

Winter 2020

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Recommended Citation

Mahler, Kristine Langley (2020) "Childe Roland and I to the Library Came," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 93 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss93/4>

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KRISTINE LANGLEY MAHLER

CHILDE ROLAND AND I TO THE LIBRARY CAME

I'VE BEEN WATCHING Tears For Fears music videos for months now, tossing up observations into a slag heap, trusting I'll know when I've hit something solid. My house sounds like a New Wave club; I directed my hair stylist to chop my chin-length bob into a quiff like Roland Orzabal's in the "Pale Shelter" video and five years later, I still have it. I'm dyeing it brown, now, instead of red. The binding agents of success are supposed to be the lessons learned by failure, but the walls keep collapsing. I'm tunneling toward a conclusion I can't see.

-X-

THE FIRST SHOT is a warning—SILENCE—as the "Head Over Heels" music video begins, panning down to reveal the study tables of a library. I've been here so many times that I don't even register the location-based reminder. I hear Roland Orzabal commanding the librarian to stay silent, to listen to what he has to say. Roland lumbers toward the counter, weighed down by two armloads of books. I can't tell if he struggled to open the library's door. Maybe he's been sleeping in the stacks, acquiring a book a day, saving them all to lay out before the librarian as visual evidence he's been here all along.

-X-

I USED TO GATHER Goya soda bottles from a downtown deli where a boy worked, displaying them like trophies on my dresser top. One for the time I pretended to be distractedly digging in my purse because I was too nervous to make conversation as he rung me up. One for the extra beat after my transaction when he suggested I read *A Clockwork Orange*. One for the time I returned to tell him I'd finished the book, but his father was working and I felt obligated to buy something so it didn't seem like I was just looking for his son.

-X-

REPETITION SHOWS EFFORT, and a presence so consistent that surely you must be recognizable by the time you show up with the fruits of your weeks, all that work obvious, to collect. Maybe Roland's stack of books is meant to awe the librarian; maybe it's meant to look pathetic, like *see how many times I came here and you never saw me*. Maybe she did, maybe that explains her eye-roll. Roland can barely hold the books in his arms, but he didn't shove them in a backpack. He didn't take two trips. He carried them all in one grand gesture.

-X-

I CAN WATCH Roland approach all day, that instant before failure, that hope like twenty-four millstones.

-X-

ROLAND HAS A fluffy brown mullet and a too-big brown trenchcoat—his sleeve seams hang halfway down his arms instead of being neatly right-an-

gled atop his shoulders. Or maybe his shoulders are just slumped. His awkwardness is so endearing I can hardly stand it, I'm uncomfortably drawn to a decades-old version of a boy whose plodding gait is nothing like the sylph-quick men who have traditionally attracted me. But if I strip off his hair, update his clothes, and remove the burden, he has the right large, sleepy eyes, the right soft bottom lip. Roland looks like my husband. Roland's been constructed to appear as a boy who can't get a girl, but he doesn't need to get a girl—he'd been married for three years when this video was filmed. Roland's courting process happened when he was a child; he met his wife when he was 13 and married her when he was 21.

-X-

AT 13 I couldn't look a boy in the eye. At 21 I told my future husband we either moved in together or we'd break up.

-X-

SHE DOESN'T EVEN look up at him as this huge pile of books is dropped with what must have been a thud, must have reverberated. The librarian's mind is elsewhere. It's not until Roland confesses *I wanted to be with you alone and talk about the weather* that she makes eye contact, like she can't believe he's coming at her with this nerdy line—who wants to talk about the weather, that trope of nothing-conversation? But it's that precise clause that moves me, silences me: the past tense is already present in the first phrase of the song. He want-ed because now, he has.

-X-

THERE WAS A boy who used to mumble at me in algebra II, tossing spit

wads at my neck, poking at my elbow until I'd turn around and then he'd look away, or look back blankly at me, *What?* I began a series of unvoiced communicative acts: arranging my body in positions of feigned disaffect, languorously tilting my head while pretending to ignore him—that's how I sought to retain his interest, convinced that any attention was proof I could be desirable. After months of half-hearted harassment, he finally said my actual name, leaning against his locker, no one else in the hall but his friend. I walked up and said, like a challenge, "Is there something you wanted?" but he averted his eyes; he had become something I wanted.

-X-

CURT SMITH GETS up from his table and leaves, like he's embarrassed by Roland's lack of finesse.

-X-

ROLAND SINGS *but traditions I can trace against the child in your face won't escape my attention*. I fixate on Roland and how he finally sustains eye contact with the librarian when he says *won't escape my attention*.

-X-

THERE IS NOTHING redeeming about his love object. She never smiles at him, never encourages him; she is constantly underwhelmed by his performance. She isn't overtly pretty, her thin hair in a severe chin-bob and stick-straight bangs. She's the antithesis of the sexy librarian—no come-ons, no cleavage, no softening. She is bored behind the counter, bored by Roland, annoyed by his presence. And that's the appeal, after all, isn't it? She will not be easily won. She's washed out in top-buttoned white, a December blonde, icy and snowy.

-X-

AS A GIRLTEEN, all I ever wanted was to be locked up tight, keyhole-turned like the harp in “Mickey and the Beanstalk,” something precious and guarded and protected. Something coveted so badly that a boy would risk anything to get me for himself. It was attractive, being wanted so much that if I couldn’t be convinced, I would have to surrender to the strength of someone else’s need. I saw evidence everywhere that capitulation was the role of a girl: Persephone accepting her six months in the underworld, Belle returning to the Beast after he released her. I dreamed someone would bend me to his will. Captivity narratives lodged in my subconscious desires, but since no one tried to capture me, they defined my approach, instead, to the ones I wanted to love me.

-X-

ROLAND AWKWARDLY RESTACKS the books while accusing the librarian of being standoffish—*you keep your distance with a system of touch and gentle persuasion*—and it’s the persuasion he wants to believe in, that she cares enough to hold him back gently, his eyes flickering up and down—now? Now?—unable to meet the librarian’s dull gaze because he’s lost in admiration, so overcome by the strength it takes to confess, to ask himself *could I need you this much?* like a middle-schooler with a crush, approaching with the tactics of a boy, not a man.

-X-

BUT I ALWAYS heard the line as “You keep your distance *and resist my touch* and gentle persuasion.” It’s a misconstruction assisted by the video—Ro-

land claiming that he'd been the one trying to touch the librarian—but I heard the effort, saw the reaching hand, felt the silken manipulation. I never gave up the sort of control I fantasized about losing; sometimes I cringed when my husband tried to turn my face to kiss my lips when I only wanted to offer my cheek, and he respected my non-verbals. But I wanted to be convinced.

-X-

EITHER WAY THE librarian sighs, frustrated at how he is misinterpreting her disinterest.

-X-

ROLAND PROCLAIMS, *Oh, you're wasting my time*, like she had done anything to encourage it, and follows up, *you're just wasting time*—and there it is, belief overcoming what seemed impossible by declaring it inevitable: you will succumb to me. The librarian watches Roland, a little concerned, as he leaves, but Roland's back is to the librarian. His heavy, gawky walk away from the counter as the chorus begins belies the weight of the books which caused his awkward steps at the beginning of the video. Something happens—something happened—and he doesn't know how he ends up head over heels—and then there's the rephrase: "*I never find out* till I'm head over heels."

-X-

THE SMALLEST GESTURE toward attentiveness made me fall for a boy. Something slight, like asking me to partner for a quiz because we sat beside each other, or reading a poem to a group in a dark lounge but meeting my eyes

during a specific line, or waiting for me after class because we were walking to the same dorm—me to my room, him to his girlfriend’s. It didn’t matter. I craved acknowledgment, and I did not realize, ever, that I had fallen in love with an idea more than a person, until it was too late and I was deep in the hole.

-X-

I FIND A *Vice* article from four years ago, mocking the cheesiness of the music video but also calling the video “absurd brilliance,” the author musing that people must have felt emotions more deeply in the ‘80s. This isn’t new territory; how could it be? There’s a pop-up video of “Head Over Heels,” but I can’t find an upload on YouTube. I remember one of the pop-ups made a reference to germs from animals when Curt kissed the monkey on the lips. I think that when the cartoon clovers swept across the screen, there was a pop-up about how four-leaf clovers are a symbol of luck. I feel like I’m inventing the pop-ups at this point. But I swear there was a pop-up about domestic violence when Roland pointed the gun at the librarian.

-X-

ROLAND FOLLOWS FATE, squinting at the card in his hand, ready to look up the answer. He knows his approach failed—*I made a fire and watching it burn, thought of your future*—because he believes he will succeed, despite his first encounter going down in flames. When the librarian pulls out a book to reshelv it, Roland is there, waiting behind the stacks, face popping through the opening like a creep, like someone determined. With one foot in the past, Roland knows failure never dissipates—it builds, it compounds,

it forces action. He glides away like a man on cloud nine, ascending to be near his angel as an orchestra plucks their strings. Roland asks himself, *Have you no ambition?*

Here's the part most lyrics pages on the internet don't include—Roland mutters, quietly, *What's the matter with*—and cuts himself off to begin the next verse. In the 1985 *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve* performance of “Head Over Heels,” Roland grits his teeth when asking the question. But after watching tens of versions of this song, I can tell when Roland's vocals are live. He grits his teeth when he's lip-synching to keep pace with the pre-recorded album version.

Because in nearly every live performance of “Head Over Heels” I can find on YouTube—a 1990 performance, a 2014 performance, a 2016 iHeart '80s performance, and a 1983 live version—before the song was even released on a record—Roland stretches out the phrasing of *have you no ambition*, removing the incomplete question. I think Roland invented “What's the matter with—” strictly for the music video; he never wants to sing it live.

So I stay in that moment when Roland steps outside the song, briefly, to address his persona in the video. I don't believe Roland intends the line to wrap into asking what's the matter with his mother, or his brother, or their hopes for him—he's too good of a songwriter to write something so provocative and then leave it on the table. I think he's asking *what's the matter with*

the librarian? Or I think he's asking *what's the matter with me?*

Either way, after uttering the question fragment, Roland turns his eyes to the camera in the music video, surprised at himself, surprised at what he revealed.

-X-

I WATCH THE original music video over and over on YouTube, posting about it on social media, rambling about the video in an interview for a literary journal. I can't stop. I'd screened all the Tears For Fears music videos five years ago to find one with a clip of the perfect New Wave quiff, my dream boy's haircut—Roland's—but I wasn't attracted to him at the time. I wanted to become him. I took his haircut for my own because I was tired of all of the attributes I desired existing only in others.

What if I could become the thing I wanted? If I could attract myself like the boys I'd wished had been attracted to me, I thought some sort of finality could be achieved, some sort of ouroboric fulfillment.

-X-

ROLAND'S PERSISTENCE IS asphyxiating. A man in a gas mask watches as Roland makes his final approach to the librarian. Curt layers his lyrics around Roland's verse, sublingual, humming a necessary catalyst: *Nothing ever changes when you're acting your age. Nothing gets done when you feel like a baby.* Roland is a man-child and nothing will happen as long as he shyly requests the librarian's attention. He has to demand it. He's 24—this feels

important—in this video, Roland Orzabal is 24.

-X-

DIDN'T I NESTLE myself into an early marriage? Didn't I snap the latch myself? I wanted the trap, and I created it, and then I told myself that someone had caught me, and I was grateful. I was 24 when I married my husband; my mother had been 21; her mother had been 19. I married the second boy who'd kissed me and everyone treated me like a baby but I thought of my future (*What's the matter with—*).

-X-

THE LIBRARIAN HAS waited for Roland. She flinches when he pulls out a small handgun and shoots at her, only to discover the gun is fake and it's asking her to BANG, with a question mark I don't notice until Video Rewatch #20-something. Roland's "joke" spins the whole video away from me, spins Roland and my fascination with his awkward crush by the shoulders, directing me toward a truth I innately understand: I don't need Roland stating *it's hard to be a man when there's a gun in your hand*, because it's not hard to be a man with a gun in your hand. It's hard to be a woman facing a spurned man with a gun in his hand.

-X-

MAYBE WHAT I received was a gift, angels-watching-over-me, repelling boys who would have damaged me deeper than just my pride. One was suspended for crack cocaine in his locker. One fucked an unpopular girl after school for weeks—we're not going out—until a popular girl asked him out. One had a friend with a gun; I saw it.

-X-

THE LIBRARIAN REACHES out and touches Roland for the first and only time, tweaking his nose, naughty little boy.

-X-

I CARRY A notebook with me for three days and dictate into my phone, enduring the vomit period when observations regurgitate and come out of their own will, unbidden. I prefer the assembly period, when I can take all these parts and lay them on the table, see what I'm missing, what I'm putting together.

I say I wanted to be desired and sought, but I floundered when a boy asked me to meet him for a movie, flustered at the attention, bungling an acquaintanceship because he wasn't the one I wanted to ask me. I say I wanted to be caught when I was a girl, but constraint terrified me as I grew toward understanding the repercussions of attachment. I say I wanted to be convinced, but I was a girl so eager to please and muffle her missteps that if a boy hadn't persuaded me and had his way anyway, I never would have told anyone.

-X-

ROLAND SINGS, *Oh, I feel so*— and cuts himself off again. He cannot admit what.

-X-

I LEAN OVER my keyboard for the tenth time, or the twentieth time—I can't tell any more—mouthing the lyrics back to Roland, *something happens and*

I'm head over heels, focusing on his face like a lover. It's all so familiar as I furrow my brow like Roland, the intensity of longing mirrored on my face for all the decades "Head Over Heels" has been on the radio, long before I saw the video, long before I saw Roland. Now I can't hear this song without picturing Roland's ecstatic emoting. I watch the concerts on YouTube to see if he is ever that rapturous again while performing these lines, and he's not. I can scrub those concerts out, and I do, because what I want is Childe Roland at the library, on his Browningian quest to wrestle futility and fantasy.

-X-

THE VIDEO SEGUES into a recording studio sequence. Roland has lost his awkwardness—or at least has gained confidence—belting out *and this is my four-leaf clover*. His luck, his success, his victory. Roland is so euphoric, so happy he can't stop grinning as he sings *I'm on the line, one open mind*—because he has put it all out there, Roland just needs one open mind; the librarian?—and as he repeats *this is my four-leaf clover* Roland can't help himself, throwing his hand up and moving the song's verse into the la-la-las. But what *is* Roland's four-leaf clover? The shift out of the library is precipitous—unexpected—and it's like I'm being told *don't forget, this is just a band. Just a band making a music video*. Maybe Roland's four-leaf clover is that he's the 24-year-old frontman of Tears For Fucking Fears.

-X-

WHAT DID I want at 24? A husband. What did I have at 24? A husband. What do I have to revise? One of my longest-held grudges and frustrations about my youth was that I was denied the teen romances I dreamed toward.

Does that matter when I locked up the end game?

-X-

THE BAND IS celebratory, everyone is smiling as they chant, like his back-up singers, agreeing, *la-la-la-la-la*, and then Roland says *in my mind's eye*. Did he dream it all up, his library woo session, preparing to win the librarian over with a gun if she didn't fall for him? Roland sings *one little boy, one little man* and it's not what happened in the past, it's how Roland sees himself, opening his mouth wide and throwing his hands in the air again as he says, *Funny how*, and it's the last time we see Roland sing. A brownish glaze falls on the next scene, a flash-forward sequence as, disembodied, Roland's voice echoes *time flies*. Roland's in a cardigan at a desk in a library, frowning slightly as the subdued librarian—is she his wife? His maid? It doesn't matter; he's got her—brings him a cup of tea. They have zero physical contact, Roland and his prize, and he barely looks up as she sets the cup on the desk. The librarian looks out the window, placing her hand on the back of his chair, how did I get here?

-X-

IS THIS ABOUT my hunger to watch a boy try and fail? Of course he doesn't—that is the crux of the video—he succeeds in the end. Roland's frustration results in smug success, the acquisition process and the actual object forgotten, because the point was proving dominance. Or is that final scene a boy's fantasy of success, a wish that was actually unfulfilled, to see the unattainable laid low and knuckling under, meekly bringing a cup of tea, trying not to distract?

-X-

AT THE END of the 1985 *Dick Clark* performance as he sings, “Funny how time flies,” Roland’s wedding ring gleams on his finger, his final proof. In performances during the 2000s, Roland lets the last line hang out there, unvoiced, ending the song *Funny how...* because it is evident: he has aged, we have aged, time has flown.

-X-

I FREEZE-SCREEN THE joy, the pure happiness on Roland’s face in the penultimate scene of the video—before his blank conquest of the librarian, after his nervous awkwardness—because his unbridled ecstasy is what’s kept me coming back. His certainty that he has found his four-leaf clover: confession achieves an outcome, one way or another.

I’ve spent months embodying Roland because it was my role. I spent my youth longing for something I didn’t have—pursuit. I was sure I’d never be the librarian, the trophy, the treasure. But if I grow out this quiff, it will turn into a mullet before it reaches chin-length. If I dye it red again, this phase will pass, five years of fixation, with no reminder but a handful of selfies and some version of “Head Over Heels” as the first recommended suggestion in my YouTube profile.

I think about that cup of tea, untouched, a presence signifying a transaction had been made. I think about that pile of books, the unwieldy weight of longing barely contained within two arms, dropped on the counter with

one unmistakable gesture. *I am here.*