

In “Elephant”, we see death through the eyes of a man who’s still in the throws of an immense grief. We see a man who’s bitter and callous, practically spitting out lyrics full of resentment, resentment for everyone who is not dying: the weekend crowd, her family, even himself. We see a man who can’t even talk about how much pain he’s in, except through the classic Isbell trick of specific and haunting memories (“Crosslegged on a barstool like nobody sits anymore”, “Sweep up the hair from the floor”, “Seagrams in a coffee cup”, etc.). To simply say the word “death”, to admit such a huge and irreversible thing, would be to break himself open in a way he’s not sure he could fix back up (but, of course, he swears he just doesn’t give a damn about that now). In this song, Jason Isbell paints a character that’s clearly familiar to him: a man who has known nothing but pain for so long that he can’t - or won’t - imagine a world without it, plunged in the depths of his alcoholism as Isbell was while writing this song. “Elephant” shows a man who is so overwhelmed by the fact that people can leave, that people come and go and he’s powerless to stop it, that he just. . . swears off people altogether.

By closing with the stand-out line, “There’s one thing that’s real clear to me/ No one dies with dignity/ We just try to ignore the elephant somehow”, he once more shows his reluctance to actually feel the overwhelming grief he’s experiencing and instead just watch it warily at a distance, whether that be through cloudy metaphors or through the cracked lens one finds at the bottom of a bottle.

In “St. Peter’s Autograph”, we see Isbell paint death in a shockingly different light than we’ve seen him do before. While both this song and “Elephant” are about grief and the forms it takes, to listen to these two songs back-to-back is to give yourself emotional whiplash. In “St. Peter’s Autograph”, we see the changes Isbell’s gone through in the seven years since “Elephant”. No longer simply that raw and angry Americana singer who was kicked out of the Drive-By Truckers for drinking, we see Isbell for what he is today: a forty year old father and husband who’s been sober for almost a decade and is well-versed in the language of pain. And Isbell embraces that role with none of his earlier trademark rebellion or denial. If an artist is to be praised for growth in their sound and in their lyrics, then Isbell should be on the cover of Rolling Stone every month.

“St. Peter’s Autograph” shows a mature grief, a grief that is not overwhelmed by inexperience and shock. In this song, the inevitability of death is not something to be ignored, as it so desperately was in “Elephant”. The sadness is still there, but it’s not something to be shielded away from. In this song, grief is embraced and encouraged. Isbell writes with a gentle and guiding hand, playing the role of someone leading another through a thing he knows all too much about. We see the experience he has in the knowing questions he asks (“Has your faith been compromised?”). We see the things he’s learned in the surety with which he reassures (“Sometimes it’s nothing but the way you’re wired/ And that’s not your fault”). We see it the ways he’s matured in the responsibility he takes on for the grieving (“He had somewhere else to be/ Cut him down and burn the tree”). One can almost picture him singing this song to the protagonist of “Elephant”, even if that man would surely not take his older self’s advice. Even putting the song in the key of G - the “key of benediction” - when compared to the minor E that “Elephant” is played in, feels like a statement made by Isbell: he has found a grace and lightness in his music and his life, by being loved by someone, by going through grief.

In one of Isbell's most famous songs, "Cover Me Up", he sings the line, "But I made it through/ Cause somebody knew/ I was meant for someone." That image has never been clearer than in "St. Peter's Autograph". The things he learned in grief, the things he learned through his suffering, have become guiding lights for the people in his life as they go through similar things. In fact, I would hazard a guess and say they're guiding lights for the people who listen to his music. Just go to any Isbell show and you'll see what I mean: when he sings, "But I sobered up/ And swore off that stuff/ Forever this time", take in the roar of the crowd that always sounds out after that lyric. Then notice the way Isbell pauses the song to hear them cheer before continuing on with the show. He hears it.