

OK COMPUTER  
RADIOHEAD



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*OK Computer*

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# Somewhere We Will Meet: My Life with Radiohead's *OK Computer*

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I can't tell you that I knew about Radiohead from the beginning. Maybe, in 1993, I flicked the radio dial across Thom Yorke's signature sob-sneer of a voice, unimpressed, a cast-off of the grunge I didn't care about. I was sullen, depressed, and nineteen in 1993; a high school dropout. I was the perfect audience for that earnest despair, but I didn't feel it. I see myself rewinding my cassette of Depeche Mode's *Songs of Faith and Devotion* (released a month after Pablo Honey), the bedroom light off, at least until the end of the first side. I listened to the hold-overs from the last decade; *Republic* might not be brilliant in the way that *Technique* was (and is), but it was still New Order. *Wish* didn't exert the same night-blooming dread that *Disintegration* did, but it was still the Cure. I wanted stability, the same voices that I had devoted hours to in all of those dark suburban bedrooms.

Time drifted, or sank away. I got a job at a local library; started college. I never moved away from home; it seemed like a risky idea. Anti-depressants came and went in my life like un-reliable boyfriends, causing my mouth to dry out and breaking up with me when their power wore out. I had multiple courses of electroconvulsive therapy (shock treatment) in those years, especially in 1995. My head was the detuned radio from "Karma Police." A bad signal; flares of memory. Most of it is gone. Radiohead released *The Bends* that year, and I didn't know anymore about that than I did about Pablo Honey. No one told me about the video for "Just," where Jonny Greenwood alternately humps and shreds his guitar while Yorke twitches and lurks; the band dimly aware that, just outside, the rest of humanity is making a colossal mistake. They did it to themselves, and that's what really hurts. I kept looking for ways to escape. Food. Cinephilia. A Xanax or two. Books. I expected rescue from whatever my life was, but not wanting it. Not really.

The degree I started in 1995 still wasn't finished in the fall of 1997, and that's when I started to hear about *OK Computer*. It was released in June, and I must have read about it; I couldn't have just known. Phrases like "concept album" and "dystopian" were used to describe it, probably too much. I still have the CD of *OK Computer* that I got as a birthday gift in early March of 1998. I had just turned 24. I did the math the other day, and realized that ten months had passed between the album's release and my hearing it for the first time. Time was slower, then. People still feared the internet. You could meet your best friend there, or your death. Either way you turn, they'll be there.

I held the disc by its edges, slipping it into the knock-off Discman. "It's always best when the light is off..." In the dark, I had no body. I pressed play; there were the familiar clicks of a house and an album settling into their grooves. Then, a noise: shuffling, a shambling guitar and bass, dips and blips and peaks: "In the nexxt world wharr/in a jackknifed juggernaut/ I ahm born again." I came to this music with only the barest idea of who its makers were, or what it wanted to do. Should I turn it off? I was scared. I was exhilarated. I didn't know that this sound was going to mutate, and own me for good. Did I understand, then, that "Paranoid Android" is a poem? I think I did. It swaggers,

grandiose, and almost topples over. Yorke sneers, and the instruments match him. He's got a ruined angel voice, running high, then dropping head-first down a well. It almost begs to end, but they don't let it. If "Paranoid Android" is an epic poem, then what is "Let Down"? Yorke can sound regretful when he sings: I'm sorry I have to tell you this, but there's not much to hope for. But I can walk you through it. "One day I am gonna grow wings/A chemical reaction/Hysterical and useless/Hysterical and...//let down."

*OK Computer* wanted me to know that whatever future I had been planning for was a lie. It was not going to be a place where obedient machines catered to our whims; it was going to be the other way around. It was going to be a hollowed out dream of a dream that didn't exist, a place where wars didn't end. It's taken twenty years for this album to peel its layers away and reveal itself; it was always there, a beautiful machine crooning a nightmare, or barking it in an automated voice. Why would I want to keep listening to this? It's like finding a diary after the end of the world. We're telling you what it's going to be like in twenty years. You can't say you weren't warned. This comforts me, somehow. I can turn off a light and pretend that I'm reading that lost journal for the first time.