

Joy Oladokun

Hope Is A Heavy Thing

Written by Hanif Abdurraqib



photo credit: Graham Tolbert

Of the things I love about Toni Morrison, near the top of the list was her constant insistence on the fact that one not *need* to see themselves in the work of another person in order to access it, or find pleasure in it. Some of this, she would insist, is due to the fact that no one's interior world is as interesting as they think it is, and it certainly isn't as interesting as the broader world beyond it. While I'm not sure I completely agree with this from the most universal standpoint, I do appreciate when I get to bear witness to a writer who is, it seems, endlessly curious about the world beyond themselves, and how they fit into it, and less about the deep dives into the personal, no matter how colorful or compulsive their specific personal life may be.

Joy Oladokun is one of my favorite writers, of anything. She has been, and remains so, because her writing urges a listener (or at least *this* listener) to remember that they are, perhaps, sitting close to a window, and they might want to look outside every now and then for an experience that is not wholly universal but *is* broadly touchable.

Hope Is A Heavy Thing is a brilliant expansion of Oladokun's mission as a writer, which places her, in my mind, firmly among one of our greatest witnesses and translators of experience. It feels like many of us – artists, musicians, writers – are often attempting to make work that is constantly in response to the world's actions or

inactions. I believe this to be admirable, and I have pursued that path of making myself, and because I have pursued it myself, I know how exhausting it can be, to take a big swing at the entire machine. What I find admirable about *Hope Is A Heavy Thing* is that it chips away at small corners of broader displeasures while, simultaneously, offering glimpses of actual, material pleasures, quiet (or emotionally quiet, but sonically robust.) Heartbreak spans many modes, all of them with a wide enough door for a listener to step into, and see a life reflected back to them: “Kind” is a moving ode to the self-realization of needing to leave someone behind, and you have maybe had the realization once, and will have it again. “The End Of The World” opens with a slight tease, a few guitar notes of The National Anthem, before they break off and veer into a high, paced anthem that is tinted with both rage and urgency, and it – like the actual end(s) of the world we are living through – feels like it is pulling you towards a cliff at breakneck speed. And it – like the actual end(s) of the world we are living through – doesn’t offer a resolution at the cliff’s edge. You jump, and maybe something better will emerge on the way down, or at least you’ll get a good few in the process of your descent.

I am not someone who is especially propelled by hope, as a concept,

and I am significantly more propelled by honesty. Honesty about our collective and individual circumstances, honesty about the condition of the heart, mine and yours and the people we turn to in hopes that they might make sense of that which is beyond logic.

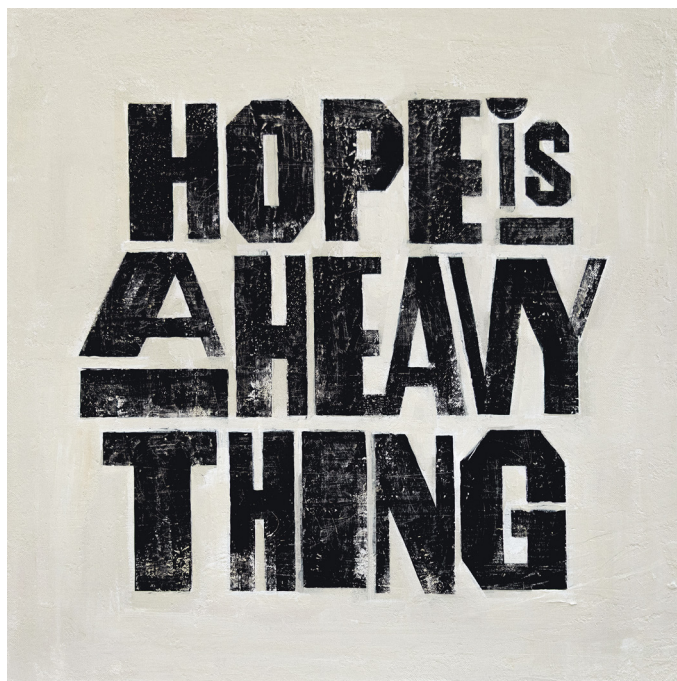
What I like most about this album is that it is, largely, an album of love songs that exist at

between circumstances: *you don’t want this, fine. I can’t get it anyway, but you’ve still got me.* “Zombie” is a song about the sometimes circular reality of attempting to claw one’s way to the surface of a collapsing world, so that you might find a different or better lens to offer the world your close attention, which is another way of falling in love

when the place you are sentenced to find love within doesn’t deserve you, or anyone you might fall in love with.

I have appreciated a life where I’ve grown up with Singer-Songwriters who treat the song as text, of sorts. Each song a chapter in an ongoing book, with a speaker who is constantly guiding you somewhere, eager to show you something. Joy Oladokun, I think, sits at the intersection of so many of those thinkers and writers I love. She has the realistic and tentative optimism of Joan Armatrading, the curiosity and seeking eye of Tracy Chapman,

the ability to build a world through a wave of information like Bruce Springsteen, and the thoughtful humor of John Prine. And her ability to tap into all of those impulses at once make her and her work singular. What a joy, to be witness to this album, to capture a writer like Joy Oladokun at the height of her powers.



album artwork

various intersections of joy and disappointment, which means they are honest love songs. An honest love song is sometimes comprised of simple, beautiful declarations. On “Don’t Call Me Baby!” for example, Oladokun sings “you say you’re scared of wedding rings / well I don’t have much money anyway,” which, in one line lays out the beauty of finding a way in

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