I'm sitting in the front passenger seat of Megan's silver Corolla named Antonio. It's a Friday night in Brampton, and we're looking for something to do. We're well on our way to Bolton to pick up the third girl of our group.

Megan turns down Z103.5. "So, what are we even doing tonight? Jack's?"

"God no. I'm too scarred from the last time we went; that place is sketchtastic. Let's pick up Charla, and we'll figure it out then."

"Sounds good."

We sit in a comfortable silence, broken by me turning the radio volume up. "Welcome to Pump It or Dump It!" says the radio DJ. "Y'know how it is, we play a song, you tell us if you like it. . ." The DJ is interrupted by my cell phone ringing. "Shit, it's my Mom." I turn down the radio and answer, "Yeah, I locked the front door. Don't know when I'll be home. I don't know. We don't even know what're doing. Sure, leave me something to eat. Ok. Ok. OKAY. Bye."

I turn the radio back up. The DJ is done talking, and the music is blaring. There's a heavy techno beat pulsating through Antonio's speakers. "Oh God, not another dubstep song," I complain. Then I hear a rapper's voice. I'm immediately drawn to his voice; it's harsh, it's rough. It's what rappers should sound like. Being raised on Tupac's West Coast rapping gave me a penchant for rough-voiced rappers. It's that penchant that doesn't allow me to take Drake's raps seriously; his nasally voice annoys me rather than draws me in. I've always associated rap with a rough tone. Maybe because when I started listening to rap at a young age, the content of songs was "rough" to me: drugs, sex, the ghetto. Listening to Tupac rapping about Compton wouldn't have been the same were it not for his rough tone of voice.

So we're done?
That's the real shit?
We used to hold hands like field trips.¹
The song is cut short by the DJ taking phone calls of drunken people "pumping" or "dumping" the song. He doesn't mention the artist, or the song title. And I'm left wondering who it was.

Weeks later my Twitter and Facebook feeds are filled with the talk of an artist named Childish Gambino. I decide to check him out. I lie in my bed at 12:30am, unable to sleep. I grab my laptop from underneath my bed, navigate to Youtube and search for any Childish Gambino playlists. I hit the jackpot with an eighty video filled playlist. I plug my headphones in and listen. The first song of the playlist is "Freaks and Geeks." I love his wordplay already.

My friends get sloppy drunk  
I stay whiskey neat  
My clique should be cancelled  
Freaks and geeks.²

The second song of the playlist begins with a piano playing a simple chord progression, followed by a strong techno beat. It's the song I heard in Megan's car that night! The Pump It or Dump It track that was listened to but remained nameless.

The song is called "Heartbeat"; I fall asleep listening to it on repeat. The song carries layers to it, each as different as the next: contentment buried between anger and longing. Starting with those soft piano chords and the whisper of a backbeat, a gentle, reverb-drenched voice comes in -

I want you to know  
That I'm ready to go  
Heartbeat. My heartbeat  
I want you to know  
That whenever you are around  
Can't speak, I can't speak.³

The intro gives off the initial impression of a broken heart ballad, sung by a ditched lover-boy. But then the heavy techno beat kicks in and the tone changes. The song is angry. Less a broken heart ballad and more a you-left-me-but-screw-you-I'll-be-fine power statement.

The lyrics transform with the beat and match the change in tone. Now the lyrics tell the story of a boy confused. He was with a girl, now he's not.
But he can't get her out of his head. And she can't get him out of hers. They both have other people in their lives –

I know what your boy like
Skinny tie and the cuff type.

But that doesn't mean they still don't see each other.

I might just text you
Turn your phone over ... I come along when you least expect me.

There's anger in his voice that lets the listener know that both these people know they're wrong for each other:

I'm a ghost and you know this
That's why we broke up in the first place.

But they can't get away from one another. They get into this vicious cycle where they

Fuck till they come to conclusions. . .

and say it's over and go back to their respective partners:

So I'm chilling with my girlfriend
But she's not my real girlfriend
Yeah, she's got a key to my place
But she's not my real girlfriend.

Everything about this song is confusing. There's only one voice, his. But I still get the female perspective of this story of a couple gone wrong. Only that female perspective has no voice; I'm hearing it through his. In a single voice, I hear both sides of the same story.

I've always seen rap as a way of telling a story. Whether it's the story of someone overcoming struggle, how the rapper met a girl, or even a story about a crazy party. The only difference between a rap story and a normal story is that raps never give the listener the full story. In "Heartbeat," I know there's a guy and a girl, and I know that the two of them shared something.
I have no idea what the girl's name is. Or what she looks like, or how they met. But I do know how the relationship ended, and how it still lingers on. I don't need the girl to be a part of the story because Gambino is giving her a voice and telling their story together.

At the beginning of the song I didn't know what it was going to be like. Is this going to be a song where the male rapper bashes his ex-girlfriend? Or is it a song of his undying love? Or is it his way of saying that he's not over her and he probably never will be, and he knows neither will she? Is it a song about him telling her she's with the wrong guy? Yes, to all counts. This song is all that and more. By the end, the listener thinks he's finally given up:

Ayo fuck this.
Are we dating?
Are we fucking?
Are we best friends?
Something in between that?
I wish we never fucked and I mean that,
Not really though.

But he hasn't. This song represents those volatile relationships that you can't seem to let go of. It doesn't matter if it's a long term relationship, or a one-time fling. It's one of those things that you know is bad for you, but you can't stay away. And you can't explain why you keep going back: are you a masochist and enjoy the hurt? Or are you hopeful that this time, this last time, things will work out? His change of tone represents both these aspects. The harsh tone, present throughout the rapping of the song, with the hard Rs that growl from the depths of his throat, is the masochist side that enjoys the pain and the thrill of being with someone who is totally wrong for him. His soft tone, saved for the chorus and woven between the heavy beat and harsh tones, is the hope that things will change and it'll hurt less. The song balances between the soft and the hard. That balance leaves the listener questioning: is this going to hurt? Or will it be alright?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGGIrvWIFKw&feature=kp
