



Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

Various Songs

The Boatman's Call

03/1997

Mute/Reprise



PJ Harvey

"Angelene"

Is This Desire?

09/1998

Island

...and other artists.

Hank Williams is Sacred

Alex DiFrancesco

Tai is the first person I ever meet who is a fan of my work. Or who even knows my work exists, really.

They come to one of Mya's shows. Mya had a lot of shows where she played guitar and sang, most of them at venues like the one I used to scorn years before while I walked to the radical bookstore down the street. I didn't like all the shallow-looking people tripping over high heels and loosening their ties out front, cordoned off from the street by long velvet ropes. It seemed like hell. I am to find myself in this venue quite frequently after marrying Mya.

If you want to see me, at the time, there is a pretty good chance I will be at Mya's shows. All of them. Expected. Sitting in the front row. She doesn't think of me as an ornament, she tells me over and over.

Mya always said she fell in love with me when I invited her to an Occupy Wall Street rally and she hugged me and put one of her hands on the back of my shaved head to pull me close to her, but I don't think it was until she read one of my short stories that she had much respect for me. I didn't take her seriously as a musician until we were driving through Brooklyn and she played me the opening, dark track of her new album on her car stereo. I asked her who it was, because she put it on out of nowhere. She said it was her, and I realized she knew what she was doing.

One of Mya's shows at the venue with the velvet ropes is where Tai comes to see me.

They are tall and waif-thin, with long blond hair and the slightly hunched shoulders of someone who wishes they were much shorter. They are beautiful, and I don't know why they are talking to me, not Mya, congratulating me on my recently published novel, congratulating me on getting my work "out of the trans ghetto." I know them from a trans writing group that most of the people I know circle in and out of. They love my book, they say. They are frustrated with trans writing communities that focus on identity above craft, above literary experimentation. They would like to talk about it all. They would like to talk to me more.

I mutter something awkwardly and run away. My game plan on nights like this is to talk to everyone a little bit, just long enough so they won't see how incredibly uncomfortable I am.

I've always been a fan of sad music, but it is when Mya leaves that I become obsessed with break up albums. What they mean as a cultural artifact, if they will continue to exist as everything becomes digital releases and playlists. I think about the year when I was in my early twenties and faced my first major heartbreak, and Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* nursed me through it. I had a cassette tape of it that a friend had bought me from a bargain bin in the late '90s when CDs were what we listened to most. I listened to it in the tape deck of my 15 year old Chevy Blazer because I didn't have anywhere else I could play it. It would wind through one side, flip, wind through the next, on and on.

It wouldn't be fair to say that there was ever a time when I *didn't* listen to heartbreak albums—the song I sang for Mya at our wedding was the opening track off of Nick Cave's breakup album, *The Boatman's Call*—but they become my security blanket and obsession in the months after Mya's departure. Mya accidentally left behind the amphetamines that she took for ADHD when she took off, and, even though I have been sober off of everything but alcohol for years, I take them and go to parties and talk about all my research and the book I am going to write on the cultural history of the break-up album.

Frank Sinatra wrote what's often considered the prototypical break-up album. He was allegedly kind of an asshole who treated women like objects then expected them to keep him from being lonely. He was still married to his first wife when he met Ava Gardner, who became his second wife. When she left him after he cheated on her repeatedly, he released *In The Wee Small Hours of the Morning*. He mourns and moans his way through a whole album of loneliness, one of the first concept albums ever.

I can't really listen to this album without thinking of my dad, a radio DJ who loved Frank Sinatra, and who split up with my mom when I was two but remained in my life until he died when I was nineteen. But it's the first of its kind, and it's important to my research, so I listen to it over and over. As much as I don't like Sinatra, it makes me feel a connection to my dad to listen to him, and this is something I cherish when it happens.

It's also a fact that sadness restarted Sinatra's career, which was then failing as the playboy aged out of his teenybopper fanbase. Sadness sells. There are a lot of mourners.

A few weeks after Mya leaves me, I host a party that is to become a video blog for my writers' group's now-defunct web page. Everyone in attendance is going to get very, very drunk and, on video, cold read James Joyce's dirty letters to his wife, Nora, in celebration of Bloomsday. I actually don't like James Joyce at all, but have always believed these filthy letters full of scatological references are the pinnacle of his work. Because I am very poor, I get a huge jug of cheap gin, limes, and several bottles of tonic. Many of the people in attendance will never get sicker than we get that night, due to the horror that is cheap liquor.

Tai is at the party. Tai had been around a lot since Mya disappeared, reaching out, wanting to work on projects, leaving me messages on Facebook. One of them says that, although they are sorry I'm so heartbroken, they are also bracing themselves for the amazing art that's going to come out of that heartbreak. After we get drunk and finish making videos of the letters, Tai and a woman I work with and I all end up in my bed.

The next day, still sick, the three of us will call off of work. I mean, maybe I can't blame the guy who wrote the s/he reveal for sitting me down and talking to me. Tai will be fired from their dog walking job, and the woman I work with will have finally run through the graces our union provides workers at the bookstore. The woman will leave, and I will feed Tai cheese, bread, and cured meats to ward off the hangover that is amplified by detoxing off of Suboxone in preparation for the first half of their gender affirming surgery.

I go away to the Catskills for the summer. While I am gone, I listen to *The Boatman's Call* every day. This album was one of the first CDs I bought when I got hired at a used record store in the early '00s. It was released in 1997, and marked a stark departure from

previous albums for Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. Their prior work, and Cave's work with the post-punk band The Birthday Party, had been somewhat rough edged—full of anarchy and murder and terrifying versions of love. *The Boatman's Call*, recorded after Cave divorced his first wife Viviane Carneiro and had a brief, intense affair with musician Polly Jean Harvey, is subdued. It harkens back to a sound the band hinted at on earlier ballads such as "The Ship Song," but with mostly just an organ and Cave's broken baritone, it was like nothing the band had ever recorded before. It remains one of their most critically acclaimed albums. Everyone can relate to mourning.

Before I leave for the Catskills, I ride the subway back and forth to work, listening to *The Boatman's Call* on earphones attached to my phone, weeping openly. That no one ever says anything to me on the train is one of the joys of New York City.

While I am gone, Tai and I start planning a reading series together from afar, for when I return to New York. While I am gone, Mya, who hasn't bothered to even attempt to write a break-up album about me, posts a song in a networking group I added her to months before. The song is called "I Don't Need You Anymore." It's pretty terrible and it's co-credited to a dentist who happens to make enough money to have a really great recording studio.

Bob Dylan has sworn up and down that *Blood on the Tracks* is not an autobiographical album, but rather an exercise based on Chekhov's stories. Most critics and fans feel that this is an obvious lie. Dylan's life as a musician is full of them—perhaps starting in the mid-sixties when he toyed with reporters endlessly instead of answering them outright. Most (including Dylan's son Jakob) feel that *Blood on the Tracks* is a chronicle of his love affair and divorce from his first wife and the mother of his children, Sara. I am firmly in the Dylan-is-a-liar-autobiographical camp.

This album, re-recorded a few days before it was to go out into the world, is supplemented by the bootleg of the original version, often called *Blood on the Tapes*. The most significant difference, in my opinion, is that in the original version, the song "If You See Her, Say Hello" contains the line, "If you're makin' love to her, kiss her for The Kid." The Kid had been Joan Baez's nickname for Dylan years before, when they were involved. One heartbreak is all heartbreaks.

In a moment of what may have been candor, Dylan famously said of his break-up album, "A lot of people tell me they enjoyed that album. It's hard for me to relate to that—I mean, people enjoying that type of pain."

We don't exactly enjoy it. But there is something about the break-up album, something about knowing that heartbreak is universal. There is a section that I always return to in the Sherman Alexie story "What You Pawn, I Will Redeem." The story tells about the trials of a homeless Native American man who finds his dead grandmother's ceremonial regalia in a pawn shop and vows to get the money to buy it back. In one section of the story, he meets several Aleut fisherman waiting on the docks. He asks them if they can sing him some songs. They say that they know all of Hank Williams. He says, no, he wants the sacred songs. They say Hank Williams is sacred.

I think about these lines a lot. I think about how one thing we all do, no matter who we are, is feel heartbreak. It can be from lost love, or lost family, even lost pets. It can be from the end of marriage, or the end of a life. But we all mourn when the future we have assumed will always be there is suddenly gone. We all feel the emptiness of moments

when someone we expected to be in them is not. Grief, when it hits you like a car crash, leaves you reeling and groping to find meaning and narrative to explain your loss. And that people have invented a musical equivalent of the process of loss sometimes feels like the most sacred thing in the world.

When I get back into town, I try to meet up with the woman with whom I'd had a threesome with Tai. She is excessively depressed. I take her to Washington Square Park and bring taramasalata and tapenade and all sorts of salty foods. We sit on a blanket and eat them as she talks about her sadness. All around us, the end of summer is hanging from the dark green tree leaves. The performers are busking under the granite arch, old folkies are singing songs they've been singing for decades. I want to be a life raft for her. I cannot. Enter that quote that people are always telling me about putting on your own mask first when the airplane starts going down.

The first night that Tai and I spend together, alone, after both of us thinking the other would rather be dating the woman I used to work with, we go out to have beers with some literary douchebag that Tai doesn't like, but who they are using to get closer to the community they want to be part of. When a woman who is at our table leaves, the literary douchebag confides in Tai and me that he's slept with her. He doesn't say it because he wants advice on how to proceed. He just wants us to know.

Tai and I leave, and we talk shit on him for a while. He's an Ernest Hemingway want-to-be, he even looks like him. We like privately talking shit on other writers almost as much as we like each other. So-and-so has gender essentialist politics, even though they're trans. Someone-else writes for a shitty website and talks about it at parties like she's won a Pulitzer. We know we are supposed to give a shit about such-and-such's writing, but we just couldn't possibly care any less.

We kiss at the entrance to the subway. Tai is much taller than me, and they stoop down to kiss me as I get up on my toes. I invite them back to my apartment, where we spend the night in my bed. When we wake up early the next morning, we listen to the greatest love song ever, Tom Waits' "Jersey Girl." It's the greatest love song ever because no one would drive regularly from New York City to New Jersey to see someone unless they really loved them. And Tom Waits, who had before that sung about dishwater blondes in coffee shops, is still married to the woman he wrote it about forty years later. We don't listen to the Tom Waits version, though. We listen to the cover by the The Hell Blues Choir, sung in a halting, over-pronounced English-as-a-second-language lilt. The morning is grey, and I might be able to fall in love again, maybe.

I tell Tai stories while we are in my bed in Brooklyn. I tell them about how I got my bellybutton pierced in my hometown at age fifteen without parental consent because one of my friends (also fifteen) flashed the much-older piercer her breasts. I tell Tai about the time I walked into a show of Mya's she hadn't expected me to be at on Valentine's Day, and she was telling the story of violating my sexual boundaries as funny stage banter. I tell Tai about the time I took crystal meth three days before an international flight, not realizing it affected you for days on end, and ended up coughing up blood in a hostel in Europe, my suitcase filled with Mexican wrestling masks and pink beehive wigs.

"Sometimes your stories scare me," they say, blinking at me.

Tai and I make each other playlists on Spotify. They put the saddest Sun Kil Moon songs they can find on theirs. I put Jonathan Byrd's "Hazel Eyes" and Diana Jones' "My Remembrance of You" on mine. Tai is impressed by their obscurity. I end the playlist with some of my favorite break up songs.

I set up a reading event in Detroit, at an anarchist collective house and performance space. Tai offers to drive. We realize on the day we're supposed to leave that we can't get a car anywhere in New York with our debit cards, and begin to panic. We take a train out to JFK Airport at the far end of Queens, but the story there is the same. We try to get on a bus to Detroit, but the last one is already full. Tai calls a man they know from sex work, who they say loves them and will do anything for them. He doesn't do anything for us. Finally, the morning of the show, we find a sketchy rental place and procure a car with bad steering. We make it to Detroit just in time to drink a few glasses of Bulleit rye before going on stage.

The next day, I stay to explore the ruins of Detroit, which remind me so much of the town I grew up in, while Tai drives back alone. I buy a Greyhound ticket back to New York. Before Tai leaves, they tell me that if I'm going to keep touring for my book, they'll come with me, they'll drive me anywhere I want to go.

Tai and I become primary partners. We are going to move to Detroit and renovate an old house. We are going to buy dogs. We are going to adopt kids.

This happens in less than a month. Maybe you see where this is going.

Willie Nelson wrote *Phases and Stages*, a fictional break-up album that chronicled two sides of a break up. Like Sinatra's *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*, it was revolutionary for its genre. No country singer had ever released a concept album before this one. While it can be argued that Willie Nelson transcends the genre of country at times, the album is firmly in that camp. Side one is dedicated to the woman's side of the story, and side two is dedicated to the man's.

While I admire this album (compulsive heterosexuality aside), can you ever tell two sides of things? Can I tell you how jealous Tai felt when I introduced them to another partner of mine and we kissed in greeting, like we always did? Can I tell you how Tai felt when they went away to a poetry reading in Canada with someone else they were dating, one I had wanted to go to but had been unable to, and the other person posted a picture of the two of them kissing on the internet, and I sent Tai a message breaking up with them while they were stuck in a car with three other people? Can I tell you how embarrassed Tai felt that they'd been asking their uncles for advice on fixing up old houses for months, and I had broken it off with a text message? Can I tell you what was in their head as we kind of got back together, then they left me to move to Iowa with the other person? Can I tell you why Tai lied and told me, yeah, sure, of course they'd been in non-monogamous relationships before, when it absolutely was not true? Not really.

I can't even really tell you why, when it was over, I told Tai that our relationship had been a meaningless rebound to me when *that* was absolutely not true. Why would I do that other than that I was hurt and wanted to hurt in return? I regret this behavior. I always do.

"It's not supposed to be that way," Willie sings in *Phases and Stages*. "You're supposed to know that I love you."

I don't think Tai was able to deal with how sad I wanted to be.

Once, shortly before Tai leaves me for someone who posts Pokémon pictures on their Facebook wall instead of boring them about break up albums, we drunkenly get in an argument in the shower. I had been talking about how, when PJ Harvey and Nick Cave broke up, he'd talked endlessly in the media about how *The Boatman's Call* was about her. She had said something along the lines of the album she wrote after their break up, *Is This Desire?*, having the best sound she'd ever achieved in her career, and nothing else.

He was a footnote to her break-up album, I say, one that she never even mentioned by name. I talk about how amazing that is, how easy it would have been to make that her Nick Cave album when others insisted that's what it was. *Rolling Stone* tried to pin her song "Angelene" down as a response to Cave's call of "West Country Girl." But Harvey never played that game. She experimented with sound, some songs whispers and some songs wails; she experimented with narrative and came up with something that is hardly evocative of their relationship at all, but resonant with ends and heartbreak and disillusionment.

But Tai doesn't agree. They argue that no, *Harvey* was the footnote, she was reduced to the object of love instead of her role as formidable artist. We aren't really arguing. We are washing our own and each other's bodies, drunk, kissing under the hot water of the shower.

I never wrote the book on break-up albums. I wrote a listicle.

The last I heard of Tai, they moved back to Brooklyn from Iowa and married the person they left me for. They got accepted into one of the most prestigious Masters of Fine Arts programs in writing in the country. Did I ever bother to mention that Tai is one of the best poets I've ever met? I realize I've also never said that Tai would feed me tortillas fried in coconut oil and topped with homemade vegan sour cream and black beans when I was sad. That if Tai came over, and I cooked for them, they would do thoughtful things for me while I did, like change out the litter in my cat's box, or sweep my bedroom. That they have a ridiculous love of malt liquor and lurking in alleyways, drinking it. That they're brilliant about philosophy in ways that make my brain twist up. That they love Bolaño and Percec, and when they read poetry with me they would check in with what I was reading first so they could read something to compliment it. How they'd look when I'd catch sight of their silhouette across the street when they'd come to my part of Brooklyn to see me at a diner at 3 am. About the night that I rode a train with them to Staten Island, where they were having electrolysis for hair removal, and I sat in a waiting room, late into the night, while they yelled in pain above the buzz of machinery in a room where I couldn't go and hold their hand. That they foster rescue cats, which they say comes with the understanding that it will always end in heartbreak for them, but a better life for their foster in the long run.

I never said these things because I never thought about them then. I thought more about books I was going to write and research I was going to do. I thought about the bright spot inside me I felt when they were around, when everything else had been so dark, a crack in a tunnel I was unsure had an end. But I never thought about them the way they deserved to be thought about. I never thought about them more than I thought about songs written by old sad men, and my own sadness.

This piece will appear in Alex's upcoming essay collection, Psychopomps, (Civil Coping Mechanisms Press), forthcoming in 2019.