Foreword:

From Sept. 16th, 2001 to February 25th, 2002 , Last Plane To Jakarta (John Darnielle of The Mountain Goats) wrote a series of blogposts examining each track on Radiohead's *Amnesiac.* The series of blogposts gained attention among fans. A later piece featured in Last Plane To Jakarta featured a review of Radiohead's follow up album, *Hail to the Thief.* Both album reviews are featured along with footnotes that originally linked out to separate popup boxes on the website.

I: Packt Like Sardines In a Crushd Tin Box

Recently I got back into an old bad habit I thought I'd dropped: I started hanging out on Usenet. To me, at least, it is still a fascinating place. I'm not sure what cross-section of the public is represented by Usenet; I'm not even sure how many people still know what Usenet is.[1] The webmonster, with whom I share close quarters, cried out in pain when she caught me at the newsgroups again, as she remembers what it was like when I used to spend an ungodly amount of time reading a few groups, mainly religious or sports-related ones. After a while it got pretty hard to pull me away from the computer. I'd've gotten myself into a spirited discussion/bare-knuckle brawl over such vital questions as the importance of disciplic succession in the Hindu bhakti cult or the superiority of the Oakland Raiders to all other football teams, and I'd be staring into the screen into the small hours of the morning.

When I logged in to my old Usenet provider a couple of weeks back, I found all the groups I used to frequent still waiting for me there, most of them showing the maximum number of messages possible. I checked out the religious one (bickering) and the we're-all-crazy-here one (alt.mindcontrol: I recommend their archive enthusiastically and without reservation), and then I went into alt.music.black-metal to see what I could see. It's a group that hosts some of the more interesting threads on Usenet, though it's also home base for a lot of pimply Springer-show hopefuls who've got schoolboy crushes on the Waffen SS, making it a potentially very irritating place to be, since people who've read too much Nietzsche simply never get tired of arguing the same boring points over and over again. I stumbled rather quickly into a discussion where the name Radiohead was getting tossed around a little, and found one of the more thoughtful newsgroup regulars dismissing Radiohead as Pink Floyd redux, whereupon I picked a fight, accusing the post's author of having copped his take from mainstream press outlets, since anybody who's listened to Radiohead at all knows that there are exactly no similarities between themselves and the Floyd.[2] But the guy, whose name is Maarten, didn't want to fight. Instead he did an amazing thing. Intrigued by my zeal in defending Radiohead against the oft-repeated, never-justified neo-Floyd tag, he went and gave Amnesiac a close, careful listening and reported back on what he'd found.

What Maarten did was amazing because it's exactly what all the critics should have done, but didn't. The press frenzy that follows Radiohead's every move is not a new story; to the contrary, practically every story written about Radiohead from *Kid A* to the present uses Radiohead's PR acumen or lack thereof as the jumping-off point, and quite often as the article's central theme. *Amnesiac,* released back in June to some fanfare though nothing resembling the saturation coverage that greeted *Kid A,* found reviewers trying unsuccessfully to break free from their self-constructed straightjackets. They want to talk about the album itself, the music on it, the way the songs relate to one another and the way they're individually enriched by relationships

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[1] The short answer is "Usenet is Newsgroups, and you probably have it bundled in your e-mail program." This short answer doesn't really begin to describe how vast Usenet is, though, and how limitless its possibilities are. If everybody followed Last Plane to Jakarta's lead and banded together to oppose advertising in all its insidious forms, Usenet would rise from its own ashes and reproduce the endlessly loud squawk of the global town square again and again.

[2] I'm not going to go nuts on the Pink Floyd question here. None of us have that kind of time. My position is that Pink Floyd only ever made one album, namely *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, and that the identically-named band responsible for *Dark Side of the Moon* bears the same relationship to Pink Floyd that Folger's Crystals bear to Jamaican Blue Mountain. You want to tell me how Roger Waters is a genius and *The Wall* is a masterpiece, feel free, but we Syd Barrett fiends are as tough to convert as second-century Christians.

within the greater pattern -- but they can't. They are addicted to talking about Radiohead as cultural phenomenon, or Thom Yorke as hermetic rock star for the digital age, or the difficulty of following up on *OK Computer.* Always they have got to bring up *OK Computer* and how great it was. *Kid A* tries to shrug off the yoke of *OK Computer, Amnesiac* proffers a half-hearted bouquet to listeners who yearn for the sweeping anthems of 1997's *OK Computer,* et cetera. It gets dull after a very short while.

I know two things: first, that *OK Computer* really was a terrific album, and, second, that *Amnesiac* is possibly just as good and just maybe better. What Maarten on Usenet had to say, after choosing to graciously ignore my vitriol and embrace the suggestion that he reexamine *Amnesiac*, was that any similarities between Radiohead and Pink Floyd were superficial, and that he found the bleakness of *Amnesiac* to be a truly impressive thing, lurching, over the course of the album, into territories with which mainstream music shares no borders. It's Maarten's choice of the word "bleak" that finds Usenet, whatever its faults, serving as a far better home for informed opinions about music than the mainstream music press. Maarten, an individual with nothing to prove to anybody and no particular axe to grind, read some blowhard on a newsgroup -- myself -- telling him he was wrong about Radiohead, and so, assuming that his correspondent was writing in good faith, he took a second look. The general press, plainly terrified of voicing the wrong opinion and subsequently looking foolish in public, hedged bets right and left, the consensus concluding that *Amnesiac* was just fine but not as good as *OK Computer.* Words like "interesting" got used a lot. In the immortal English phrase, we must all join together in response to say: bollocks to that. The problem here is that all these critics assume that there's only one way to skin a cat[3]. *Amnesiac* isn't trying for anything remotely like the effect of *OK Computer,* which was essentially England's response to Walt Whitman, delayed a hundred years and updated for technological compatibility. If its mood were different, its lyrical concerns more full of the introspective, panicked-but-ultimately-hopeful sentiments that informed *OK Computer,* then we might have read some actual reviews of *Amnesiac*. But people don't want to actually think about what's going on with this record. People want to form an opinion, state it, and then get this record the hell out of the changer. It's just too damned dark.

OK Computer led off with 'Airbag,' five minutes of pure magic, the bridge to the chorus a great tidal wave of melody, Yorke's soaring voice sewing hope and rage together at full tilt so that the stitches didn't show; its chorus was "In an interstellar burst/I am back to save the universe." *Amnesiac*'s opening retreats from the listener as soon as it starts. It's a rippling heavy-effects drum-machine-and-keyboard affair called "Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box," and its lyrics depict a completely barren interior landscape with such audible familiarity that one can only conclude either that Thom Yorke is a genius, or that he's in some serious emotional trouble. Here they are:

After years of waiting, nothing came
As your life flashed before your eyes
you realize
I'm a reasonable man, get off my case

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[3] Your humble editor, a card-carrying, dues-paying member of the Federation of People Who Sincerely Believe Animals Matter More Than People Do (FPWSBAMMTPD, or "Fipwissbamtiped": we blame our low public profile on the fact that "PETA" is a better acronym), would like here to stress that he decries all currently established methods of cat-skinning and will continue to oppose any future research and development into new cat-skinning technologies, despite the fact that his own cat, Gretzky, should probably be skinned for the general good of the commonwealth.

That's about it, really. There's one other phrase dropped in later (just after the first repetition of "you realize," Yorke either finishes the line or drops in a phrase that's not at all related to anything else, and either case is wholly plausible: "You're looking in the wrong place"), but it's as spare as a Rothko canvas, and almost as rich. The catchy, skittering rhythms of synthetic high-toms ping-pong across the song's high end while a legato four-note progression slides along underneath and a second and then a third vocal track compete for the same attention which the words being sung are attempting to deflect. "Get off, get off, get off my case," he says, not raising his voice much, sounding not enraged but smolderingly angry. The chord changes, when they come, feel like moments out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie: you dread what's coming for so long that it feels like a big relief when it finally comes. The stereo separation is so careful, the panning so clearly thought through at every turn, that one gets the same chilly rush that analog synths used to deliver when they were great novelties: you feel like you've awakened sometime in the near future without anybody to tell you how you're supposed to feel. Yorke's delivery of the vocal is by turns clipped and languid, his phrasings sounding both painstakingly wrought and off-the-cuff. It's hardly even a song; it's a breath of bitter anger strung out across a trebly wire and dangled in the air in the hopes that somebody trips over it.

I am at sixes and sevens trying to figure out how critic after critic could have listened to this record and not come away disturbed and filled with dark wonder. I am fairly confused as to how it came to pass that at least one critic, hearing 'Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box,' didn't put on a '40s style reporter's hat with a little "press" card sticking out of its band and immediately wire the editor: NEW RADIOHEAD ALBUM STOP THREAT TO GLOBAL EMOTIONAL WELLBEING STOP SONGS LIKE RUBIKS CUBES WITH COLORS SANDED OFF STOP PLEASE SEND RYE WHISKEY NOW STOP. But even if the first song hadn't done the job, the second, 'Pyramid Song,' should have put everybody on notice that something very special was underway. I do not even want to talk about 'Pyramid Song,' or the title track, or the frankly terrifying 'Knives Out,' or 'Like Spinning Plates'; not now, anyway. If nobody else is willing to go out on a limb and say it, I am: *Amnesiac* is important enough to warrant very close inspection.

II: Pyramid Song

The second song on *Amnesiac* is of course 'Pyramid Song,' which was the subject of much scrutiny on its release. It was the first single; it had been, if not a staple of recent live shows, then a welcome and occasional component of them; its lyrics were easy to catch and easy to follow, if not terrifically easy to take; it had a video. Most importantly, while the album-opening 'Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box' shares some of *Kid A*'s[4] deep suspicion of the pure songcraft, 'Pyramid Song' is most assuredly a proper song. At any rate it sounds like one. Our opinion on this question is that 'Pyramid Song' is actually a hand reaching out of a rabbit hole proffering delicious candy, only the candy is drugged and there are no rabbits in the hole: just ghosts and the promise of bad times ahead.

It opens with piano and strings, and a slight slip of an acoustic guitar way off in the background. The piano reverberates like the one your grandmother probably has, or used to have. There are some other noises, probably a lot of them; one of the album's most appealing features is the almost maniacal attention that's been paid to even the tiniest of details. The strings threaten to surface, but don't; the other noises skitter about but then cease to be, and there's nothing but the piano again, and Thom Yorke's falsetto.

Ah, Thom Yorke's falsetto. If you listen to Radiohead's first album, *Pablo Honey*, which I can't really recommend you do, you'll hear a decided U2 influence. Radiohead are by now so vastly superior to U2 that to even bring up the similarity is painful, but it's important to be honest: Thom Yorke probably got the idea to sing falsetto from Bono, who believes that he has a great falsetto and whose fans encourage him in this belief. I am going to give it to you straight: Thom Yorke's falsetto kicks Bono's right out of the ring. Morrissey's falsetto isn't much good next to Yorke's either. The main reasons for this are twofold: first, Yorke's voice goes falsetto rather lower in the register that Bono's, which often sounds like a man imitating a little girl, or Morrissey's, which sounds like a man imitating an operatic soprano. Yorke's falsetto also convincingly emulates a speaker drifting out of a two-way conversation into a monologic reflection -- he sounds, I mean, like he's singing to himself, as you might have if you were a young boy desperately alone. He doesn't sound like he's showing off; he sounds like he's drifting away. It is a simply beautiful sound, Thom Yorke's falsetto. If you listen to it right, it will make you want to cry.

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[4]I'm assuming here that everybody knows the story of *Kid A*, the album Radiohead released in 2000 after three years of near-silence following their universally lauded 1997 album, *OK Computer*. The short version, which I bet I'll end up telling more than once as we swim through the cold waters of *Amnesiac*, is that while *OK Computer* had been attended by ceaseless music-press attention and Radiohead had played along (they sent out screensavers and mousepads; they proclaimed their intention to make videos for every song on the record; they toured relentlessly), *Kid A*'s press attention was, depending on who you listen to, either the result of an ingenious reverse-psychology ploy on the part of the band ("We're not sending out any promotional copies! There will be no videos! There will be no tour! There's just the album and an interview or two by email only! Take it or leave it!") or a wholly organic phenomenon, the result of real interest in what this suddenly-somewhat-seclusive group was doing. *Kid A* did not have a single, and nothing on it sounded like much that Radiohead had done before. The one song that did sound like the Radiohead of old only sounded more like old Radiohead than the rest of *Kid A*; it still wasn't much like the stuff that had made them famous. *Kid A* itself, a pretty decent album, got such close scrutiny that its own character vanished in the over-magnification. This is naturally a rather complicated issue; it did in fact deserve all the attention it got, though a number of people complained that they were tired of hearing about it when it was the order of the day. As it isn't actually our concern here and we've said what needed to be said about it for now, we'll leave off talking about it. For the moment, anyhow.

Here, all it does it go “Oooh” for a while while some guy with a mixing board decides between tons of reverb and none at all. Combine all that with the drenched piano and the somber, stately chord progression, though, and the scene is well set for something portentous and grand. The strings tentatively test the waters again and Yorke begins to sing:

Jumped in the river and what did I see?
Black-eyed angel swam with me
Moon full of stars and astral cars
And all of the figures I used to see
All my lovers were there with me:
All my past and future
And we all went to heaven in a little rowboat
There was nothing to fear, nothing to doubt

The three-chord progression carries the lyric along its sad, mournful little melody, strings coming and going; then, here, Yorke breaks into the falsetto again, and the strings solidify, high up in the treble, and then there’s a drumkit playing in the loose, lazy feel of a ’70s jazz-rock drummer on one of the slow numbers. There are some other sounds -- high-pitched electronic tones, similar to sirens but ghostlier, like the shadows of sirens. As Yorke repeats the first verse almost verbatim (he leaves out “what did I see?”: why? Because now, you’ve seen it too), his passion (or fear, or shame) lending added force to his voice; his sheds his languor like a snake shedding its skin and settles into the telling of his dream, which he seems not to think of as a dream at all. More noises show up in the depths of the mix, unidentifiable sounds, more palpable than audible, adding tension to the already tense mood while leaving the piano, voice and strings to do all the apparent work. The work that they do is the work of the devil’s henchmen -- they make you feel uneasy about everything, or about nothing in particular.

And so it is that when all the other sounds suddenly but smoothly fall away at the last line of the repetition of the song’s only verse and Yorke is left singing “There was nothing to fear, and nothing to doubt” accompanied only by the wine-dark piano and the drummer, we are to understand this much if nothing else: the singer is lying to us. Indeed there was something to fear. There must have been, or else why is the singer so afraid? Why is the music that surrounds him so sad, so nervous, so resigned to carrying its heavy, minor-key burden? A second vocal track helps Yorke to assert that there was really nothing to fear or doubt -- I mean to say, he harmonizes with himself as he repeats the last line a few times, trying to convince himself or maybe us, or maybe just listening to the sound of his own voice saying something he knows isn’t true -- but the effect of the second voice is a continuation of the nursery-rhyme invoked by the little rowboat in which everyone all went up to heaven. There is no rowboat; that’s just a story. Death is what he’s talking about, his own and those of everyone he knows. That is his subject here. The rowboat is a life-preserver in the heavy depths of the song; it’s for the singer, not for us. But it’s not real, and we all know it. The rest is real enough to make a man want to lie about it.

‘Pyramid Song’ is comparable to Radiohead’s old stuff only insofar as it has a grand unifying design; everything on *OK Computer*, even ‘No Surprises,’ was brighter-faced than this. No one dies or saves the universe here -- they just dream dark dreams and see visions of a future that’s more of the same overwhelming stuff. It’s no accident that the video for ‘Pyramid Song’ appears to take place underwater; the song feels like drowning. The Romantic poets used to imagine that drowning was the most beautiful of deaths, and who’s to say? ...none of us having been

there and come back, I mean. What's certain is that it's still death, which seems to be the way we're headed at the end of *Amnesiac*'s second song.

III: Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors

If ‘Pyramid Song,’ the second song on *Amnesiac*, gave people who had a hard time with *Kid A* reason to hope that the surroundings would be more human and familiar this time around, then the third song, ‘Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors,’ crushes that hope with sadistic abandon.

It should be glaringly obvious that the placement of ‘Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors,’ the song we’re looking at now, is an immediate, direct, and rather perverse response to ‘Pyramid Song’’s last line, which we last heard Yorke repeating a few times like a man sitting in a corner singing quietly to himself: “There was nothing to fear, nothing to doubt.” He’d sung the words as though they were lines from an old hymn, something to hold on to in times of trouble or something to sing when the road ahead was uncertain. He’d been reporting back to the world on some kind of vision, possibly (probably) a vision of death and what lies/lurks/burns beyond this veil of our sorrows. He said it was lovely. It didn’t sound so lovely, but maybe that was our problem. Maybe not.

‘Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors,’ on the immediate heels of the organic, ebbing piano chords of ‘Pyramid Song,’ is very heavily processed and begins with the words “There are barn doors, and there are revolving doors.” The words are practically unintelligible; only the god that the circuitry generates knows how many filters the voice that speaks them has been run through. There’s nothing in the half-human sound to suggest that the voice is actually Thom Yorke’s; our faith in the standard contract between the rock band and its audience insists that we think of the voice as Yorke’s, though, and this has the effect of making us worry about him. Is he all right? “Doors on the rudders of big ships, and there are revolving doors,” he continues. Yes: “on the rudders.” There are no doors on the rudders to any ships large or small that I know of. So in the wake of ‘Pyramid Song’ we seem to have a largely computer-generated piece whose central image is at best unreliable. We shall see.

Song order is so important. The better an album is, the more certain you can be that the order in which the songs appear was one of the hardest things to iron out. There’s some disagreement on this question among some folks, most bitterly between label executives and artists. Labels tend to be of the opinion that you must absolutely put a single, probably the first single, in the #1 slot, and that you shouldn’t put the second single any later than track #4; assuming a ceiling of four singles per album, which is an incredibly high ceiling (Michael Jackson’s *Off the Wall*, for example, had exactly four, and it sold millions), you should place the final single no later than sixth. Certainly, at any rate, you’d want to save any potentially off-putting stuff until later. So goes the prevailing wisdom.

Artists (good ones, anyhow) usually want to leave one or two of the strongest pieces for nearer the end, so that an involved and engaged listener will arrive at some sort of climax just as the album is drawing to its close. Radiohead are quite clearly an album-oriented band, and they tinker rather aggressively with preconceptions about song-order. So far on *Amnesiac*, we’ve have a very nervous, repetitive song that was all chorus and no verse, a kind of desperate, agnostic breed of religious chant; that was followed by a song that’d work as a single if you needed one (‘Pyramid Song’ was, in fact, the album’s first single) but which in its world-weary languor suggested strongly that there could be no second single, else why would this sad, dark thing be the first one?; that single bumped squarely and quite immediately (there being no gap whatsoever between the second song and the third) into something almost overwhelmingly inaccessible. People who’ve been into electronica since ‘96 or so complain about Radiohead’s late discovery of weird noises and insist that their sound bricolage is mainstream compared to

the really out-there stuff, but these complaints are comparable to old-school punks complaining that a band with an unsellable name -- say, the Meat Shits -- has “sold out.”

We haven’t talked about the album title yet. We almost never talk about album titles any more. This is because there are too many records. So many records! You buy one or two a week, maybe you’re crazy and you buy five or six a week, and the ones you can’t buy you borrow or have copies made for you by your friends, and it’s a trial just finding time to listen to all the stuff that interests you so you have a decent sound system put into your car to make better use of the dead time you spend heading from one place to the next, and soon what time you spend listening is shared time: you’re cooking or studying or cleaning, and you’re not looking at the album jacket or staring into the speakers like you did when you were younger, and thoughts about an album’s title as it relates to its individual songs and to the collection as a whole -- well, who has the time for this sort of thing? But the modern era’s contention that if you don’t have time for it then it must not be of value is a vicious lie. ‘Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors’ is laughing at your short attention span, being as it is a song that’s about memory if it’s about anything at all: it talks of routes that can be retraced and ones that can’t, and of pathways from one place to the next, which is how memory works -- by relating one thing to another in a “this is like that” fashion -- contained within an album whose title suggests that the album is, itself, an unreliable source of information.

I should be honest. While I am forever wanting to slap people who complained that *Kid A* was a precious thing for a band to do (the rationale here being that the band, knowing they’d sell tens of thousands of copies in their first week of release no matter what the damned thing sounded like, decided to test their audience's gullibility and release an album they themselves didn't actually like: I don't buy this argument, and neither should you, unless you're still young enough to find cynicism romantic, in which case may God bless you a little more than He’s apparently seen fit to do as of yet), I don't actually listen to it much. I think it had some great songs on it, most especially ‘Idioteque,’ which scares the bejabbers out of me, but in the end it's almost too successful: it tries to be cold and off-putting and alien and inscrutable and so shiny that you can't look directly at it, and so it is. It’s also perhaps less fully realized than *Amnesiac*, about which more shortly. It's a fair guess that in five years or so people who listen to *Kid A* will hear things that absolutely no-one noticed when the album was new. I hope to be one of those people, and I promise to report back. It remains the case, though, that *Kid A* was at the very least a strong B+, certainly better than most anything else competing in its class, and that people who yammered on and on about how it was some sort of big unmusical gob in the faces of the band's loyal fans are full of hot air. Such persons should be given looks of pity and condescension whenever the opportunity presents itself.

In the Radiohead canon, *Kid A* is the equivalent to the elephant in the living room. You simply cannot avoid talking about it; you can’t, for that matter, avoid mentioning it every couple of minutes. Indeed, practically any Radiohead-related conversation you have is going to have to make reference to it at some point. Lots of people got very tired of talking about *Kid A* rather quickly (though most of these people are the sorts of folks who await the opportunity to publicly announce that they have grown bored as eagerly as children await the coming of Christmas: that is to say, crashing bores), but I hope that by now they’ve at least gotten comfortable hearing about it, because it’s going to be a touchstone of conversations about Radiohead for some time to come. This is right and good. It was the album that followed *OK Computer*, whose eloquence and depth of feeling in describing the emotional impotence of our generation (an impotence wrongly characterized as anomie, which characterization lends fuel to the impotent fire-that-refuses-to-burn) can by no means be overstated. This life-changing, epoch-defining

album was followed by lots of touring, and then by a movie that chronicled all this touring, and then by dead silence. Time passed. Music changed. In the interim nobody anywhere came along and challenged Radiohead's top-dog status; there were lots of good records, and a few great ones, but nothing as grand and incontestable as *OK Computer*. (The mainstream press tried desperately to convince itself that both Built to Spill and the Flaming Lips were possible contenders to the throne; meaning no disrespect to either one of these wonderful bands, but the mainstream press must surely have been kidding.) A brilliantly conceived promotional campaign masquerading as no campaign at all preceded *Kid A*'s release: the album was coming, we were told, but there would be no advance copies delivered to the press. There would be no radio singles. There would be no videos. There would be no tour.

PEOPLE FELL ALL OVER THEMSELVES trying not to look stupid while talking about *Kid A*: everybody seemed spooked. It was as if, lacking a press kit with bullet points, nobody was willing to go out on a limb and describe what the album was actually like. They wrote instead about the hype. Whole articles were dedicated to the subject, in Newsweek, Time, Spin, Rolling Stone, and numerous other irredeemable landfill-destined advertising receptacles. While *Kid A* does look like small potatoes when placed next to *Amnesiac*, it's also, in the broader context, a pretty interesting little record; at some points (the title track, and "Treefingers," and "Everything In Its Right Place"), it seems like a study for *Amnesiac*. Its successes are on smaller scales, but are not without their own uneasy charm. Its songs clear the road for the songs that will shortly follow. The commercialization of all art has resulted in less room for bands who want to take full public steps toward real artistic growth (Bob Dylan used to do this sort of thing all the time), but it's exactly what Radiohead seem to have done with *Kid A*: in it, they assemble the palette and define the parameters for their next move.

If you listen to the two one after another, the absurdity of this notion becomes almost excruciatingly clear, though you'll have a hard time convincing the critics. Here's why: *Amnesiac* is a better album. Noticing this, people want to attribute warmth to *Amnesiac*: humanism retains a chokehold on the critical imagination, and people would like to hold on to the idea that if you have two things and one's demonstrably human and the other isn't, then the former must be the better of the two. That this is the presumption of practically every critic on the planet is a point that has not been lost on Radiohead. *Amnesiac*'s ventures into strictly-electronic territory make the Radiohead of *Kid A* look like Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. Whole songs on *Amnesiac*, 'Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors' among them, owe their entire existence to technology that's only been available for a year or two. Its bleakest lyrics venture into territory that would scorch the earth on which *Kid A* walks, with the possible exception of 'Morning Bell,' a song which appears on both *Amnesiac* and *Kid A. Kid A* is practically a rock album next to *Amnesiac*, but since *Amnesiac*'s songs are better than those of its predecessor, critics call it "more human." This is comparable to the President of the United States granting honorary citizenship to any person toward whom he feels personal affinity: it's intellectually dishonest.

But the tension between "cold" and "warm" is the very breeze upon which 'Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors' drifts, leaf-light and unmomentous. Its lyrics, spoken in monotone and processed until they're almost completely unintelligible, express the sort of everyday paranoia that's recognizable to anybody -- the small beginnings of paths down to anonymous madness and unsung desperation. Here they are:

There are barn doors
And there are revolving doors
Doors on the rudders of big ships

And there are revolving doors
There are doors that open by themselves
There are sliding doors
And there are secret doors
There are doors that lock
And doors that don't
There are doors that let you in
And out
But never open
But they are trapdoors
That you can't come back from

Again we look back at 'Pyramid Song,' the lullaby from whose soothing strains we awakened to find ourselves where we presently are. Set against a sonic backdrop of distorted bass-heavy rhythm and stereo panning effects with no melody whatsoever anywhere in sight, 'Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors' sneers uncomfortably in the direction of 'Pyramid Song': "Nothing to fear, nothing to doubt"? *There are doors that let you in and out but never open, but they are trapdoors that you can't come back from*. The sound of a phonograph needle traveling over empty, scratched vinyl looped from beginning to end across the entire song, as though to plant the song's roots within emptiness itself. Near the beginning there's what sounds like a plucked piano string, and an electric piano noodles around a major chord for a while near the beginning before opting to get the hell out of Dodge, but for the most part we are in the middle of a rhythmic nowhere. As we listen, subtleties of the processed voice's intonation present themselves: "And there are revolving doors" is spoken with a declarative end-stop, as though to say "This much, at least, is certain," while the final line of the lyrics is whispered, perhaps because it's not being said to anyone at all but is a stage-whispered rueful observation being made by the speaker for his own benefit. Anyone who knows that you can't come back from someplace, after all, must actually have been there, or he wouldn't be qualified to say whether you can or can't come back. The speaker of 'Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors' speaks with authority. The nature of his authority makes the temperature in the room drop noticeably.

I have gotten into trouble from time to time by using the word "song" where some people think it doesn't belong. It's true that as far as I'm concerned, Wagner's *Gotterdamerung* is in the final analysis just a very long song with lots of long instrumental passages, but I do think that 'Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors' counts as a song. I'm willing to take Radiohead's word for it, because they wrote 'No Surprises,' which is a song that can kick practically any other song's ass with one hand tied behind its back. One of many excellent and thorough Radiohead fan sites, http://www.greenplastic.com/, cites a resource that calls 'Pull/Pulk' "more sonic experiment than song," but this is inaccurate. It has a lyric that clings heroically to its theme, and its music, consisting entirely of loops, replicate the doors being described. The loops, without beginning or end and therefore infinite, let you in and out but never open. This should not be construed to mean that 'Pull/Pulk' is self-referential, like those horrible poems that are actually only about themselves that we've all been forced to read in 20th-century literature classes: let the vultures pick those dry, if they want to. The music of 'Pull/Pulk' is about the lyrics, but the inverse does not hold true.

I like a good slasher movie as much as the next guy -- my irrational love for the movie *976-EVIL* is a matter of public record -- but one of the unfortunate consequences of increasingly graphic depictions of violence in the visual arts has been that it's gotten harder to scare people. Where the word "murder" would have done the job once, now nothing short of the autopsy photographs

will do. What is a songwriter who wants to frighten his listeners using the subtle effects of language and nuance to do? Why, misspell things, of course. Is there anything creepier in the world that a well-placed misspelled word? Stop and think: which of the following two notes would you be more frightened to find stuffed in your screen door --

or

?

Naturally it has got to be the latter. The first one could be a friend trying to pull one over on you, but the second is either an quasi-literate stalker or a kid in your neighborhood, and either way it can only mean trouble. Who knows what 'Pull/Pulk' was supposed to have meant at some point in the distant past, before its meaning was forever mangled beyond recognition? 'Pull/Push'? But how? It cannot be "push." We will never know. Its original impetus was destroyed by its own desperate speed to get its point across. It has effectively erased its ability to convey meaning. It commits suicide right in front of your eyes, again and again, as many times as you read it. There is blood everywhere.

Let there be no mistake about how aggressive this song really is. It pulls out all the stops. Knob-twiddler enthusiasts complain that 'Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors' robs Squarepusher's purse, but it does so, I think, in the service of something greater than Squarepusher's choir-directed preaching. Its point, both lyrically and musically, is that you can't be sure of anything. The relative truth of this statement is not at issue, but *Amnesiac* is so convinced that it wants to evangelize about it. It's not that the sounds are various, like a blues-rock band showing off their jazz chops; it's that the positions the songs take both complement and contradict one another. Linear narrative clashes with motionless stasis; songs with beginnings and endings collide with songs that only end because somebody somewhere pushed a button, and if they hadn't, the song would still be going on, an unstoppable, unfeeling force lacking even the ability to slow itself down; minor-key beauty, obsessed with death but still classically pretty, vanishes into the jaw not only of near-pure rhythm but near-pure rhythm with intentionally exacerbated fuzz on the bass-end of things. Whoever this frightened person singing 'Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors' is (presumably it's the unmoving, unmoveable "reasonable man" of the album's opening number, whose claim to reliability is now deeply suspect), he's in a bad place. You wouldn't want to find yourself there. But he has begun speaking in general statements whose implications seem to include us. Hold on to your damned hats.

Despite its unquenchable darkness, though, there's a current of glee running under 'Pull/Pulk Revolving Doors' that both underscores its bloodthirst and makes it seem OK. Perhaps it's just the musician's love of music; "at the end of the day," as the English would say, Radiohead are musicians, and they ply their chosen trade because they enjoy it -- an occasional lucky person may keep making music after a while because the money's gotten good, but one only enters the field out of love. The devil's workshop of inorganic sounds that Radiohead assembles on *Amnesiac*'s third song is, in fact, the only exit from the song's dark heart: these sounds have been doted on and tended to by people who cared deeply about their creation. If there's something worth expending this kind of effort on, then it must be all right in the end.

IV: You And Whose Army?

Then, naturally but still somewhat surprisingly, there we were at 'You And Whose Army?', the fourth song on *Amnesiac*. We had been happily (if sometimes desperately) making our way through the micro-labyrinths the band had been constructing for us, sometimes finding ourselves in slightly familiar settings -- the morose watery landscape of 'Pyramid Song' had signposts we seemed to recognize from the similar if less claustrophobic wilds of 'Exit Music (For a Film)' -- sometimes wondering if we were completely lost. And then the bottom dropped out -- not the floor, but the bottom, the bass-end -- and 'You and Whose Army?' began, and something very strange happened.

We got sick. We couldn't help it. The first thing we heard was a human sound, maybe: an exhalation, or maybe an inhalation. It might also have been the sound of something heavy being dragged across a metal desk. Whatever it was, its actual nature was concealed by the post-recording processing that had been done to it: somebody had put the sound through a box of some kind and slowed it down, possibly distorting it a little while they were at it. It gave us pause, and then the guitar sounded.

We knew what that was: jazz guitar. Unmistakably so. The muted, even tone of the strings; the near-total lack of attack. It was smooth and soft, and its chords were rich but empty minor and minor-seventh affairs. They, too, had been subjected to processing, not simple reverb or echo but some sort of filter that set them at a distance from the listener, not only in presence but in time. Just as we were righting ourselves and trying to calculate our positions in relation to the sound, Thom Yorke started singing. He sounded like he'd just been awakened from a thousand-year sleep, or as if he expected to enter such a sleep if he could only get these few troubled thoughts across beforehand. "Come on, come on," he sang, in a melody that first fell and then rose like a dispirited human slide-whistle. "You think you drive me crazy." As he began, a third sound joined the heavily medicated fray -- it might have been a second human voice, or two of them, or it could have been a keyboard. "Wooo, wooo," it said or was forced to say. All of it seemed to come from a radio on the windowsill in a single-occupancy hotel room in Akron, Ohio, circa 1948, nothing going on in the city or anywhere else in the universe, a total emptiness overtaking spaces that might once have held hope or promise. "Come on, come on, you and the army," Yorke said; "You and your cronies." Our stomachs began to turn.

We tried to get comfortable. The chords were so pretty; the melody was so light and simple. It seemed to come from somewhere deep inside of the singer: it was completely unforced. He might have been making it up as he went along. In another world, without the songs-leading-up-to-this-point baggage with which we were faced, or with lyrics less rooted in total and inviolate mistrust of an unidentified opponent (some of us seemed to imagine that Tony Blair or the English Parliament were the target, presumably on the strength of the word "cronies," but those, too, were shortly caught up in the wave of nausea), this might have been something wholly enjoyable. Nelson Riddle could have arranged it for Billie Holiday to sing on *Lady in Satin* and it would have fit right in. But then Yorke said "Holy Roman Empire" after one of his "Come on, come on" incantations, and then he said "Come on if you think you can take us," and then words failed him and he just said "Oh, oh," and the next time he sang his voice had begun to distort and he was repeating himself, and we began to vomit.

It was wonderful. The beauty and the terror of it had taken control of our very bodies. The song transitioned quickly but very smoothly from its swing rhythm to a more standard rock 4/4 and cymbals, light and plush as clouds, flashed against our ears. Nobody knew what Yorke started

saying next. It wouldn't be fair to say that nobody cared; it's more accurate to say that we could all tell what he meant even thought we couldn't agree on the actual substance of his words. "We ride, we ride/ghost horses," some of us thought we heard as we lay there puking. "Relax, relax/hold on tight," others imagined hearing, the involuntary convulsions of our esophagi arrhythmically retching against the diabetic coma-inducing sweetness of the three chords that splashed repeatedly and calmly but relentlessly against the heavy air like pond ripples lapping up on rocks. We weren't sure if we had ever felt so good in our lives, lying there on the floors of our kitchens or living rooms, reclining also in the seats of our cars, leaning over our workdesks or kitchen counters, puking our guts out.

It meant to make us sick: how could it be otherwise? Its sweetness was not cloying but aggressive and overwhelming. The album had been setting us up for this all along, and 'Pyramid Song' had almost explicitly warned us that something like this was going to happen: that somewhere along the line the conflict between feeling something and feeling everything at once would become too much, and something would have to give. What we hadn't known was that we were the ones who were expendable. *Amnesiac* was going to do what it had to do, no matter what the human cost. It was even going to make it feel good as it victimized us, holding our mouths open and drizzling sugar-thick melodies down our throats while subjecting our minds' eyes to a barrage of images that were not images at all but vague feelings of threat and resolute resistance whose own futility was nowhere stated more loudly than in its own insistence that it would prevail. The song pulsed or swelled like an imaginary sea creature from somebody else's bad dream brought somehow into the world of real things and then dropped off at our doors. We were in love with our own ruin. It felt so good. Somebody was out to get us. Only their English songwriter accomplices seemed to know who that somebody was. We had to trust them. We had no choice.

V: I Might Be Wrong

When an album's shown itself to be an honest-to-God album and not just a collection of songs, one of the questions we end up asking is: where's the center? Because we are of the Western mind, we figure there must be a center somewhere; all our theology depends on the notion that there is. We assume that there are parameters, and that the structure we're examining will eventually prove to be symmetrical, and that at some point the narrative, explicit or hidden, will swell to a climax. This is a fair enough assumption, especially if you're dealing with Englishmen. On *Kid A*, Radiohead tried hard to defer or deflect this kind of idea, but they didn't succeed on that head; hands up, now, anybody who thinks that 'Motion Picture Soundtrack' could possibly have been put anywhere else besides the closing slot of the album? I rest my case.

Amnesiac is very nearly traditional in its narrative gambits; its structural integrity can fairly be called classical. So far it's been a maze-like sequence of horror-movie lulls and crests, and the fun of it has been learning that the lulls are deeper than they look and the crests are less exciting than unnerving. The traditional moods associated with the movements of an album -- from catchy opening number to weightier second song; from slow, sad number to mid-tempo, brighter number; et cetera -- are here toyed with in a delightfully malicious way, though the movements themselves have been preserved. The idea of all this, I think, is to hold a traditional high-reaching rock album up to a funhouse mirror, and then, instead of looking and laughing for a minute as we usually do when we're in the funhouse, to stare directly into the distorted face until things begin to feel really uncomfortable. And then to look some more.

Trying to find the center of *Amnesiac* is a tricky business. By "the center," I mean the point at which all the various moods and movements of an album intersect; the song that sounds most representative of the album. It's not always the best song (to use the inevitable Pink Floyd comparison: 'Shine on You Crazy Diamond' is pretty unarguably the center of *Wish You Were Here*, but the title track is a much better song; so's 'Have a Cigar,' for that matter), though it seems to work out that way fairly often. I wish that the center of *Amnesiac* were the album's first song, 'Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box'; one could look at it as a simple alienation parable if it were. But 'Packt Like Sardines' is a spark from the fire at the album's center, where things are pretty damned scary. I wouldn't mind, either, if the center were 'Knives Out'; then the song's heart, which is awful and ugly, might be a little more bearable. But 'Knives Out,' which I fear having to examine any more closely than I have to even though it's the next one in line, is a sunken pit within the overall roadmap of the album: it is not the center, but the great and terrible dead end. How an album -- how any effort -- can survive its own depths is the very miracle of creation itself, and is why so many great works seek out the dark places within once-bright things.

Well, now, all of this is quite heavy. But the center of *Amnesiac*, the moment when its lodestar goes nova, is not heavy at all on its surface. It's a tiny little dance number called 'I Might Be Wrong,' and it has more and less in it than anything else on the album. It's like a balloon, but a very sad and angry balloon. Its rhythm recalls the genre which we hope is dead now and no-one will ever mention again -- I mean "trip-hop"[5] -- but the snare's meaner, and the attack is nastier. The riff, a two-string matter that sounds like the James Gang on a bad Quaaludes bender, is catchier than swine flu -- you want to hum it to yourself: dum-dum dum da-dum dum, dum-dum dum da-dum dum. It goes on and on. It monkeys around at its lower end; toward the song's muted finale, we'll learn that there was a keyboard, the same one that made 'Packt Like Sardines' sound so carbonated, running underneath the guitar all along. The words and melody that Yorke layers over this are a playfully mournful matter, like a nursery rhyme for morbid little boys and girls to sing while they read the obituary page.

But it's not the music or the beat that places 'I Might Be Wrong' at the dead center of *Amnesiac*. It's not the weight of it. It's the shifts in tone that do it -- the spasms within the meanings of words and phrases that make 'I Might Be Wrong' an absolutely killer single and a perfect repository for *Amnesiac*'s suicidal leanings. It's the actor-like way in which Yorke gives each line its own reading, rising from sleepy, disinterested resignation to very intensely focused bitter anger as though it were the most natural thing in the world. It's the calm but crazed focus on how a thing changes when you say it twice. It's frightening, is what it is. "I used to think," he sings, his intonation suggesting pained reverie; "I used to think," he repeats, drawing out the word "think" for emphasis. Emphasis? Why? Here's why: he means "I used to think, but now I'm certain." "Think about the good times and never look back," he says at another point, repeating "never look back" with an almost inaudible but unavoidably felt shift in meaning: the first iteration's a suggestion, the second practically character assassination.

As commentary to Yorke's ever-deepening monologue, which is almost certainly addressed to someone[6], the music thickens and distorts; instruments are added, faded in quietly, so that when we turn away from the narrator's increasingly discomfiting low-key tirade, we find that our once-comforting scrambly-guitarscape has become a bubbling lava pit. When, near the end of things and possibly near the album's interior End of Things, he sings "Let's go down the waterfall/Have ourselves a good time, it's nothing at all/nothing at all/nothing at all," anybody who's been paying attention knows that we're somewhere very near the mouth of hell. How'd we

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[5] It's not that there was anything inherently wrong with some of the records -- don't Portishead count as trip-hop? I like Portishead pretty well -- but really, are there words in the English language -- in any language -- damning enough to adequately state just how stupid a genre-name "trip-hop" is? Probably not, but let's try these: *that's the stupidest God-damned genre name anybody ever came up with in the whole freakin' history of categorization*. No, not quite there yet. We could spend ages trying to muster up the right tone. Let's just leave it at this, and then get back to business: *the guy who coined the term "trip-hop" should be disemboweled. On television. While a house band plays Massive Attack covers behind him.*

[6] This lends extra punch to "I Might Be Wrong," since so many of the other songs on *Amnesiac* are sung by an anonymous figure to himself -- the mournful "Pyramid Song" being a clear case in point -- while others are addressed to faceless groups of people who, we feel certain, aren't listening and never will be. "I Might Be Wrong," though: there's somebody else here. There has been some matter of import come to pass recently between the singer and the person he addresses. It seems to have mattered rather a lot to the singer. We will never know how the intended listener feels, because songs are cruel to their targets in that way: they set the terms for conversation, then terminate the conversation before anybody besides themselves has had a chance to speak. Radiohead play off of this like obsessive-compulsive raquetball champions.

get here? We were always headed here. All the signposts are still visible -- the repetitive crab-walking guitar, the wild-eyed keening man by the side of the road. They are not receding, but we can't retrace our steps. We listen as Yorke repeats himself again and again, pointing us toward the things we saw and didn't worry about: when we've heard them two or three times, we recognize them for the stumbling-blocks that they are, but by then it's too late. When we heard them first, we couldn't have known. More so, even, than 'Pyramid Song,' 'I Might Be Wrong' is cinematic in its sweep.

Fitting, then, that it's one of the songs Radiohead have made a video for. It's as frightening as the song itself: the little monster hanging his head makes me want to cry, and I don't care who knows it. More important than the New Archetypes that populate and haunt the frame, though, is Yorke's address-the-camera lipsynch of the song. If it doesn't frighten you at least a little, then you haven't spent much downtime at the bad end of a relationship. His hands flailing near the lens, his sudden smile-to-scowl shifts, his pacing of the floor: authenticity is a question I almost never bring up, but at some level, he really means this stuff, or else he is a monster, which amounts to the same thing. To put a song like 'I Might Be Wrong' at the center of things alerts us, not so gently as 'Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors,' that while we are not in a non-narrative nothingscape like *Kid A*, we are not walking toward any happy ending, either. I don't particularly want to think about what's waiting for us at the end. I don't think it's going to be very pretty. I might be wrong. I might be wrong.

VI: Knives Out

Well, that brings us to 'Knives Out,' a song most Radiohead fans knew from bootlegs and finding live songs on Napster[7] long before *Amnesiac* came out. 'Knives Out' is a hard song to talk about. It's hard to talk about 'Knives Out' not because it's complex -- it isn't -- or because it's slippery and elusive. It is neither. Truth told, you'd be hard put to get out of the way once 'Knives Out' decided it was coming for you. It's like those mythical enemy-finding missiles[8] that our government[9] keeps crowing about during these last couple of wars: supposedly accurate to within one-thousandth of a millimeter, they're like something out of an old Warner Brothers' cartoon, homing in not just on particular coordinates but on living, breathing, moving targets.

'Knives Out,' though, has no enemies; or, if it does, it is its own worst one. It's just a song, for heaven's sake. It will not cure or cause cancer, and it will not start or stop any wars anywhere. What it can do, and what it does do, is give me a chill so deep that it kept me awake nights when I was first getting my head around *Amnesiac*. Like 'Morning Bell,' it's a break-up song; like 'Morning Bell,' the break-up in question seems more like divorce than a simple parting of ways. There is too much bitterness, too great a sense of there being something really big at stake, for this to be a simple you-go-your-way-I'll-go-mine song. It is too hideous for that..

Its guitar part is frankly astonishing; it's reminiscent of the Durutti Column's Vini Reilly, which is a pretty cool and obscure thing to be reminiscent of. Most guitar parts rely heavily on chords, but

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[7] If there's anybody reading this who actively supported the music industry's crusade against Napster, let me just say here that you're a moron. When Napster was active, I personally saw people who couldn't usually be bothered to care about music as anything more than incidental soundtrack getting involved and engaged in the collection and distribution of music they really liked. People were talking about this or that song, and the collector's urge was finding new and interesting routes of entry into its host-victims: obscure Radiohead songs constituted one of the most active Napster networks. Radiohead started playing "Knives Out" before even *Kid A* came out, and fans were discussing various versions of it that they'd found as MP3's floating around out there in the ether, and it was fascinating and exciting to watch and feel the enthusiasm for this dark little song growing as the song itself grew toward its eventual realized studio version. There are plenty of Napster clones, of course, but Napster was a neat little engine. Did Radiohead go bankrupt because everybody who wanted one had a full copy of *Kid A* before it came out? No. Did small bands like those about whom Metallica claims to be most concerned suffer because of the free distribution of their music on Napster? Hardly; my own band benefitted considerably from what amounted to lots of free publicity in the form of files hanging around on Napster waiting to be heard. If commercial radio weren't a complete joke, accepting graft from larger labels and shutting out interesting music when they don't get paid to play it, then the arguments against Napster might actually have been substantive. But commercial radio is utterly bankrupt, and so a still-forming worldwide community of enthusiastic music listeners got the shaft because their activities might have cost Britney Spears's management bus fare. These people did not start buying more records; many of them woke up to the music industry's total lack of interest in what they, as consumers, actually want. Somebody please destroy all the major labels, would you? History will thank you.

[8] You don't really believe that wholly innocent people -- women; children; hardworking men and eager young boys bursting of the promise of a better future -- don't die by the hundreds in those "hostile-target-specific" bombing raids, do you? Really? Shame on you. Your deed for one acre of prime Florida swampland is in the mail.

[9] I use the term "our" both in my own case -- I'm a U.S. citizen -- and in its more unfortunate meaning: no matter who or where you are, reading this, my government has appointed itself your government, too, whether you like it or not. Not that my saying so will change anything, but some of us really are sorry about that and wish we could do something about it.

‘Knives Out’ skitters around like a seagull with soft-colored paint on its feet, playing arpeggios and parts of scales that outline what would be chords if the song weren’t trying to make itself as light and airy as possible. The drums, too, are remarkable for their restraint: they’re soft, whooshy jazz drums, a constant pretty ride cymbal emphasizing the song’s bile by making it known that they don’t even really want to get involved if they can help it. The bass notes rise like bubbles through oil; if this were an outtake from Joni Mitchell’s *Mingus*, which it sort of could be if some malevolent God took hold of the universe in its glass bubble and gave it a good shake or two, we’d shortly be treated to a more delicious pain than the one we’re about to get.

But “this is what you get when you mess with us,” as Radiohead put it on *OK Computer*’s ‘Karma Police’ -- in the present case, what you get is probably more than you bargained for:

I want you to know
he’s not coming back
look into my eyes
I’ll not come back

Well, we’re screwed now. Four lines into the song, whose melody is as mournful and as desperate as the sound of child standing over the motionless body of a beloved pet, and already there is considerable tension over who’s here and who’s who. “He’s not coming back” and “I’m not coming back” are hard to resolve: is our singer shifting voices without letting us know? That’s not sporting. But then ‘Knives Out’ isn’t itself particularly sporting. It is mean.

So knives out
Catch the mouse
Don't look down
Shove it in your mouth

Yorke has turned on the afterburners for this one. His voice is at its most compelling: smooth and beautiful, but full of pain and dread, almost conversational in the surety of its moves. Every line serves at least two rhetorical roles: “I want you to know” is both sincere and witheringly sarcastic; “look me in the eye” both pleading and sadistically forceful. When he gets to the words “knives out,” it’s like Bruce Lee at the end of *Game of Death*: there are so many different possibilities lurking in all these images before us that we don’t know where to strike, or from which direction we’ll be struck. We stand held by the pure passion in Yorke’s delivery and disgusted by the nastiness of what he’s saying:

If you'd been a dog
They would have drowned you at birth
Look into my eyes
It's the only way you'll know I'm telling the truth

Amnesiac has not been very forthcoming about its cast of characters: we’ll never know who this “you” is, or what they’ve done, or why the person singing is so cruel to him or her. For all we know, the singer might as easily be addressing a mirror as a camera. But we don’t know; that’s part of the tension here. Are we eavesdropping, or do we belong here? Are we looking in with the dispassionate interest of a theatergoer, or have we actually done something wrong? Should we feel sorry about something? Well, shouldn’t we? It’s impossible not to feel at least a little apologetic, because it sounds like we’re under attack:

So knives out
Cook him up
Squash his head
Put him in the pot

And what is all this about the mouse, anyhow? If we have to eat mice that we've just caught ourselves, shouldn't we be a little less sanguine about it? You'd think that if we'd been brought to that point that we'd at least be allowed our dignity. But Yorke, whose voice begins sailing in its repetitions into the kinds of notes that made him famous -- the sweet, achingly beautiful held notes that sound as natural as breathing, lacking all of the evident artifice that mars so much of modern popular singing technique -- continues to thrust and parry with an arsenal of phrases that can neither be taken as sympathy nor pegged down as cruel. They are both; how we take them tells us what we really know about our position. And of course it is not very pretty.

I want you to know
He's not coming back
He's bloated and frozen
Still there's no point in letting it go to waste

So knives out
Catch the mouse
Squash his head
Put him in the pot

Dear readers, if I may be so bold as to speak openly, I must tell you that I cannot stand it. Listening to 'Knives Out' is a frankly painful experience. By setting us down in a present tense loaded with immanent squalor and pressing hard decisions between various options which are all entirely distasteful, it places us in an uncomfortable situation. It rubs in the icky details of our surroundings and takes an unseemly delight in doing so. It has to it a skeletal beauty, and Yorke's singing, as it will continue to do until the album's end, is practically a treatise on the very subject of beauty; but its heart is a cold and horrible thing, and it wants to share its horridness with us. That is really all there is to it. The phrases that could be taken two or three ways can only really be taken one way: as open attacks on whomever's being addressed. Its guitars help the singer to convince his target that there's some ambiguity here -- the music only takes on its menacing tone in light of the lyrics which have been set to it -- when they know, as the drummer knows, as the preceding song knew and as the next one knows even better, that there is nothing ambiguous about the singer's position. He hates us. He has constructed labyrinths for us from which there is no escape and in which he hopes that we will starve to death. His seething is a hard thing to hear. If you miss the fury that underlies 'Knives Out''s languid, pretty rhythms, then *Amnesiac* itself will remain a mystery. But if we locate what's waiting for us here, then all is revealed: the singer who said he "might be wrong" didn't mean it; the death-obsessed narrator of 'Pyramid Song' is less romantic when there are other people involved; the narrators we can't find are people we'd do better to avoid, and the ones we do find mean us harm.

We take some cold comfort in the idea that we live in an age when an album populated by characters straight out of Ibsen or Strindberg can be as legitimately popular as *Amnesiac* really is. But we feel mainly nervous when we consider the direction things have been heading. Once we were introverted, or living in dreams -- the album's first two songs -- but now we have come into contact with others, and we are spewing venom every time we open our mouths. Our attention to our meanings has sharpened, and our targets have multiplied. Even as we see how

well-aimed the shots are, we feel certain that our whole city will be destroyed. We are right to be little anxious about this, too: unless our track listing lies, ‘Morning Bell’ will be next, and we remember that one from the last time we ran into Thom Yorke in a dark alley.

VII: Morning Bell/Amnesiac

And yes, in fact, ‘Morning Bell’ is next, and that means trouble. ‘Morning Bell’ has two lives: it had previously appeared on *Kid A*. On *Amnesiac*, it’s listed as ‘Morning Bell/Amnesiac.’ It was one of the more frightening moments on the earlier album, far more tense that its stablemates, more percussive than you’d remembered it when you revisit it.

It is more at home on *Amnesiac*. *Amnesiac* likes awful things. *Amnesiac* has made it quite plain that its narrator, whatever his various (dis)guises, wants to build a machine that will perform, at the touch of a button, some terrible task. The task is an undoing of some kind. To our hero this machine’s work seems rather less morally certain than it seems to those who succumb to it or to we who hear about it.

I wish I could write about ‘Like Spinning Plates’. I heard ‘High and Dry’ on the radio today and I enjoyed it so much. I saw the video for ‘Fake Plastic Trees’ a week or two back, too; what a magnificent song, what a well-articulated ache. I’d happily write about either of those. I wish there was no ‘Morning Bell.’ I wish there weren’t one here. I wish they’d left it alone after making a percussive, mildly assaultive run at it on *Kid A*. I could leave it alone then.

The old CD player we had in the house refused to play ‘Morning Bell’ all the way though. I brought *Kid A* home when it was new and sat listening to it and then, exactly on the phrase “release me,” the wonderland of digital skipping set in: if I hadn’t’ve broken free from the spell, I suppose I’d still be sitting here listening to Thom Yorke infinitely keening “eeeeeeee.” I was angry like one always is with something that isn’t working, but I was somewhat relieved, too. ‘Morning Bell’ is a painful song.

We’ve got a different CD player now and so tonight we are here listening to the two versions of this song, which is about divorce. If it weren’t so hateful, the song might almost feel like an attempt to climb out of the undertow and get a breath of air: it’s got recognizable situations, phrases from real life, the human touch. But it sticks its head up above the self-absorbed, inward-gazing morass only to draw attention to the immeasurable depth of it all. This is a mean thing to do.

I do not enjoy listening to ‘Morning Bell.’ I think it is probably the best song on the album. It does not make me cry; not many songs do that, and the ones that do usually manage it not by their own wiles but by accidentally finding some hidden circuit in my brain that leads to a gentle reminder that someday everyone we know will be dead, and that the same is true for people we don’t know. ‘Morning Bell’ has a childish melody, and a childish chord progression, and I’ve heard the case advanced that the narrator is himself a child.

I don't know about that, but one does feel certain that 'Morning Bell' is about divorce. One only senses it intuitively, though I haven't heard any other explanations. It's as though, like a person for whom too many damning clues have been left carelessly lying around, we are supposed to look at what's right in front of our noses and take the hint for once. It's in some of the phrases scattered around the lyric, which reads like a spontaneously delivered series of exclamations and questions spoken by a man who is, perhaps, just waking up, either literally or metaphorically. It's in this phrase:

and this one:

and especially:

And if we know that something's permanently breaking in these phrases, which are delivered on *Kid A* in an insistent, angrily panicked but well-controlled voice and on *Amnesiac* in a resigned, permanently deferred, roundly defeated voice, it's also here that we know that there's no reprieve coming, ever. We get bits and pieces of the real world of people and relationships and successes and failures and furniture and chimneys, and we see that they are real-time versions of the ghosts and shadows whose contemplation has been our main purpose. In fact the ethereal world is somewhat better. Fewer people get hurt.

One person does, though, and pretty badly at that. So when he parts with his wife, he says things like "cut the kids in half." He says it with audible horror in his voice, but he also says it like he means it. There's no mouse here, no angel, no high-minded monologue about doors that open or don't. There's a guy at the end of his rope saying terrible things to somebody he loved once, and the things he's been saying are things he's been thinking for so long that the person he once was, who had the capacity to love another person that once, has been wholly swallowed by their rhetoric.

It's the "release me" that ultimately makes 'Morning Bell' not just difficult to take but practically impossible to tolerate. Everything depends on it. Everything else has been leading up to it. It is so gorgeous. It is so wonderful. It is so authentic. It is so formal. It is so final. It is so conclusive. It is so sure of itself, so nearly content with the decision at which it has unhappily arrived. It is held up by keyboards and guitars that ripple like skin forming on just-boiling milk, and what it has to say atop its perch is: death would be better than this. In various ways, this voice has been saying this all album long, but never with such naked, open desperation. He has stopped philosophizing and started begging. He has called in those grand old men of getting what you want, idiosyncrasy and visible anguish. The artifices under which he has sketched his pain all go transparent at once. Our man is broken. He knows it. He is pushing away the people who might get hurt when the real collapse begins. It would be a noble thing to do if he weren't so nasty about it.

And so, if ‘I Might Be Wrong’ was the album’s center, ‘Morning Bell/Amnesiac’ is its pivot, the fulcrum that flips it toward its final moments. What is left of our narrator after he’s exposed so much of himself in ‘Morning Bell’ is the album’s true genius, and so I am grateful for ‘Morning Bell,’ but I am also glad that we get to move past it. It is no place to hang one’s hat.

VIII: Dollars and Cents & Hunting Bears

'Dollars and Cents' is the eighth song on Radiohead's *Amnesiac*, and it reminds me a lot of the Allman Brothers. It's the drums. A lush banquet of ride cymbals and floor toms, it's the drumkit that's the unsung hero of *Amnesiac*: when the album shakes itself free from its electronic dreams of an insulated future ('Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box,' 'Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors') it finds repose in the drums, which are loose enough to float from jazz phrasings to rock bombast without committing themselves either way.

It's a good thing about the drums and the Orchestra of St John's (who'd done the strings for 'Pyramid Song' back back near the beginning of things; they're here with some very cinematic sweeps of bass-heavy string-swells), too: 'Dollars and Cents' has the weakest lyric of the album so far. It's Yorke on autopilot, panicked by the modern world and its awful way of burying the individual under store receipts and red tape, etc. Bureaucracy and its malcontents, the individual falling victim to the facelessness of the world in which he must live, the cruelty of the dispassionate quotidian routine -- we've heard this from Yorke before. It's admittedly one of his more powerful points of obsession: there's something very potent in the way he paints the crossroads in history at which he sees the individual -- you, or me -- standing, not knowing where to go, not wanting to go anywhere. Here, though, it seems a step back from some the riskier games of chicken he's been playing.

But we have been following *Amnesiac* song by song here, and we'd do well to remember that a great album is not just a collection of songs but a sequencing thereof. There are movements to consider: the fluid slip from individual claustrophobia to communal entropy that took place in the gap between 'Packt LIke Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box' and the following 'Pyramid Song'; the three doors to the same immobilizing fear that we found waiting for us at the ends of 'Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors,' 'I Might Be Wrong,' and "Knives Out,' which fear's resolving clarity made the journey across the songs feel like a slide from a snow-topped house down a well-oiled chimney into a fireplace; the free-fall from 'Knives Out' into "Morning Bell/Amnesiac," which had to it a sort of gleeful, masochistic abandon.

And so after these movements, which have steadily been increasing the pressure, we're given a fairly easy song. Its point ("We are the dollars and cents/We're going to crack your little soul") seems to be that the world is a bleak place governed by money. Sure: I mean, absolutely. If Propagandhi were making this point, it'd have some zing to it; if Phil Ochs were making it, it'd find a way to break your heart. But next to *Amnesiac*'s other revelations, it rings a little hollow. When the narrator attacked politicians in 'You and What Army?' it was clear that he'd suffered some personal injury and wasn't really interested in politics at all; there was something grand and pathetic about his lashing-out. 'Dollars and Cents' doesn't feel like that. It's quite wonderful musically, with an hypnotic, water-logged bassline climbing an octave again and again like Sisyphus pushing his rock up the side of the mountain, and those absent-minded strummed guitars that gave 'Knives Out' the waiting-for-something-bad-to-happen mood of a Hopper painting. And there are those drums, you know, echoing like a voices from a cave. They mark time with a rusty pocketknife. They lend to this particular song a feeling that no other song on the entire record has: an easy, breezy feeling. But overall it feels like nothing much is really happening.

O good people, turn away and run, because you are being set up. 'Dollars and Cents,' the least interesting and in many ways the most pleasant song on *Amnesiac* (and also, by three seconds, the longest), is a malevolent palate cleanser. Cynics might want to argue that it's just "filler," but

what follows it -- a gorgeous, spare, two-string electric guitar meditation without lyrics that's only two minutes long -- leaves no doubt that they are doing this on purpose. It's an island of normalcy: a song whose meaning is easy to parse, whose music holds no surprises except for a really, really scary noise that crescendos in at about the halfway mark, whose place in the world is secure. 'Dollars and Cents' and the instrumental that follows it (it's called 'Hunting Bears') are the straight men for the murderer who is waiting in the wings. 'Dollars and Cents' rises to a climax and ebbs away from it, good stuff all right but not great Radiohead by any measure, and certainly not great by *Amnesiac*'s quite high standard, and then 'Hunting Bears' spends two meditative minutes exploring a couple of mournful minor-key phrases on an electric guitar, and we feel peaceful in a way we haven't since before we began our walk through the album's dark corners and lonely rooms.

'Dollars & Cents,' 'Hunting Bears,' the slight lift, the drugged lull: this is all because a song called 'Like Spinning Plates' is coming. It is just around the corner. There is no place to hide from it. We are very near the end of our road, and Yorke and crew, who like all artists are sadists at heart, want to optimize the effect of their closing remarks. If we play along, we'll be nice and relaxed, all primed for the big, ugly moment: the moment when an entire album's worth of bad feelings, deeply held suspicions, shameful prayers, frightening visions, ugly people, dying cities, well-nursed grudges, oft-licked wounds, and broken blisters opens and reveals the full bloom of its long season under the earth. I wouldn't listen to it, if I were you; it's harrowing; but you will, just as I will, again and again. We are voyeurs, you and I. We do not even despise ourselves for it. We can't. It is in our blood.

IX: Like Spinning Plates

How can a song be “right” or “wrong,” you might reasonably ask, unless it made the sorts of claims that could be confirmed or dismissed with quick and total certainty. If someone sang a song that went “Water boils at twelve centigrade, water boils at twelve centigrade, I’m singin’ this song because water boils at twelve centigrade,” for example, we could feel comfortable in saying that that song, whatever its charms, is flatly wrong twenty-four hours a day. ‘Like Spinning Plates’ isn’t making pronouncements about the relative truth-values of the basic laws that govern the physical universe, though. It argues from experience, which has been *Amnesiac*’s tactic all along. It’s a brutal tactic: If you’re a surgeon, you can say “this won’t hurt” all you want, but if the other interested party is screaming and wincing, what you know about whether the procedure’s supposed to hurt or not isn’t going to count for much. The eight lines of ‘Like Spinning Plates’ are savage poetry, spattered with their author’s own blood:

While you make pretty speeches,
I'm being cut to shreds.
You feed me to the lions.
A delicate balance.

And this just feels like spinning plates.
I'm living in cloud cuckoo land,
And this just feels like spinning plates.
My body is floating down the muddy river.

We probably wouldn’t be able to identify the third or fifth lines at all if Radiohead hadn’t printed up lyric sheets to be handed out at official listening parties for the album (which now serve as reference materials for Radiohead fan sites), but that is neither here nor there. What’s pertinent here is, first, the intense focus that the song attains and sustains, and second, its climactic recollection of the songs that have preceded it and its response thereto. Be certain: we are gazing here into the mouth of madness, but not the kind of madness that doesn’t wish it could retrace its steps. Nine songs led this way, nine songs unafraid to face the truths they kept running into wherever they turned. And this is what it got you. Got me. Got us all.

People who might otherwise have stood a chance of making a name for themselves in the world sit like cars idling at stoplights, their conversations knowing nothing but the intricacies of this incredible, pernicious little song. “It’s not even four minutes long, but it feels like an epic,” they say. “There’s a fair chance that all the music you hear on the track is running backwards,” they tell each other. (It’s true.) “The first pronunciation of the line from which the song takes its title pains me so severely that the sensation is almost physical,” they say, and they are accurately reporting their experience when they say so. This sort of thing has got to stop. There’s truth, and then there’s greater truth, and then there’s the bone-deep desperation that comes when a person has spent too long in a continual state of terror or shock. That’s real truth, the kind of thing that real poetry is always cruelly inching toward, and ‘Like Spinning Plates’ resides there like a heartworm. It is excessive. It is worse than hard to take: it’s malevolent. The sweetness of its chords as they buffet its upward-rising melody make its ugly medicine seem irresistible, and it must be stopped.

We try to avoid the sticky, usually misleading question about the relationship between author and persona, but ‘Like Spinning Plates’ makes it hard not to meet the problem head-on. It is incredibly emotional. It’s hard to imagine that Yorke doesn’t have something invested in the

whole thing; the obsession with mortality that was first manifest in ‘Pyramid Song’ (and was latent in ‘Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box’) and has never lay dormant for long during the album’s course here takes on its rightful status as honey-sweet deathwish. The larger design of *Amnesiac* -- its gradual, speed-gathering slide down toward oblivion, its simultaneous attraction and revulsion toward system-destroying entropy -- comes into a focus so sharp that it raises two conflicting visions of Thom Yorke. The first is the obvious one: a once-young man made feeble by pain, bravely articulating his torment as it eats him alive. The second is more probable. It’s Yorke as mad scientist, setting up his narrators like those furry canvas cats you knock down with softballs at the county fair. The difference is that unlike the furry cats, these guys bleed, and you have to watch. When dreamy Thom Yorke arrived at this point, his inner sadist must have beamed like a miniature sun.

And this is the thing, you know: the thing that makes this, the deciding moment of *Amnesiac*, a moment of nearly heart-stopping drama. It’s the ambition. Ambition is the quality that makes great bands out of weekend concerns and matinee idols out of regional-theater vets. Its lack is what leads whole genres to their graves and makes a lot self-produced cd-r releases difficult to listen to. Ambition isn’t the desire to succeed materially, nor the thirst for public recognition. Ambition, artistically speaking, is the desire to *kick ass*. I have heard ambitious records that knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that only a few hundred people would ever hear them (Charlie McAlister’s *Mississippi Luau* being the most glorious example I can think of), while financially ambitious projects can often turn out to be meek and timid at heart -- the new Michael Jackson album, for instance. (When will Michael Jackson make the gin-spitting five-piece-rock-band album of killer pop songs we all know he’s got in him? The answer’s “never,” I’m afraid, but we are free to dream of what might have been.)

Radiohead first showed signs of the someday-I-shall-be-God ambition that’s needed to accomplish great things in rock on ‘Fake Plastic Trees’ from *The Bends*. “She looks like the real thing,” Yorke sang, his sweet voice heavy with the heartbreaking fullness of what he meant by “looks like,” his notes soaring. ‘Like Spinning Plates’ is ‘Fake Plastic Trees’ minus all the melancholy and plus an untenable level of panic. The melody of the latter is very nearly as sweet as that of the former, though less fully realized: it meanders, possibly afraid of what it will find when it settles on a direction. When it does settle -- on the line “and this just feels like spinning plates” -- it climbs, Yorke’s falsetto as dependable as an old Studebaker and almost as beautiful. To make a song that sounds like everything’s being sung & played backwards -- an almost clinical experiment in sound -- and to let its gnomic little lyric ping-pong back and forth between detached cynicism and romantic visions of death, and to then infuse that song with the sort of sweeping feeling usually reserved for opera or Rufus Wainwright numbers: that, friends, is ambition on a rather large canvas. Whole musical eras have been built on less. It’s better than good. It is glorious.

Go back to ‘Packt Like Sardines’ for a minute and listen to it. The jumpy little beat, the up-front mid-range vocal, the gradual layering of sublimated influences: Detroit techno, the Tubeway Army, different-universe *Pink Flag*. Let the whole song get back under your skin, noting that the background sounds that come in after the three-minute mark seem to be separate voices. There’s multiplicity in it. It’s an organized confusion of sounds brought carefully together into one bouncing, uneasy little dance track. Now skip ahead to ‘Like Spinning Plates.’ It, too, has noises pushing in at it: the reel-to-reel tape being rewound (the sound runs through the entire song); more plish-plish cymbals of the sort that have been surfacing since ‘Pyramid Song’ and that burst like fireworks all over ‘Dollars & Cents’ but which, here, drop in only once or twice like voices from a cave; a sound that recalls (though no-one else does) Toon Tubes. What’s

happened? We dropped crumbs along the trail and took careful note of our surroundings, but we have no idea how we got here. The stereo panning gives the impression that everybody involved is looking for someplace to hide. The several or several dozen synths are soothing, but the cumulative feeling isn't soporific: it's excruciating.

When we started, we were antsy; now, we'd happily trade our over-narcotized state of constantly-scanning-the-windows alertness for the low-level paranoia we had at the outset. Because, I shouldn't have to say it, someday we are all going to die, and all our toil under the sun -- all the pain and petty grievances, all the large and small struggles we braved through -- will have amounted to nothing. One's mind feels saturated like a badly-working color TV at the thought of it. The song knows that you're thinking about all this stuff, and that's why it begins: "While you make pretty speeches, I'm being cut to pieces." It knows it might as well be talking to itself since it is well beyond help, so it makes itself sound like it's talking backwards. But it needs you to understand its anguish at some level, just like any of us, if we were suffering, would need someone to at least acknowledge that it must be pretty awful from where we stand. And so it invents this melody that you can't shake, hardly a full melody at all: something that you might sing to yourself on a three-mile walk on a cold afternoon. Something lilting, almost cute. Something to remember it by.

Of course there's been plenty of pain all through. *Amnesiac*, in a marketplace crowded with poseurs whose pain is substantially the pain of the rich kid who didn't get the Corvette he wanted for Christmas, gets elbow-deep in the jam-thick spring that Sylvia Plath drank from daily when she was writing the poems that became *Ariel*. Digging our way through the songs, we've come to see the narrator's pain less and less as something exothymic (that is, having its origins in some external cause) and more and more as some basic condition that he'll never be able to shake. He sees it that way, too; he's already dead. "My body is floating down the muddy river," he says. This is the same river we crossed way back in 'Pyramid Song.' Perhaps all songs since then have only been the flashing glimpses of a life ill-lived that the popular imagination likes to think we'll get in our last minutes on this earth. Perhaps, though, no-one's going to die at all. Perhaps living through it is worse, and is our narrator's lot in life.

I say "perhaps," but I mean "of course." There's one song left, and everybody who's read this far already knows what it is and exactly what it sounds like, but let's pretend together that we don't know at all. Let's sink down to the bottom of the warm ocean of 'Like Spinning Plates' and stay there for two more weeks. Let's listen to Yorke's voice practically pleading to be released from the frail cage of flesh and bone that keeps it from finding a remote planet on which to hide from the causes of its terrible beauty. Let's keep ourselves in suspension until we see what our final reward is. It may be an even lighter rising-bubble-chamber than the wholly self-contained world of 'Like Spinning Plates,' or it may be something utterly alien to the ten-part puzzle whose assembled picture now horrifies us with its visions of the grave and its insistence that no grave is colder than the world in which it keeps too many plates spinning on too many poles at once. Who knows? Who, indeed.

X: Life In A Glasshouse

What happens next is a kind of emergence. They pulled this same kind of stunt on *Kid A.* It's a good trick. It's the last song. The last song on "big" albums almost always follows the hardest song. The hardest song is the one people play before they kill themselves. Hence 'Like Spinning Plates,' though 'Knives Out' would also serve. Don't anybody get any God-damned ideas, OK, we don't need anything else weighing down on our consciences. It's bad enough already. What with the guy who keeps singing about whether death is preferable to all this business. All what business? All *this* business.

First time through the album I remember hearing 'Life in a Glass House' and feeling sort of dizzy, woozy. If *Amnesiac* is a specialist in the field of nauseating moments, then 'Life in a Glass House' is the emetic it's been saving in case the others didn't work. It's a funeral dirge. Except that the narrator is the one who'll be departing. This is what's known in the trade as irony. Our narrator has come to us in various costumes: the lost man, the dead man, the killer, the victim. 'Like Spinning Plates' was the breaking point, and now we are broken.

"Once again, I'm in trouble with my old friend," Yorke begins now, his voice rising from the sort of shuddering electronic leaf-pile to which we are now accustomed; there's a high hat and a piano, and a clarinet, and a trombone. New Orleans. "She is papering the windowpanes," he sings. You can go ahead and try to connect those two lines if you like, but I know better by now. They're not connected. None of this is connected. How else to put it? Our man is gone.

"Once again, packed like frozen food and battery hens," he says at the outset of the second verse. Packt, he means, because we haven't really gone anywhere. We are right where we started and we have been all along. We have been living with memories and visions, seeing them painted as the big axe-wielding things they really are. Blood-drenched and guilt-laden images projected on the infinitely huge canvas of the inward-looking eye.

"Of course I'd like to stay and chew the fat," Yorke says, having saved his voice's most beautiful range for last, so sweet, so comforting, so devoid of compassion for the living, "Of course I'd like to sit around and chat, but someone's listening in." The piano strikes ominous two-hand, four-finger chords and the band gets downright giddy.

Well, of course I'd like to sit around and chat.

The clarinets are more radiant than Charlemagne in all his glory. The trombones bubble. We are rising, returning to the world, which is no better than the land of nightmares in which our hero, of whom we will now take our leave, will live always.

There was nothing to fear, nothing to doubt.

We will whistle his little songs and carry his dreadful dreams with us as if they were songs. He knows it: "There's someone listening in," he says, pretending that he's about to leave when he can't.

Thanks so much, ladies and gentlemen. You've been a great audience. We'll be here all night.

Poor old Michael Finnegan begin again.

Hail to the thief

Not to gloat about it but you all shoulda done what I did with the new Radiohead album.

> "New Radiohead album?"
>
> > "Whass he talkabout, 'new Radiohead album,'
> > there ain't no new Radiohead album"
>
> *"Guy at* Last Plane to Jakarta *gone funny loco, man"*
>
> "Yeah that's right they ain't
> no new Radiohead album"

So you say! But there is a new Radiohead album, and it's called *Hail to the Thief*, and I'll bet you'd say that *Hail to the Thief* isn't a new Radiohead album at all, since it came out back in June and many of you had copies of it via Kazaa or Soulseek several months beforehand. I know, because lots of people wrote to me as soon as the unreleased tracks hit the peer-to-peers, asking me: "When are you going to write about the new Radiohead?" Which made me very irritable in the way that expectations make anybody irritable, I'd guess.

To the point where I decided I wouldn't listen to the album until the clamor about it died down a little.

A month passed; my wife listened to it through earphones on her iPod and told me it was pretty great; the letters became more insistent: "When are you going to write about Hail to the Thief?" My resolve strengthened. I became petulant. Maybe I won't even listen to it this year! Once it was in the changer and I was listening to stuff and I almost heard it, because the album started and I didn't know what it was, but then I figured it out and hit the "skip" button.

Months passed.

Went outside to have a cigarette last night and suddenly thought to myself: I wonder if the new Radiohead album's any good? Put it on the stereo first thing this morning.

Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. Umm, oh. Wow.

The handclaps on "We Suck Young Blood" practically write their own dissertation.

So, uh, right. Give me a week to get my thoughts together, and to try to rid myself of the memory of angry Radiohead fans attacking a fellow critic of mine who didn't happen to like Hail to the Thief (as though all intelligent people must necessarily love Radiohead! I don't get it). Let me process some of this. I'm not going to song-by-song the album, but it may take a couple of weeks to slog all the way through the mud, and the wet vines, and the stinking bodies, and the dead dry leaves, and all the people standing around waiting for the rain to clear up, which I don't think is going to happen because sometimes the rain doesn't clear up at all, but it may happen,

only what will we do then, when it’s not raining any more, you know some of us have grown very accustomed to it.

I will see you next week.

What if Bruce Lee had lived? This is the question Hail to the Thief attempts to answer.

OPEN ON: *the Hong Kong skyline just as the new day dawns. A man on a bicycle enters the frame at left, heading first across the screen and then away from us. When we can no longer see him,* ZOOM IN *just to the right of where the man on the bicycle was last visible.* MUSIC: *faint chimes; SFX: chickens, children yelling playfully at one another.*

CUT TO: *the close-walled interior of a live poultry shop. Quarters are very close, even cramped, but the general atmosphere is intimate rather than claustrophobic. Chinese-language signs adorn the walls and are elucidated by subtitles as the camera* PANS *240 degrees, beginning with the far right wall - they read "All sales final," "no gambling," etc.*

CUT TO: *the front entrance as seen from the back of the store, and* ZOOM IN *toward the door.* ENTER **JACK CHO** (Bruce Lee), *a gambler in his mid-fifties. He wears a polyester shirt unbuttoned to mid-chest, dark yellow-tinted glasses, and tight-fitting slacks. He is perhaps chewing a toothpick, or smoking.*

JACK CHO: I need to buy a chicken!

BUTCHER: Get out of here, can't you read the signs? [*He points toward a Chinese-language sign just above his scale, which a subtitle informs us reads "All Sales Final."*]

JACK CHO: All sales final??? [*begins laughing, at first ominously, then gradually with less control until he is giddy*] All sales final? Aaaaaah, oh, my God, all sales final? They...and then you...[*he leans up against the wall to prevent himself from falling over, now helpless with laughter*]

BUTCHER: [*Comes out from behind the counter, side-hugs* **JACK**] Yes, you're right! "All sales final," indeed!

NOTES OF 23/11/03 MEETING IN RE: "HAIL TO JACK CHO" aka "'04 BRUCE LEE VEHICLE"

present: James Cameron, director; Lloyd A. Silverman, producer; Calvin Broadus aka "Snoop Dogg," executive producer.

— Meeting called to order.
— JC states emphatically that HTJC script cannot be shot as-is. LAS and CB concur.
— SD suggests that JC script-doctor himself, citing past action film successes, crossover drama success e.g. Titanic, etc.
— LAS cites clause in Bruce Lee's contract forbidding any tampering with script. Clause predates studio's relationship with Lee and was present in contract when acquired in Viacom deal. CA state law esp. unforgiving in re: preexisting contracts. Contract renegotiation necessary before we can afford to even raise this issue.
— SD asks whether contract renegotiation is an option at this point. LAS replies that as we all already expecting to go over-budget on "Hail to Jack Cho," and as we can all remember the exhilarating first-weekend grosses of Lee's last film, "Bruce Leesiac," proposing renegotiation probably unwise at this point. SD responds that the film is completely unshootable and will cause audiences to stay away in droves, as there is neither action nor drama in it.
— After a long silence, meeting adjourned.

Review: Variety, June 1 2004 [excerpt]

...a return to form. No-one expects a retread of *Game of Death* at this point, and why should they? Bruce Lee had nothing left to prove after shooting the genre-defining *OK Bruce Lee*, and so he is free to explore his muse. Of course, it wouldn't be a Bruce Lee movie without action - and what action there is! The fists fly, the camera cuts left to right and back again like a rapt spectator at a tennis match, and the shrieks and howls of the combatants pierce the theater, and sometimes our hearts. Along the way (if we're not careful!) we may even learn something: about Bruce Lee, the man and the actor, and perhaps even about ourselves. ***½

FIN