columbia. They plan on trading the kind of tales you can count only in centuries at whatever pace they please, where the only traffic present comes with fins and tails. He's a romantic, naturally, and speaks fondly of the music he listened to at the Writer's age, "before lyrical poetry and storytelling rolled over to sorry confessionalism," he says.

As it happens, the Writer's heading to Portland to interview a band, he replies, but

hardly the usual trope. When they first appeared it was wearing dirty faces and Civil War gear—conductor's caps and peacoats, bandanas and banners—carrying a banjo, an accordion and a guitar, looking for all the world like the last bastions of battle hymns from a lost battalion in General Grant's army. With the backfire black of cannon dust on their cheeks, they played a peculiar pop: a combination of hallowed college rock a la R.E.M., the murky quirk of Neutral Milk Hotel, the Celtic lilt of the Pogues, and a folk that felt as old as anything. Even more peculiar, the singer introduced himself as "Lesley Anne Levine," the ghost of an infant girl "born at nine and dead at noon." His real name, of course, was Colin Meloy.

That was on 2002's *Castaways and Cutouts*, the Writer continues. Over two albums and an EP since, the band has played—on Hammond and Rhodes, guitar and banjo, accordion and pedal steel, drums and standup bass—the backdrop to Colin's fantastical narratives. His are dark tales of sad characters who all seem to exist in an antique world perpetually trapped in the month of December—a French legionnaire lost on camelback, cutthroat mariners trapped in the mouth of a whale, a loving mother who turns tricks for sailors by night, the barrow-pushing specter of a lovelorn soul...each wrapped up in history and mystery, black humor and vaudevil-

lian grandeur; each the result of an obsessive attention to detail and literary craft. To wit, their last album was titled *Picaresque*, which is the name for any fiction focusing on protagonists as unluckied as his (further to wit, each song on that album was told from the first-person perspective of a different character).

"What do they call themselves?" asks the historian.

"The Decemberists."

"Really..." he leans in to the Writer and lowers his glasses. "Then they're named after the failed Russian revolt in 1825. Several officers from the imperial army gathered their men in Senate Square in St. Petersburg to protest the incoming czar. They were called the Decembrists. They wanted the people to back them in calling for a Russian constitution, but the czar blew them away. Anyone left alive was either hanged or sent to a Siberian gulag. I'd be interested to know what the band identifies with in their story—the Decembrists were constitutional monarchists, hardly revolutionary. I'm intrigued. Especially hearing that the singer writes in narrative fiction. That's the most laborious path for a lyricist. Good for him."

The curtain falls and the speakers alongside blare the sound of a rough airplane landing; a cheery voice announces: "Welcome to Portland."



Act 2 The musician starts from square one, a promise to a Russian historian is kept and bloggers disagree.

COLIN ISN'T DRESSED IN ARMOR. He isn't wearing a scarf around his head or a scimitar in a sash, or chewing a gold doubloon. He doesn't look like a gypsy pirate or a rogue or a ne'er-do-well or a roustabout or a waif. Instead he's wearing a button-down, small-gauge corduroy dress-shirt, sky blue, with comfortable brown slacks, sneakers, and glasses that fit his face conservatively. The set fits the part; everything on stage seemingly suggesting the house of a storyteller: the tall ceilings and wide portholes of a Craftsman, large wooden beams and old floorboards, bookshelves crammed with worn classics. Colin's tapping his foot and checking his wristwatch. The door to his right looks heavy and cut into its middle is a

glass oval covered in arabesque. There's a knock.

The Writer walks in and removes his hat; Colin pours drinks, and the two sit down around one corner of a broad table. The sound of a baby intermittently gurgling and crying plays in the background. There is art all over, including the painted panorama that adorns the Decemberists' second album, *Her Majesty, the Decemberists*. Colin lives here, he explains, with Carson Ellis—the artist who's done the drawings for every Decemberists release to date—and their baby Hank (named after Colin's painter uncle). Carson has been holed up in her upstairs studio for weeks steadfast in her commitment to finish the art for the band's Capitol Records debut, *The Crane Wife*. Like *The Tain*

(the proggy 2004 EP that retells the centuries-old Irish myth of the same name), the new album takes its title, and some of its story, from antiquity: an ancient Japanese fable, he says. And it dabbles in prog as well.

As Colin begins to tell his story—the Underwater Boy and his college-aged uncle who'd send him mixed tapes of R.E.M., Hüsker Dü, Belle & Sebastian, and the Replacements; how he joined theater in high school after a short-lived and ill-fated run at track; studying creative writing at the University of Montana and reacting against the straight-laced style; starting an alt-country/college-pop band called Tarkio that was actually quite good—he is collected and candid, impressively thoughtful, and a little tickled to be questioned so.

“I’m trying to write songs that appeal to a collective imagination, things that are already pre-programmed there.” – COLIN MELOY

So what brought you to Portland?

There’s a bit of a transient population in Missoula; it’s made so much of students. Everybody around my age was constantly moving away and it just didn’t feel like a place I had any interest in putting down roots. The advice I was given by all my faculty in college was, “Before you go back for a master’s, you should go and get some life experience,” so I figured it’d be a better to do that someplace else, try living in a city for the first time. My girlfriend at the time and I just packed up the old Honda and drove to Portland. Got an apartment, got a job. Initially I was working at a scene shop making scenery pieces and props.

And then you just started playing open mics?

[Colin leans forward and puts his hands on the table] The idea was that I’d hit the ground running. I’d met some people out here touring with Tarkio and felt I had good enough contacts to get a few opening slots. But I quickly discovered that nobody had the time to foster an up-and-comer, so I had to start from square one. There was that “life experience.” I figured the only way was to start playing open mics, which is a bitter pill. But it felt good to play, and I managed to get my first real show after a couple of months. It was me and this guy Natron—he played John Spencer-y blues-rock, except that his thing was that he’d set up robots behind him and they’d be making him do things—on a Monday night, like December 27, right after Christmas; nobody’d be playing that slot anyway. Still, I remember being excited about seeing my name in small print in the local weekly. Soon after, I started cobbling together the players for the Decemberists.

I promised a Russian historian I’d ask you what it was about the original Decembrists that you identify with, considering they weren’t particularly radical.

Yeah, a lot of people confuse them with being communist agitators or socialists, but they were anti-tsarist, and heroes of every revolution that followed because they set the standard. To be a descendent of a Decembrist was a very proud mantle to wear. The Decembrists’ wives chose to follow them to the gulags in Siberia, and they actually developed communities in these far-flung places that before had been nothing but work camps and political prisoners.

Even if bound to straight fact in writing, one’s approach is, by nature, an exercise in subjectivity. Your stories are fantastical, and told from the viewpoint of these lowly characters, but they are still yours. In what ways are these songs autobiographical?

Only in a very abstract way. I didn’t have a mother who prostituted herself so that she could feed me, but certainly I have an attachment to that character and all of the others; there’s a bit of me in each of them. Otherwise I don’t think I would find them very interesting to write about. A lot of it is just messing with narrative—messing with the humor and trying to go to darker places—in the interest of crafting a story that’s interesting and that has a beginning, middle and end, and a character that makes sense. As for what I pull from myself, I’ve always had a particular fascination with dark activity.

[He clasps his fingers in front of him and smiles]

And that’s one of the greatest strengths of a Decemberists song: painting

these roguish characters with actual nuance, and finding humor in the darkness...

It just shouldn’t entirely be one way or another. They should have a certain amount of depth and faults and all those sorts of things that make a character dynamic. Hopefully anybody can relate to that.

Do you ever get lost in the wintry world that your characters inhabit?

Absolutely. You naturally immerse yourself in that tone when you’re working on a song and it does stick with you for a few days after; it tends to color your everyday experiences.

Since you draw so heavily on history in your original stories, does it feel any different to rework an old myth like *The Tain* or *The Crane Wife*?

No. All of my historical references are intentionally based on an understanding of history that any seventh grader would have. I’m not trying to write historically accurate pop songs; I’m trying to write songs that appeal to a collective imagination, things that are already pre-programmed there. So all my understanding of and references to history or time periods is totally fucked up. When doing *The Tain* or *The Crane Wife*, I’ve tried to take the same approach; I abstract it as much as possible.

There are lengthy ongoing debates in the blogosphere over the meanings of your songs: over whether or not “Eli, the Barrow Boy” committed suicide; whether the mother in “A Cautionary Song” was a prostitute or a victim of rape; there are even people trying to wring meaning from the numbers used in “16 Military Wives.”

[With the rickety squeal of a large wheel turning, the stage swivels 180 degrees clockwise to reveal the backs of two teenage bloggers sitting at partitioned computer consoles. Projected onto the wall in front of them are the words: LyricDisputes.com – band: Decemberists, the – song: “We Both Go Down Together”]

Blogger One: *[excited, reading aloud as he types]* Not sure if you knew this, but this song is actually the prequel to “Leslie Anne Levine.”

Blogger Two: *[scoffing and straightening her posture]* This is certainly not a prequel to “Leslie Anne Levine.” That song is about a deceased infant whose spirit haunts the scene of her death. This is a simple tune about lovers who can’t have one another and so they jump off a cliff together. Check.

Blogger One: Oh you are so shrewd; how did you ever figure out that Leslie Anne Levine was a ghost? *Of course* Leslie died, but she had parents. Perhaps they committed suicide together. I heard a live bootleg with Colin himself saying that this is the prequel. Beat that.

Blogger Two: *[laughing gloriously]* Fool. Everybody knows Leslie’s mother died during childbirth. That’d make it rather difficult for her to die yet again, wouldn’t you say? You’re probably lying about hearing Colin say that. There’s not a single thematic link. I needn’t “beat” a thing when the lyrics do the job for me. Check...mate.

[The stage rotates again to find Colin with a slight grin on his lips; the Writer continues]



Colin Meloy and his vaudevillian vagabonds: the Decemberists through the years

How does it feel to know there are so many eager little minds out there trying to take apart what you do?

I think it's great. I think it's what we're going for. I've always been the sort of person that sits down with the CD booklet after getting a new album, especially when I was younger, just poring over Robyn Hitchcock or Morrissey lyrics, digging through and discovering the literary references, each one being this exciting epiphany. It's like putting a puzzle together; it all makes more sense as you go along. I applaud that and fully support it.

But people can take certain interpretations and go really far with it. A couple of years ago we were playing "A Cautionary Song" at the Bowery Ballroom in New York and a girl in the front row started screaming at us, "You've never been raped! You don't know what it's like!" There's some dark imagery in the songs and I haven't necessarily shied away from exploring rape, exploring violence, exploring anti-Semitism, the objectification of women...exploring all of these things that we see in the newspaper on a *daily* basis, but treating them like the antiquated ideas that they are. If you're writing about a certain time period or mode of thinking, you're not going to get it right if you apply the ethics and the morals of contemporary society. As a consequence people have gotten mad at me.

Is it just that they aren't used to hearing fictional narrative in music?

A lot of it has to do with having ironic sensibilities and understanding that in the context of a pop song. You may understand that in a book, but in a song you might not get that the "I" is not necessarily me. People are so conditioned to hearing pop music and assuming that it's a first-person monologue based on the experience of a performer; they have a hard time believing or getting into it through a different voice.

Nothing's easier than writing about one's own angsts, and nothing's more painstaking than crafting a great story. Do you ever regret the path you've chosen?

[Colin pauses for a moment] Sometimes I do kind of curse it; I would like to be able to write really simple first-person monologues, but I can't do it for some reason. It's not interesting for me to listen to, it's not interesting for me to write, and I always just get myself stuck in these stories where I end up really having to write my way out of them, which is great because it makes it more interesting and more exciting. I think it's just naturally what I'm inclined to do.

What keeps you inspired?

It's a constant discovery. It's something that never gets old, the tactile-ness of running words together. What is it in the human mind that attracts us to alliteration, to consonance to assonance? Then we have language, which provides meaning to the sounds. And melody, which suggests narrative and tone. There are so many layers of potential meaning, so many different opportunities to convey feeling, especially in song. And what it really comes down to, I think, is language itself. There are good writers and there are not so good writers, and you can tell a good writer from a single sentence on a page. That's a really powerful idea.

Is there a certain "zing" that comes with using a word like "palanquin" in a song?

Sure, there's definitely a thrill in taking a word like that and having it work in terms of making sense and fitting the meter, but I don't do it gratuitously. That's my main criticism of everything that's been written about us: this idea that I'm sitting down with a dictionary and trying to find weird esoteric words to fit into pop songs. That suggestion wouldn't be leveled at a poet, who is given all the freedom in the world to use every word and every tool in the English language. I feel like that's what I should be doing too.

Why aren't you writing novels?

[Colin shrugs] I'm a bad prose writer. My sister always says it's a muscle that you need to exercise and mine is totally atrophied. What attracts me to writing in other people is their use of language, so writing poetry or writing songs is that boiled down, where all you're doing is using the sound and the movement of language.

But you've come miles in terms of executing narrative and crafting stories. Yeah, but I like seeing them happen over the course of a four-minute song.

Is it fair to say that the Decemberists is a vehicle for your stories more than anything?

Yeah, I would say so. I don't know what else it would be.

[He says this with a matter-of-factness that avoids arrogance. His voice is level and deliberate, contemplative yet focused, like a Decemberists song. The stage goes dark.]



Act 3 The cast visits a Japanese garden and the fourth wall is broken.

WHEN THE LIGHTS GO UP AGAIN, it's on a verdant scene; suddenly, it seems, the playhouse has been overtaken by vegetation. There are deep-hanging tree limbs, leaf-loaded and craggy, obscuring the ceiling and seat-tops alike. Mossy granite pagodas have emerged from the aisles and a Zen garden has taken up residence over the orchestra pit. There's a koi pond with a waterfall flowing into its farthest corner and a stone-carved crane in its foreground, and a stream crossing the stage with a slat-boarded bridge zigzagging overtop. Portland's celebrated Japanese garden—once voted the best outside of Japan, marveled at for the quickness with which it matured—is now, somehow, here.

All five Decemberists bustle onto the stage in bright contrast to the ancient-looking scenery. They're fresh-faced, lightly made up, and wearing custom-made dress shirts in candy-colored hues (Colin in green), except Jenny who's wearing an equally day-glow dress. They're shaking hands and sharing hellos, but silent as kabuki characters even as their lips are moving. Soon a photographer joins the scene and starts moving the members around the surroundings, to different places and poses as they chuckle or chat or nudge each other. Mount Hood looms in paint on the back wall, and over it a cardboard-cut airplane heads into the wings; the businessmen are going home. As the sound of the airplane fades out, *The Crane Wife* starts to waft into the room and the vegetation gets denser.

It begins with "Crane Wife 3," which is the ending actually. Colin plays the Japanese fable's dejected sail-maker, lamenting the loss of his crane wife, voice full of depth: "I will hang my head/Hang my head low." Like a good cry, the music alternates between stripped nothing and fullness (a lone acoustic guitar with a roomy hollow ring to it; then epic drums, a bittersweet bass melody, crawling cello and reverberating piano hits). Guitar feedback follows the beat to its final pulse, and into the second song, a four-part, 12-minute prog suite. A huge and heaving Pink Floyd groove swings forward over marching percussion, then gives way to pensively picked acoustic guitar. Every bit the narrator, Colin paints a stark picture of a dark and awful island over a menacing sound-

track, punctuated instrumental smacks and blasts of Wurlitzer. Part three is announced with a baroque, ELP-worthy, swirling flourish of organ. The pace becomes more frantic as Colin adopts the guise of a barbarian chasing his prey: "I spied in sable the landlord's daughter/Produced my pistol, then my saber/Make no whistle or thou will be murdered." In the sad, dim afterglow colored by Spanish-tinged guitar, Colin's character lays his victim to rest beside a river.

"Yankee Bayonet" and "O Valencia!" lighten the dank atmosphere in the theater, but deceptively so. These are classic Decemberists pop songs: jangly and upbeat with dark secrets in their folds. The first is a duet between a dead Civil War soldier and his love left at home (voiced by Laura Veirs); the second is the story of a gang girl who winds up dead in her suitor's arms, the bullet that's lodged in her chest originally meant for him. "The Perfect Crime #2" runs Steely Dan's blues-funk into the Talking Heads' organic disco, Colin spinning a sexy yarn of espionage and double-crosses, while "When the War Came" vamps loud and heavy like Led Zeppelin's "No Quarter" as we hear the tale of the Russian botanists who starved to protect their seed cache during the Siege of Leningrad. "Shankill Butchers" curls through the air like a bedtime lullaby, despite its subjects being vicious serial killers, and sets the stage for a lilting lyrical thing called "Summersong." Then, in "Crane Wife 1 and 2," Colin becomes the sail-maker again, first nursing an injured crane back to health, then unknowingly marrying her human counterpart. The band chases his emotions throughout, on out to the epic sing-along finale, "Sons and Daughters." Over a buzzing hurdy-gurdy, a building beat and a banjo, Colin leads listeners to the other side of the island explored earlier: "When we arrive, sons and daughters/We'll make our homes on the water/We'll build our walls of aluminum/We'll fill our mouths with cinnamon."

As *The Crane Wife* comes to a close, the flora begins to recede from the room and light returns. The Decemberists are posing for their last shots, looking bored and hungry. The curtain falls.

Act 4 Meanings are contemplated over sake and nigiri.

“PEOPLE WANT US TO BE a band of vagabonds or pirates, running around Portland in our Victorian outfits,” says Chris Funk as the scene opens on a darkened sushi bar. The Decemberists and the Writer are huddled around a series of small square tables pushed together, drinking cold sake and waiting for their rolls to arrive. The band looks worn out after the photo shoot in the garden, but seems grateful for the promise of food and conversation. “We’re that band on stage, but that’s not who we really are. You can’t live in that persona when you’re at a grocery store or paying your cell phone bill. It’s a strange sort of two worlds to be living in between, but it is great.”

What’s changed the most since the band’s beginning?

Chris: I think it’s the confidence we have to keep doing what we’re doing regardless of what people write or think about it. And after looking at this new record, looking at how much we’ve grown from our first EP, *Five Songs*, to now...it’s exciting to see us all blossom so much.

Jenny: It feels way more like my life now. Before, I was teaching piano lessons and with every tour it was like, “Should I quit teaching now, or should I wait until the next tour?”

Colin: Or getting up the gumption to ask your boss for a month and a half off, hoping you’ll still have the job when you get back. That was so stressful.

Nate: *[To the Writer]* To go on tour when you’re starting out, you have to work twice as hard before and twice as hard after just to make it happen. There’s something romantic about that, but it fucking sucks. And now, our approach to our music isn’t necessarily different, but we get to focus on it completely.

Chris: Having time right now to spend with my daughter, to consider myself a musician for the first time, to realize that’s what I *do*...that’s really exciting. It’s been my dream, I guess my whole life. I think it has for all of us.

[A waitress arrives with two large plates of brightly colored sushi rolls complemented by little hills of wasabi and tastefully arranged slices of ginger. All of this is obliterated instantly. The Writer wipes his face clean and continues]

When Colin brings a song to the band, do you hear the lyrics as a fan would? Can you get lost in the stories?

John: Things filter in slowly, like we’ll be recording and I’ll go, “Are you saying such-and-such right there? That’s really great.” Then the questions start coming like, “What’s a curlew?” But there are some songs that kind of take you aback. The second part of “The

Island”—the old-timey rape sequence—right away that was like, “Oh my God, what’s going on?”

Jenny: It’s not until about two weeks later that I’m like, “Colin, what does that mean?” or that I try to figure out the story. I don’t always know his exact intentions in terms of meaning...that’s still a mystery sometimes. Sometimes it’s really dark and I just don’t want to know. I’m like, “What is that about? I don’t understand.” And Colin’s like, “It’s just a study in death and killing.”

Colin: *[Seemingly insecure]* But you read that sort of stuff. It’s like fantasy.

Jenny: I just sort of avoid that in my life. If I was to write a song myself, I would never imagine focusing on that particular element of humanity, like people who just can’t stop killing each other. *[Colin starts laughing]* Colin likes those characters, which is awesome.

Chris: I usually have to get on Google to figure out what the hell the song’s about, *[laughs]* but to me that’s exciting: You can keep going back to the song and letting it unfold. And even if you don’t know what the word means, it’ll have a natural flow to it, and that’s way more refreshing than hearing the same words used over and over. It’s also fun to not analyze the words and just let the syllables carry the song like a drum would.

[A plate of nigiri and a sizeable salad arrive and disappear]

The music in Decemberists songs always seems a perfect match for the words, to the scenery and the emotions involved. To what do you attribute that?

Nate: *[Pauses in thought]* I always want to play the thing that seemed like was there already. Sometimes the song doesn’t need bass, or doesn’t need guitar, or doesn’t need whatever, and if that’s the case, none of us have any problem just not playing. And if you’re okay with not playing, that means you’re okay playing a really simple part. It also means that, with the new record especially, when there’s room for more, we’re ready...

Colin: ... and it sticks out so much more. Like the organ part on “Landlord’s Daughter.” It’s remarkable not only because it’s really cool, but because it’s a stark contrast to everything else on the record.

Jenny: *[Quietly]* I always feel bad for them; I play so much.

Chris: One of the greatest things about Colin’s songs is that there are these moments where you crawl inside of another world. It’s almost like you’re writing a soundtrack.

[More food and more sake come and leave, come and leave. There’s a crane preening itself painted into the mural on the far wall. The banter fades into the night.]

THE ALPHABET
ACCORDING TO
the Decemberists

An A-Z Selection
from the band’s
lyrical lexicon

ARETHUSA	INFANTA	QUAILED
BOSUN	JEWESS	RHAPSODICAL
CHAPARRAL	KITH	SHRIFT
DOLOR	LAUDANUM	TARLATAN
EUNUCH	MAIDENHEAD	URCHIN
FOLDEROL	NIPPING	VESTRY
GADABOUT	ODALISQUE	WASTREL
HEIRLOOM	PALAVER	X, Y, ZIGGURATS



“There are these moments when you crawl inside of another world.”

— CHRIS FUNK

Act 5 The Writer meets a peer, details are accounted for, and...

AS THE CURTAIN OPENS FOR THE LAST TIME, it's on the Writer and an older man wearing a black suit, a white beard and a driver's cap. They're sitting in the same chairs used in the airplane scene, but arranged one behind the other and with black cushions this time. The gloved hands of the older man rest on/hold up a disembodied steering wheel; the Writer has a large suitcase at his side. As the two introduce themselves to one another, a screen behind them plays some of Portland's more recognizable scenes: the Willamette River which cuts through town; the historic red-bricked Union Station with its clock tower urging passerbys to “Go By Train”; Powell's City of Books, the largest independent bookstore in the nation; Mount Tabor, the extinct volcano that lies within the city's borders. The driver talks about music—says his son plays jazz and classical around the city; he used to play a little guitar himself when he and his wife lived on a ranch in southern Oregon. They'd jam in the rickety old barn loft over whiskey and marijuana cigarettes. But these days he's a widower and his hands are mildly arthritic. He notices the Writer's microphone and recorder, and reaches into his pocket.

“I've got three novels on this thing,” he says holding a key-chain-sized hard drive. He talks about needing to keep his mind fit and pokes fun at the other drivers he's met: bitter old cigarette-smokers who do nothing but complain between pickups. He used to rush home on his breaks and run to the computer with his ideas. Now he keeps his laptop (bought used with the money he made selling his first novel) in the trunk and finds a nice place to pull over when the mood hits. “I often write about those other drivers,” he says in his everyman drawl. “They make great characters.”

Seems like a trend, says the Writer. He tells him about Colin Meloy and the Decemberists, a band of details—of small considerations and painstaking parts that

swirl about to create some tall Tower of Babel that feels as if it holds an entire world of secrets and solutions in its inner coils. But every piece is where it's meant to be: the odd words chosen for their natural rhythm and archaic implications, the stories and characters for their fairytale familiarity, the music to match the mood and narrative. Each detail is accounted for, planned out and placed, by the maestro Mr. Meloy, down to the blush on Chris Funk's cheek in the press photos and the accordion in Jenny Conlee's hands when they tour (she'd never played one before joining the Decemberists). Though they be fathers or daughters, husbands or lovers in their own respective existences, they are characters in the world of Colin Meloy just as much as those he makes up or snatches from history. Just as much as the bloggers and the critics and the fans and the writers and the detractors and anyone else swept in through the doors to sit in the audience or get up on stage.

Call it precious or pretentious if you must, but the Decemberists' show isn't a hard sale. It's a ticket to stay—to not return home with the rest of the cynics and suits—and any old romantic is invited, from gore-obsessed 7-year-olds to septuagenarian historians who'd figured themselves too old to care about contemporary pop music. And like their Russian namesakes, they've built a functioning world around their storied existence (out of aluminum and cinnamon, no doubt), with Colin Meloy again writing, directing, and starring. But this time it's as the singer of a rock and roll band.

As the Writer says this, a heavy crack sounds from above. The driver covers his head as the curtain breaks loose, and the playhouse starts to fall away. Sunlight pokes through widening holes in the ceiling. There's singing outside and people wearing bright shirts. Welcome to the story of the Decemberists. **F**