

Brainwashed - Less Bells, "Mourning Jewelry"

Written by Eve McGivern

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Mourning Jewelry, the second release from Julie Carpenter's orchestral outlet, fashions beauty out of grief, even as it takes listeners on a complex journey through darkness and grace, conveying it in not a single lyric. As with the prior release *Solifuge*, the palette consists of both electronic and acoustic instruments — choir, violin, cello, piano, flute, synth, bells, and this time, more acoustic guitar — that encourages the listener to succumb to grief, at times to feel overwhelmed but to be cathartically guided through and out of the challenging quagmire of emotions.

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Mourning (or remembrance) jewelry — around since ancient times and reaching peak popularity during Victorian times — has long served as a way to remember deceased loved ones, heartfelt creations seeking to commemorate loved ones and construct beauty from grief. Like religious relics, these pieces were venerated by the wearers, often embedded with hair, bone, and remains of the deceased. *Mourning Jewelry* leads off with "Brooch" as a nod to it. To reinforce the mystical aura, Carpenter has stated the track titles comprise the major arcana of an imaginary tarot deck from an alternate universe, ruled by "The Queen of Crickets." Like other tarot decks, various personalities and archetypes are represented in "The Gates," "The Fault," and "The Fang." And, like the Tarot, interpretations are left open to the listener.

The cover of the album features the Queen of Crickets: a woman dressed in combination of mourning Burlesque fashion (as designed by Carpenter), cradling a giant cricket, framed by a dry and barren landscape, hearkening back to the content within. The folksy Americana banjo of the song "Queen of Crickets" bends with classical imagery, suggesting earlier times, harrowing violin underlining an emptiness that echoes the desert landscape on the cover. Each member is masterful enough to mask traditional instruments as modern and vice versa, tricking the listener's ear and making it more complicated to identify the source of celestial drone, blurring the contrast between ancient and modern.

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Carpenter is a masterful composer, having scored for numerous films and television series. She knows exactly how to blur lines, combining sweeping majesty with haunted melody. And, like a soundtrack, moments of natural sound appear throughout the album that often suggest a moment matched to an imaginary film, as in the rolling thunder in "Plait." Plait is to braid, and like hair, compositional elements are braided together to guide the listener. Just as thunder suggests the dual-edged coming of impending rain — offering both inundation and relief — Less Bells' many plaited elements provide a welcome crafting of beauty out of grief.

[Samples available here.](#)