

**“Opening Montage/Is There Any Way Out of This Dream?” (Fall 2019)**

*(Picture a seated, middle-aged man at a piano. Uncharacteristically combed, curly brown hair tangled into a gelled mass on his head. A pilling charcoal suit jacket and a wrinkled white button-up hanging loosely on his bones. Pants riding high up his calf. A thrifted black tie disheveled around his neck, as a cigarette switches slowly between the gape of his lips and the tips of his long, bony fingers. His smoke fills the space between the walls with effortless grace, exploding like black drops of ink in resting water.)*

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I wish I had a dollar for each time I took a chance. For every day I walked through the same damn door, hoping. Hoping for something new. A dollar for every recurring thought about some past Juliet, some place beyond my reach. For every drag towards September that ends in heartbreak. For every cell of my brain that fell victim to the noise in my Corolla between Camden and Deptford. But really, if I had just half of that money I could escape. Escape through this window. Escape the hamster wheel sprint towards the next minimum wage paycheck. The next set of apathetic faces and spaces that pass me like a road sign each and everyday. This red polo (made of 18 recycled bottles) and pants stained with chocolate syrup and chicken grease. This is my life for everyday but Sunday for the next two weeks alone, 40 hours a week after class. The life I can only blame on myself.

***“Picking Up After You” (Spring 2019)***

*(After a long drag and a slow draw of his eyelids, his head slowly drops back towards the keys. His charred paper finds comfort in the embrace of a glass ashtray)*

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After hours, black non-slip shoes meet streaks of soapy water on white tile flooring. The same cold tiles that I rest my knees on, brush-in-hand, arm-in-toilet. Color coded chemical spray bottles and paper sanitation packets. Alone, I hum to myself quietly. I can practically hear Tom Waits behind the piano, his voice like a smoky bourbon, his hands moving like spiders across the keys. Later, the voice of Crystal Gale hangs above, like a cloud of silky ice. The fingers of the bass player thump past the strings, poised and controlled. The playful hum of brass atop it all, the sound of vintage excess that guides my gloved hand around the bowl.

Before leaving, I take a walk to the manager’s office in the back. I take in the distinct smell of a clean backroom: a unique aroma of distant fried foods, clean metal and aired chemicals. At the deepest depths of the store, I wait by a featureless white door. It has a small, easily covered window. Jack in the Box gives it a quick peel, a short and sudden exchange of hollow. I wave and yell over the machinery as I make my way towards the front. There are young, faceless co-workers (here today, gone tomorrow), each huddled over their own frier or metallic counterspace. I’m smiling subtly as I make my way past the door and towards the cool Spring air.

I feel outside of space, surrounded by blocks of empty lots and engulfed in a blackened, pinholed sky. I slouch into the seat. My car key transforms into a slot machine handle as I carefully give it a turn (hoping that all will go as planned.) The sound of ignition transforms my car into the Vegas of Coppola’s *One From the Heart*, the Vegas that Tom Waits dreamed of when

he wrote these songs: both alive and desolate at once. Neon lights stain my loose fists as they rest upon the wheel. If I turn the music loud enough, my voice is the perfect amount of ragged when I drop to Tom Waits and as clear as can be when I reach towards Crystal Gale. Everything is in its place, the musicians never miss a note. This is the order I strive for but always fall short of. It's a consequence-free life I can escape to whenever I want, like the drama of a horror film or reality television. Just one click to turn one life off and another on, at any given moment.

Though I know I look and sound like a fool at this red light, I really don't care. I will happily sing to these empty streets, closing pizza shops and vacant shops. There is nothing greater than that release: That perfectly hit note after a shitty day, a well-timed punch of brass that sends my body into sway and guides my head back and forth. When there is nothing else, this sweet nothing is the most tangible thing to push forward for. It is the erasure of self that I crave and the embodiment of emotions that I can't yet verbalize.



**“Little Boy Blue” (Fall 2021)**

*(His fingers touch the aged, ivory keys with a casual precision and drunken charm. The melancholy melody reverberates through the bones of the instrument, resounding through the room and cutting the smoke in the air.)*

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For me, one of the allures of Tom Waits is the way he rephrases the loser. Early in his career, with albums such as *The Heart of Saturday Night* (1974,) *Nighthawks at the Diner* (1975,) and *Small Change* (1976,) Waits relies on the influence of folk music, jazz and blues to guide his stories about the disenfranchised. Lyrically, these albums peel back the curtain of nightlife to reveal the vulnerability of the people behind it. Rather than reporting on the state of nightlife at the time it was written, Waits opts to look back towards the nostalgic, suit-clad stylings of the Beat generation (relying heavily on the influence of writers like Kerouac and Burroughs). The result is an engaging collage of stories and personalities, ranging from the heartbroken old man from the folksy “Martha” to the struggling comedian-turned-weatherman on the spoken-word jazz track “Emotional Weather Report”.

Listening to these records, I can’t help but feel a kinship with these fictional characters from a bygone era. Though it is hard to argue that Waits is breaking new ground at this point in his career, there is a humanity here that resounds over all. A certain X factor that sets his work apart from his peers. Perhaps this is a testament to his talent for performing as even at this early stage in his career, he is able to embrace the hardships of his characters as his own. Watch his sideburned-head tilt a little to the left in his tweed Newsboy cap. Watch his posture as he sits with his guitar, how he changes the nuance of his voice to reflect the character. This intoxicating

personality elevates the otherwise forgotten characters of his work, transforming them into charming, memorable literary figures.

As time goes on, one can hear Waits' voice evolve from that of a timid singer-songwriter to the low, raspy howl he has built his brand on. This revised, mid-eighties and beyond version of Waits favors dark, experimental arrangements full of unconventional (occasionally abrasive) instrumentation and strange scales. In all of these recordings, the blown-out Louis Armstrong (near-Cookie Monster<sup>1</sup>) bark that Waits is known for is pushed into center-stage. Rather than referencing Beat poetry, the most successful albums from this era like *Rain Dogs* (1985,) *Mule Variations* (1999,) and *Blood Money* (2002) elevate Waits' now morally destitute characters to the heights of experimental art and exclusivity that comes with it. It is here that Waits truly embraces his "loser" persona in the public eye. Watch his villainous, full-tooth grins, and carnival-esque movements as he moves like a man on stilts.<sup>2</sup> Watch him curl and pounce like a snake. This kind of loser cannot be swayed. He cannot be fixed.

For whatever reason, the cockeyed confidence that Waits exudes in his embrace of the outsider is strangely gratifying. You want to hold it for a while, like a lung full of smoke or a mouthful of cola. You replay all of the live performances, play all the albums on loop. You sacrifice tomorrow's voice to bark "HOIST THAT RAG" with just the right amount of bassy chutzpah. I suppose all vices, all methods of escape, are all the same. There is no way to scratch the itch. Once an addict, always an addict.

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<sup>1</sup> [Tom Waits/Cookie Monster mashup - God's Away On Business](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Tom Waits - Rain Dogs](#)

**“Old Boyfriends”** (Winter 2019)

*(The slow, rain-like melody continues. He hides the seriousness of his expression with a tilt of his head. The veins in his wrist pulse and rise to the surface of the skin. He plays as if guided by an outside force.)*

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I broke up with my highschool girlfriend in the winter of 2017 and cut her off this winter. R and I had a toxic habit of pretending to be together, even though we knew we could never be again. Our phones buzzing all day with bundles of grey texts in a row. Updates on family drama, things in class that were funny but would be weird to laugh at, observations about the weather, how friends are doing, updates on what we're reading, updates about work and how we're feeling. It was exciting to open up my phone and see a bunch of bubbles. Like we were in high school again. Occasionally we'd hold hands across campus or at a store, insisting that friends should be able to show signs of affection even if they aren't intimate. Well over a year after we broke up, people would still ask about how we were doing. It was like no one could tell we were broken up but us, though the boundaries were shaky at best.

Last summer outside the mall, we kissed for the first time in years. My car was warm and neither of us had felt the touch of another person like that in months (or in my case, years.) It felt like the exact wrong thing to do, but it took a few seconds to stop. There were strangers around, people who might know us. We didn't care. But after a while, we opened our eyes and looked at each other. I remember her green eyes looking at me with a question, a look of sorrowful surprise. Our heads returned back to our seats and I drove her home, ashamed. Without much in the way of conversation. I don't remember ever talking about it with her or anyone else.

That summer, I discovered the soundtrack for *One From the Heart* in a magazine. There was a write-up about the highs and lows of Tom Waits' discography and it was rated very favorably. Recorded in 1980 and released in 1982, it fell smack in the middle of his two definitive periods for Tom, between the traditional, 1970's Waits' fair *Blue Valentine* (1978) and the grime that would follow in releases like *Heartattack and Vine* (1980) and *Swordfishtrombones* (1983). Director Frances Ford Coppola was fresh off of *The Godfather: Part II* (1974) and the visceral war film *Apocalypse Now* (1979). *One From the Heart* was the collision of artists on opposite tracks.

After a few listens, I was hooked. It is the peak of Waits' nostalgia writing with its carefully penned lyrics about a relationship gone bad. Gale is his counterpart, the woman he lost at the start and eventually found again at the end. This is not what I typically go for, I'm not one for Romance films. But I remember texting R "I hope when I die, I can be buried in this album." It feels like a safe place to crouch into for warmth. Like the embrace I'd been yearning for all this time.

I remember playing the album for R on the way to the gym one day. It wasn't what we'd typically listen to in the car, but I had been talking it up so much that she wanted to hear it. She didn't get it, but at times I sang along anyway, in that timid voice I use to temper my singing around other people. One of my favorite songs to sing on the album is "Old Boyfriends," a song sung by Crystal Gale about the Tom Waits character. Her jazzy-blues vocal style compliment the understated guitar perfectly as she sings

*"Though I very seldom think of them, nevertheless/ Sometimes a mannequin's/ Blue Summer dress/ Can make the window/ Like a dream/ Ah, but now those dreams belong to someone else/ Now they talk in their sleep in a drawer where I keep/ All my/ Old Boyfriends."*

For some reason, this is the song I was most anxious for her to hear. She didn't think much of it.

***This One's From the Heart*** (Summer 2020)

*(With brass behind his shoulder, he sings "I should go out and honk the horn/ It's Independence Day/ But instead I'll just pour my-self a drink/It's got to be love I've never felt this way/Oh baby, This One's From the Heart...")*

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I'm months into a pandemic without a job in hand. I'm staying at home for yet another year, penned inside my childhood home. No vaccine in sight, nothing to comfort my poor, anxious mother. The country and all of the world is burning up in fever. This is no time for love, no time for another neat, storybook ending. But yet, in some ways, I've found one in you, G.

In your backyard on the Fourth of July, the explosions of light and color in the sky reflect off your skin, off your hair. I wonder how fate didn't lead us together sooner, why we were compelled to believe that old answers were the solutions to new equations. How we were seduced into believing that the love of Hollywood was the love of our life. Perhaps we forgot what this is like: To fall into the arms of someone new. To learn all they love and listen to their history. To find things that you've never found in another, qualities that contrast yours like a complementary color. To accept another and embrace them for all that they are. Perhaps we never really knew what that was like to begin with.

I end the night with a drive back home, playing "This One's From the Heart" as parties die down, colors fade and street lights make their nightly debut. The dramatic crescendo of the record rings differently in my ears now that I've met you. The distance between us grows with



every second of pressure on the gas pedal, though the warmth of your presence is still felt with me, even as I write this.