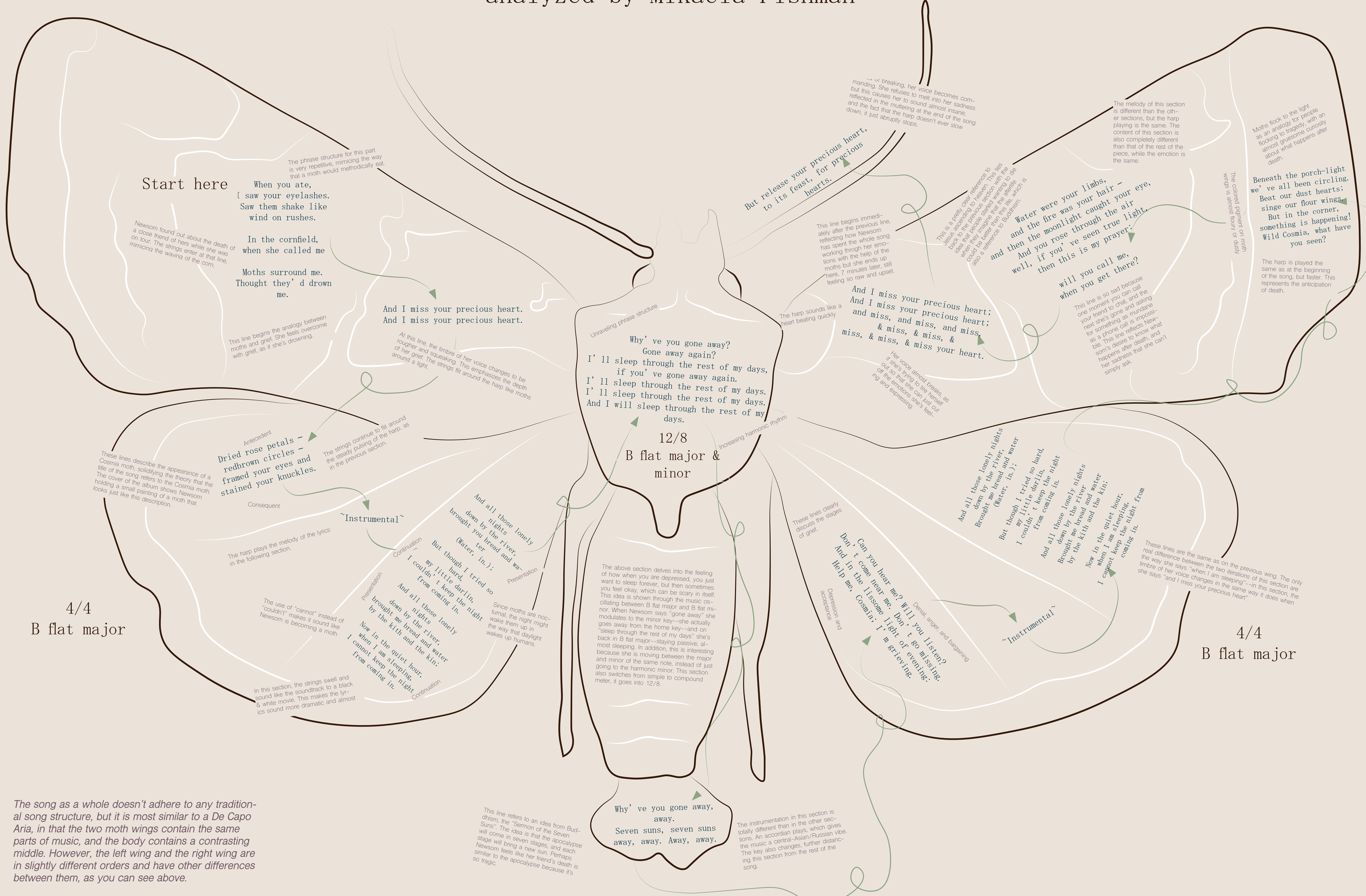


Cosmia, by Joanna Newsom

analyzed by Mikaela Fishman



Start here

When you ate,
I saw your eyelashes.
Saw them shake like
wind on rushes.

In the cornfield,
when she called me

Moths surround me.
Thought they'd drown
me.

The phrase structure for this part is very repetitive, mimicking the way that a moth would methodically eat.

Newsom found out about the death of a close friend of hers while she was on tour. The strings enter at that line, mimicking the waving of the corn.

This line begins the analogy between moths and grief. She feels overcome with grief, as if she's drowning.

And I miss your precious heart.
And I miss your precious heart.

At this line, the timbre of her voice changes to be rougher and squeaking. This emphasizes the depth of her grief. The strings fit around the harp like moths around a light.

Why've you gone away?
Gone away again?
I'll sleep through the rest of my days.
if you've gone away again.
I'll sleep through the rest of my days.
I'll sleep through the rest of my days.
And I will sleep through the rest of my days.

Unraveling phrase structure

12/8
B flat major &
minor

Increasing harmonic rhythm

But release your precious heart,
to its feast, for precious hearts.

This line begins immediately after the previous line, reflecting how Newsom spent the whole song working through her emotions with the help of the moths but she ends up here, 7 minutes later, still feeling so raw and upset.

And I miss your precious heart;
And I miss your precious heart;
& miss, and miss, & miss,
& miss, & miss, & miss, & miss, & miss your heart.

The harp sounds like a heart beating quickly

Her voice almost breaks, as if she's trying to jolt herself out so that she can just cut off the emotions she's feeling and expressing.

This is a pretty clear reference to Jesus ascending to heaven. The idea that people started wanting to die could be better than his life, which is also a reference to Buddhism.

Water were your limbs,
and the fire was your hair -
and then the moonlight caught your eye,
And you rose through the air
well, if you've seen true light,
then this is my prayer:

will you call me,
when you get there?

This line is so sad because one moment you can call your friend to chat, and the next she's gone and asking for something as mundane as a phone call is impossible. This line reflects Newsom's desire to know what happens after death, and her sadness that she can't simply ask.

The melody of this section is different than the other sections, but the harp playing is the same. The content of this section is also completely different than that of the rest of the piece, while the emotion is the same.

Moths flock to the light as an analogy for people flocking to tragedy with an almost gruesome curiosity about what happens after death.

Beneath the porch-light
we've all been circling.
Beat our dust hearts;
singe our flour wings;
But in the corner,
something is happening!
Wild Cosmia, what have
you seen?

The harp is played the same as at the beginning of the song, but faster. This represents the anticipation of death.

The colored pigment on moth wings is almost hourly or daily

Antecedent
Dried rose petals -
reddrown circles -
framed your eyes and
stained your knuckles.

Consequent

The strings continue to fit around the steady pulsing of the harp, as in the previous section.

~Instrumental~

The harp plays the melody of the lyrics in the following section.

And all those lonely
nights brought
down by the river,
brought you bread and wa-
ter
(Water, in.);

Presentation

Since moths are nocturnal, the night might wake them up in the way that daylight wakes up humans.

But though I tried so
hard, I couldn't keep the night
from coming in.
And all those lonely
nights brought me bread and water
by the kith and the kin;

Continuation

Presentation

Continuation

The use of "cannot" instead of "couldn't" makes it sound like Newsom is becoming a moth

In this section, the strings swell and sound like the soundtrack to a black & white movie. This makes the lyrics sound more dramatic and almost

4/4
B flat major

The above section delves into the feeling of how when you are depressed, you just want to sleep forever, but then sometimes you feel okay, which can be scary in itself. This idea is shown through the music oscillating between B flat major and B flat minor. When Newsom says "gone away" she modulates to the minor key--she actually goes away from the home key--and on "sleep through the rest of my days" she's back in B flat major--staying passive, almost sleeping. In addition, this is interesting because she is moving between the major and minor of the same note, instead of just going to the harmonic minor. This section also switches from simple to compound meter, it goes into 12/8.

These lines clearly discuss the stages of grief.

Denial, anger, and bargaining
Depression and acceptance
Don't come near me? Will you listen?
Don't go miss me. Don't go miss me.
And in the lissome light of evening:
Help me. Cosmia: I'm grieving.

And all those lonely nights
brought down by the River,
brought me bread and water
(Water, in.);

Presentation

Continuation

Continuation

But though I tried so hard,
my little darlin,
I couldn't keep the night
from coming in.

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Now in the quiet hour,
when I am sleeping,
I cannot keep the night from
coming in.

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

Continuation

4/4
B flat major

The song as a whole doesn't adhere to any traditional song structure, but it is most similar to a De Capo Aria, in that the two moth wings contain the same parts of music, and the body contains a contrasting middle. However, the left wing and the right wing are in slightly different orders and have other differences between them, as you can see above.

This line refers to an idea from Buddhism, the "Sermon of the Seven Suns". The idea is that the apocalypse will come in seven stages, and each stage will bring a new sun. Perhaps Newsom feels like her friend's death is so tragic.

The instrumentation in this section is totally different than in the other sections. An accordion plays, which gives the music a central-Asian/Russian vibe. The key also changes, further distancing this section from the rest of the song.

Why've you gone away,
away.
Seven suns, seven suns
away, away. Away, away.