The Art of Autobiography: Earl Sweatshirt’s “Grief”

On Earl Sweatshirt’s “Grief”, Earl summons old and recent demons for a chance at progress.

In the age of the smart phone--of social media, and of the “self-ie”, we’ve made it harder to be with people. We know this, and yet it seems like people don’t care--or at least unable to. The Internet, social networks, and bios have given us a way to become, instead of becoming. Instead of moving toward each other, we move away--picture by picture, arbitrary post by arbitrary post. We consolidate. We brand. Meaning then becomes what I can produce, not who I am to you.

It’s easy to paint a picture of a young man growing up by posting a picture of them dressing differently than they did a year ago, or posting a quote, or a meme, or picture of a place they moved to. But in Sweatshirt’s “Grief”, he creates space in order to be visible. The major difference between a song like his and let’s say someone like FKA Twigs, or Big Sean, (an early innovator of “just say it” rap and one of the many rappers who got on the concept of talking about your immediate life, refined by rapper Curren$y, wrong) is the fact that Earl’s song is a confessional. This is where Drake lives. But the beauty, and talent of a person who’s clearly developing his craft on a song, while exuding development and growth *in* the song, is hardly witnessed--unless you listen to Kendrick Lamar, or a Childish Gambino.

On Grief, Earl drifts over a stable drum pattern, with light swing, and repeating pad. He touches briefly on a recent break up and goes into “detail” about thing that have happened at his apartment which he dubbed “Babylon” on an NPR interview. Soon after the breakup he admits that, “376 was brothel/we had females coming every hour on the dot”. He also dabs into his anger about putting his all into rap. Losing himself, and holding on emotionally, and mentally, for dear life “Lately I’ve been panicking alot/feeling like I’m stranded in a mob/scrambling for xanies out the canister to pop/never getting out of hand/steady handling my jock…” Not only is this hard to say, present, and admit, but he does it gracefully, without retention, is careful in his alliteration, and timing, and but stays away from delving into hyperbole or irony. “I was making waves, you was surfing in em/dealing with the stomach pains just from birthing niggas’ shit” Is another line Earl lashes off. And because the song is like a confession, and because the production makes it sound like he’s in the dark wondering alone (as does the video) you won’t understand everything that he mentions. The art of it, is that it’s leading the listener, and Sweatshirt, somewhere, which is precisely what happens when the hook comes back around “Good grief/ I’ve been reaping what I sow/nigga, I ain’t been outside in a minute…” Earl annunciates “Good Grief” here, with confidence. It’s good he’s expressing. Its way different from where he started in the beginning with a monotone, unsure “Good grief” where he sounds uninterested--like a pessimistic therapy patient. Through his delving into his recent past he finds some kind of solace within his bars (Solace, the title of his new EP, actually)

But he doesn’t stop there. In that moment of confidence: the picture taken and uploaded, the movement onto the next—Earl takes us, as well as himself, further on into the darkness. You witness a come down. You know the story not over--“Fleeting thoughts on a leash, for the moment/high as fuck, I’ve been alone in my shit/ for the longest”. He continues his spout of anger as if he doesn’t want to let go. “Snakes sliding in the street/Mama taught me how to not be like them bodies lying in the pigs/ riding them. I’m a target so it’s hard to even eye me in them. If he ain’t dying for me, then I ain’t riding with them.” He journeys into more insight: he doesn’t feel he’s connected to people because he’s famous. In proclamations like these and others on the track, at this point Earl seems defensive-- at the same time teetering on a breakthrough. By the end of the song he mentions his grandma who’s passed away, and begins to slip back into a place immaturity…”Find a bottle/I’ma wallow where I’m lying at.” Then the final confession: “I just want my time and my mind in tact.” Then he goes into revelation: the part of the story that ends up in the listener. The part we don’t get when we upload a picture—our gift for being. “But when they both gone, you can’t buy em back.” Earl leaves, contemplating his life. He brings in the wonder just in time for the song to descend into an instrumental, and just in time to leave you with something to think about. It is neither ironic, nor is it preachy. It is strong example productive reflection, and artistry, in an age where music and media are based on saying and presentation, and not challenging.