

Jack Norton

Way to Burn

REFLECTION STATEMENT

Despite our significant progress, it still seems almost natural and uniform for men to repress their feelings today. I can't say that this was the plan for my short Tragedy, "Way to Burn", all along, but this certainly was how it developed over the year I spent writing it.

Over many form changes, one essential reality remained consistent: the interplay between existentialist philosophies, nihilism, absurdism, and psychoanalytical theories of regression and repression and their manifestations in modernity and media. This manifestation of repressed emotion delved into many areas of artistic expression, such as T.S. Eliot's works, but most notably the lyrical and emotional expression of The Cure's frontman, Robert Smith. I started listening to the angst-ridden screams of Kurt Cobain, the wailing howls of Smith in music, and the disconnect between the stage personas and the men in interviews. The more research I did, the more I saw that female artists were quite willing to discuss personal lyrics in these similar interviews. In contrast, male artists were far more restricted in discussing lyrics of a personal nature.

The title "Way to Burn" is cognisant of the Sisyphean, Freudian and Jungian aspects that encapsulate the central paradigm of masculine repression at the play's heart. The Sisyphean nature of repeated repression and, consequently, regression of the self's emotions and the Jungian aspect of the awareness of the subconscious self, cause the issues, yet the lack of will to confront them. Therein lies the toxic paradigm that, unfortunately, is still attached to males today.

I intended to dismiss the notion that we've finished this debate and implore the audience to keep this topic alive and not simply move on. I can't provide a solution but ask that we continue scrutinising this topic.

SCRIPT

Scene One

The cabin, night.

The stage is unlit and pitch black.

We hear the ambient sounds of rain pattering on a glass window.

A blue light projector casts the stage into rain-like patterns.

An answering machine blinks a red dot.

The stage is still very dark.

VOICEMAIL: You have 23 voicemails: Hey Tom, me again, y'know, your manager; just letting you know it's been two weeks since you spontaneously isolated yourself in the ass-end of nowhere for inspiration. A progress update would be appreciated.

Click of an old answering machine.

VOICEMAIL: You have 22 voicemails: Hi Tom, just checking up on your progress with the album. The label's getting antsy about seeing a lack of progress, or any progress for that matter.

Click of an old answering machine.

VOICEMAIL: You have 21 voicemails: Hi To-

The answering machine is abruptly turned off by Tom, sitting in an armchair.

Lights up on stage.

The stage is dimly lit, revealing both sides and a screen for projecting centre stage.

The left side is completely bare.

The right side has an armchair facing the audience, a fireplace on the right wall further upstage, and a small table with a glass and bottle of whiskey on it, downstage in front of the armchair.

Tom appears; he sits in the armchair and puts his head in his hands.

Tom goes to take a drag but stops and examines the half-smoked cigarette.

He puts it out in the ashtray.

Lights down on stage.

Scene Two

The cabin, night.

The sound of rain pattering.

A window is projected onto a screen, centre upstage, along with two shadows: a male and a female sit together, giving the illusion of watching the rain pour outside.

The right side of the stage lights up as Tom lights a cigarette.

Tom stands in front of the fireplace, holding a glass of gin in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

He goes to pick up an acoustic guitar next to the armchair, but his fingers linger, and then he shakily draws them back.

He drains the glass, puts the cigarette between his teeth and grabs the guitar.

He carries the glass and guitar to the armchair and places the glass down.

Next to the chair is a half-drunk bottle of gin.

He strums a single note, and as he changes position, he shakes even more.

He plays a slow, broken E minor chord, an arpeggio, his hands shaking more each time.

On the sixth note, he drops the pick but doesn't pick it up.

Tom inhales a shaking breath but can't bring himself to finish the melody.

He sets the guitar aside.

Tom pours a glass of gin to the top, it spills over, but he doesn't seem to notice.

Tom puts the cigarette out and drains the glass.

The sound of rain grows as the stage fades to black.

Scene Three

The cabin, night.

Lights up on the right side of the stage.

Tom stands in front of the fireplace, holding a glass of gin and a cigarette in the other hand.

The bottle of gin is refilled.

Tom makes a fist and sways on the spot for a few moments absentmindedly.

He drains the glass, puts the cigarette between his teeth and places his hands on the mantelpiece with his head staring at the ground.

Tom sits in his armchair and begins to write lyrics on a notepad.

Lights up on the left side of the stage, revealing a bar setting.

A young woman, Lily, stands at the bar drinking red wine.

Offstage, cheers are heard.

Tom, with an acoustic guitar around him, stumbles into view.

He looks offstage at the bartender, who is hidden from the audience.

TOM: Fix us a gin and tonic, will you?

He turns left to Lily.

TOM: If I make you laugh, you have to buy me a drink.

LILY turns right to look at Tom.

LILY: (Confused) Sorry, who are you?

TOM: Was just up on stage.

LILY: Ah, right.

Pause.

TOM: So how about that drink-for-a-laugh deal?

LILY: I can't tell if you're flirting or broke.

TOM: Yes, to both. So, about that drink?

Lily checks her phone.

LILY: Sure, why not? It's not likely to happen, though. Like, I gotta leave in a bit and work on-

Clearly disinterested, Tom cuts across her.

TOM: What were your thoughts on the show?

LILY: Oh, um, it's not really my thing, y'know... music.

Tom accepts a drink from the offstage left.

TOM: Everyone has a type of music.

LILY: No type; I don't listen to music.

Midway through a sip, Tom pauses and swallows.

LILY: You good?

Tom ignores this. He breathes calmly and stares at her.

TOM: (Genuinely confused) I beg your pardon. What the hell do you mean you don't listen to music?

LILY: I- just never really got into it.

TOM: "Never really got into-" Are you having a laugh? The greatest art form, and you couldn't "get into it"?

She shrugs.

LILY: Sorry, I prefer books, poetry. Y'know, T.S. Eliot and Nietzsche.

TOM: Who the hell is Eliot? Actually, y'know what? Whatever. A song without music is basically poetry.

LILY: Yeah... I guess. I like the lyrical aspects. Just not the actual music part.

TOM: I don't believe...

She snorts and then straightens up.

LILY: That doesn't count.

TOM: So you like T.S.- what's-his-face and- I'm not gonna bother pronouncing that other bloke's name.

LILY: *(It's her turn to be incredulous.)* You don't know one of the most influential poets of the 20th century? Famously wrote about how shit current life was?

TOM: Sounds like an incel. Did he consider going outside?

LILY: Shush, you don't know any poets.

TOM: You'd be mistaken.

LILY: Huh?

TOM: Yeah, all my idols are poets: Kurt Cobain and John Lennon. All songwriters are poets.

LILY: Including yourself? You're comparing yourself to, who I assume are famous musicians?

TOM: Rockstar. Not a musician, and yeah, 'cause I am one.

LILY: Does doing three shows make you a musician? I mean, I don't know much about the business, but y'know.

TOM: I've actually done two.

Lily laughs.

Tom sticks out his hand.

Lily doesn't take it.

He withdraws it.

TOM: I'm Tom Reed. Guitarist and vocalist.

LILY: That kinda sounds made up.

TOM: Forward, aren't you? I like that... Miss?

LILY: Corbeau.

TOM: Blackbird? That's French, right?

LILY: *(Pleasantly taken aback)* Wow, how did you- you don't know who Eliot is, but you know French?

TOM: Eh, bits and pieces. Spontaneous, aren't I? So about those two and a half drinks for two and a half laughs? Miss Corbeau?

LILY: Hey, we agreed to *a drink* to make me laugh.

TOM: I'm altering the deal.

LILY: Alright, alright. A deal is a deal.

Pause.

LILY: *(Sarcastic)* I must admit, you've intrigued me, Mr Reed.

Tom flashes her a perfect smile.

TOM: I'm gonna go get the drinks, if you don't mind. Miss Corbeau.

Tom walks out of view.

Lily smiles to herself.

Lights down on the left side.

Lights up on the right side of the stage.

Tom is breathing heavily.

He sets aside the pen.

The window displays the discombobulated lyrics he wrote.

They are in an untidy scrawl and without punctuation:

*"Itneverchanges. Nothingchanges. Alwaysthesame.Alwaysburn
Illalwaysfindawaytoburn.Icannotcannot. Fadingandpaling
Ohchristohchristitsalwaysthesame. Theendalwaysis. Theendalwaysis.
Theendalwaysis. Stopstopstop."*

He picks up the gin bottle on the side table and gropes for his glass but sees that he left it on the mantel.

Tom drinks directly from a whisky bottle and gags.

Tom picks up the bottle and drinks again.

He gags and vomits on the floor to the side of the armchair but persists.

He places it back down on the table.

Lights down on the right side of the stage.

Scene 4

Lights up on the right side of the stage.

Tom stands in front of the fireplace, holding a glass of bourbon in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

He drains the glass.

He puts it down on the side table, on which there is the notepad.

He picks up the notepad and starts to write.

The window at the back of the stage reveals random words being written and projected before Tom tears out the page and starts again.

This occurs six times:

“Lover. Lost. ‘22. Her. Eyelikethesea? Stupid, stupid. Itrembledstuck. Smileasun? Stay. Her. Loverdontleave. Breakwhatsbroken. Fix. Fix. Blind. Drink. Isolation. Yourname. Blur. Nolove. Silence. Shouldaknownsouner. ThereIgo. Lacuna. Mysweetlacunaandmelancholy. Nobody. Leave. Breed. I. Eyeoftheneedle. Shatter. Spectre. Bendedknee. Sleepnomore. God? Nosound. Wavesthatmakeyourown. Something, something. Anything? Nothing.”

Tom puts his head in his hands in frustration.

Then, he writes a title for the song “Cigarettes by Starlight”, which appears on the window.

Lights up on the left side of the stage, which features a bench that faces upstage. The window now has the silhouettes of trees and a faint moon. Tom and Lily sit on the bench. The older Tom stares at the left side of the stage before bending down the page to start writing, which lights down on the right side of the stage.

Lily offers Tom a cigarette.

LILY: You smoke?

Tom turns to her, surprised.

TOM: You do? But yeah, if you don’t mind.

Lily fishes a cigarette from a packet and puts it in Tom’s mouth. As Tom leans in for the light, she speaks.

LILY: We’ve all got our little idiosyncrasies, right?

Tom smiles at her and draws back once he’s lit.

TOM: What’s mine?

Lily giggles.

LILY: Okay, well- here’s the thing: I could be a bit mistaken, but a very minor case of severe alcoholism?

TOM: Is it an addiction if you’re good at it? Lily?

Pause, shocked silence.

LILY: Sorry, I need a sec just to marvel at- wow.

TOM: Marvel as much as you’d like; it’s genuine moments of genius mixed in with the most genuine moments of idiocy you’ll ever see. It’s quite an adventure being with me, you see.

LILY: *(Giggling)* I believe you.

Pause.

TOM: So, did you listen to the artists I told you about?

LILY: Yeah, I did.

TOM: And?!

LILY: I liked them. The Cure, The Smashing Pumpkins, they’re very- ah, what’s the word? Like, flows well? Something like that.

TOM: Melodic?

LILY: Yeah, yeah. Melodic, if a little bit depressing. Like, actually, day-ruining.

TOM: Is that a problem?

LILY: Not at all; I think art *should* make you feel, even if it’s misery. Like they’re all stuck, y’know?

TOM: What do you mean?

LILY: So, like of, like, sex, drugs and heartbreak, and they say they’re gonna change in the songs, but they turn ‘round and make another album about the same stuff.

TOM: Yeah, nah, I get it. Like it’s the setting, right? Yeah, lotta musicians play ‘cause they got something to say about something they can’t change.

Pause.

LILY: Like, I don’t know, love?

TOM: 100%, it’s why like 99.9% of songs are about desire.

Lily snaps her fingers.

LILY: Oh! You'll be proud of me. Like that Nirvana guy who screams like he's on fire, which I'm not a fan of.

TOM: Kurt Cobain, and yeah, I think it's beautiful. The whole grunge scene in the '90s was kinda punk 2.0.

LILY: You think a 25-year-old screaming on stage, not singing, screaming, is beautiful?

TOM: It's why, to me, music is the greatest art form, right? Because in a book, you can't get that unrestrained agony blasting into your ears. Like in that moment, you know what he's feeling, right? And that's art to me.

Lights down right.

Tom has his face in his hands and is shaking.

More lyrics appear on the window, even more untidy and frantic:

"Getitout. Getitout. Howitends. Getyourfuckingvoiceout. Alwaysends. Alwaysburns. Notabang. Notanoise. Notascream. Butawhimper. Alwaysawhimper. Cease. Silence. Stop. Theendalwaysis. Silent. Splinter. Decayanddie. Splintered. Inmyhead. Dieanddecay. Cannot. I. Cannot. Alwaysawaytoburn."

Lights down on stage.

SCENE 5

Lights up on the left side of stage.

Tom is sitting down; there is the faint sound of a crowd cheering.

The sound of a door opening.

Tom takes half a line of cocaine off the table before Lily enters.

LILY: What the hell are you doing?

TOM: I know it looks like-

LILY: Christ, Tom, we agreed you wouldn't get into that shit. I can't- I just- fuck!

Lily sits down on the couch with her head in her hands.

Tom moves closer to her.

TOM: It's just to take the edge off my anxiety- look, those people out there, all those voices screaming in your ear... It's unbearable... I can't explain... It just triggers something in me that makes me shut down.

Tom tries to put his arm around her shoulder, but she shrugs it off and stands up.

Lily crosses her arms.

LILY: It's cocaine; it should do the opposite.

Tom tries to reach for her, but Lily draws back.

TOM: It's not just relieving the weight of all those nobodies; it's everything. Everything just goes away, that perpetual feeling of breaking into pieces. I know you know how I feel right now.

Pause.

LILY: I do, and that's why I feel like my words have weight.

Tom puts his hands in his pockets and moves out of the way of Lily.

TOM: How's this for an excuse: you only live once, nothing matters, and we're all gonna die anyway. I think a girl I knew said that to me once when trying to convince me to try grass.

Lily snorts and immediately covers her mouth.

LILY: That was different; you can't drop dead from a single joint.

TOM: Sure, but you can experience psychosis.

LILY: Get out of my way, Tom.

TOM: Fuck you.

LILY: What did you just say to me?

TOM: I said fuck you, Lil. I change my mind. You don't understand; nobody does.

Lily slaps Tom.

She is close to tears.

LILY: Because I'm not a fucking narcissist

She gestures to the table.

TOM: Since I started taking it, I've never been more accessible. I'm headlining fucking Glastonbury 2022.

LILY: So because you've effectively been burned out and drained of talent, you need to be high as a fucking kite to stay relevant?

TOM: I'd rather be addicted than use a fucking ghostwriter. On that day, I quit music or overdose, whichever comes first.

LILY: It's not just you that I'm concerned about. I'm not gonna get roped into this shit and get my life ruined.

TOM: What fucking life? You follow me around when I tour.

Pause.

TOM: Fuck. I didn't mean-

VOICE OFFSTAGE: The opening act has finished; you're up.

TOM: Lily, I- look just-

LILY: Go.

Tom walks past her, giving her one last look before walking offstage left.

Lily sits down and starts crying with her head in her hands.

She stares at the half-finished line.

Lights down on stage.

Lights up on the right side of stage.

Tom holds his glass so tightly it shatters in his hand.

Blood runs from his cuts.

He doesn't notice.

He walks offstage right.

Lights down on stage.

SCENE 6

Tom sits in his armchair with a glass of brandy.

He drains the glass and sets it down.

Lights are down on the right side of the stage.

Tom and Lily are sitting down.

They are both drunk, though Lily is significantly more drunk.

Tom puts a line of cocaine on the table.

He snorts it and jolts up.

TOM: Christ, Christ, Christ. So, get this right? It's a two-hour concept album called You, and it's a huge metaphor for Orpheus and Eurydice, but it's super miserable and like set in the 80s music scene.

His speech is a little slurred but mostly fast.

He sniffles his nose.

LILY: I dunno; seems too long. I mean, like, two hours. As an unprofessional music enjoyer, I feel like that's a tad too long. Two hours of anything is too long... wait.

LILY's speech is more slurred.

LILY goes to do a line, and Tom stops her.

TOM: Hey, I may have seven different substances coursing through my veins, and I may be able to feel my own eyeballs vibrating, but I don't think that's a good idea, Lil.

LILY: Ah, who're you to judge?

TOM: Y'know, that's a fair point. Nah, w- wait a sec: doesn't alcohol, like, fuck your decision-making thingy in your brain or whatever?

LILY: Oh yeah, are you a neurologist? I thought not.

TOM: Wait, hold on a sec. Why the sudden interest now?

LILY: I don't - don't know, man, boredom? Like, I just don't take en-enough risks?

TOM: You're a literal smoker in 2021, despite the research about it.

LILY: Yeah, but like that's legal. Aren't you the guy who said verbatim, "We're here briefly, then we're dust. Gone, and there's no encore." I thought, "Wow, that's the most fucked up thing I'm ever gonna hear."

TOM: Nothing matters, but you do. You know damn well I wasn't thinking of that when I said it.

LILY: No one likes a gatekeeper. Are you really gonna make a whole thing about this?

TOM: I'm not gatekeep- Look-

Tom sighs.

TOM: No, I'm not gonna make a whole thing of it. Just be careful is all I'm saying.

Lily does a line and bolts up.

TOM: Lil? You alright?

LILY: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm fine. God, that's-

Lily does another line.

TOM: Christ, Lil, stop.

LILY: Isn't this what you wanted?

TOM: What the hell? No, I- I never asked.

Tom holds her.

Tom does not see the line of blood run from her nose.

TOM: Alright, let's calm down. Let's take a break, yeah?

Silence. She does not respond. She shakes in his arms.

TOM: Lil?

Still no response.

Tom holds her.

She starts to convulse more violently.

TOM: Oh God!

He turns her onto her back.

TOM: Lil, what the hell- what do I do? I don-

Tom looks around frantically. He scrambles for the phone in his pocket and drops it while fumbling. Tom stands and paces with it up to his ear.

Lily stops convulsing.

Tom drops the phone and scrambles to kneel beside her.

TOM: No, no, no, no, no. Hey Lil, hey, it's me- please, please jus- just. No, please.

Tom puts his head on her chest. Realisation dawns on his face.

Tom's voice has broken.

Silence.

Tom sits holding her while weeping.

Lights down on stage.

Long pause.

Lights up on both sides of the stage.

Tom's hands are shaking as he tries to light his cigarette.

He succeeds after a few attempts and inhales deeply.

The cigarette is reduced to nothing, and the hot ash falls onto Tom's hand onto his lap, but he doesn't seem to notice.

He continues to smoke, not noticing the cigarette is burning his fingers.

Lights down.

SCENE 7

Lights up on stage.

Tom lies, dishevelled, at his desk, passed out.

A cigarette sits in his hand.

The whiskey bottle is now empty.

Tom plays Em, Am, and Fmaj7 in a slow ballad-like melody on the acoustic guitar, strumming with his thumb gently.

Tom tries to complete the melody he played at the beginning and starts to sing.

The lyrics appear on the screen unbroken and grammatically correct:

TOM: No matter which way I turn
There'll always be- be a way to burn.

He sits, thinking.

TOM: Always. Every. Time.

Tom snorts and then chuckles.

He straightens up and laughs.

Yet his shadow projected on the screen continues playing the melody.

And laughs.

And laughs.

He smashes the guitar to pieces.

Tom shrieks with laughter so hard he doubles over.

Still playing, the shadow is held from behind by a female shadow.

Lights down on stage.

The final chord ends on an arpeggio, a broken chord.