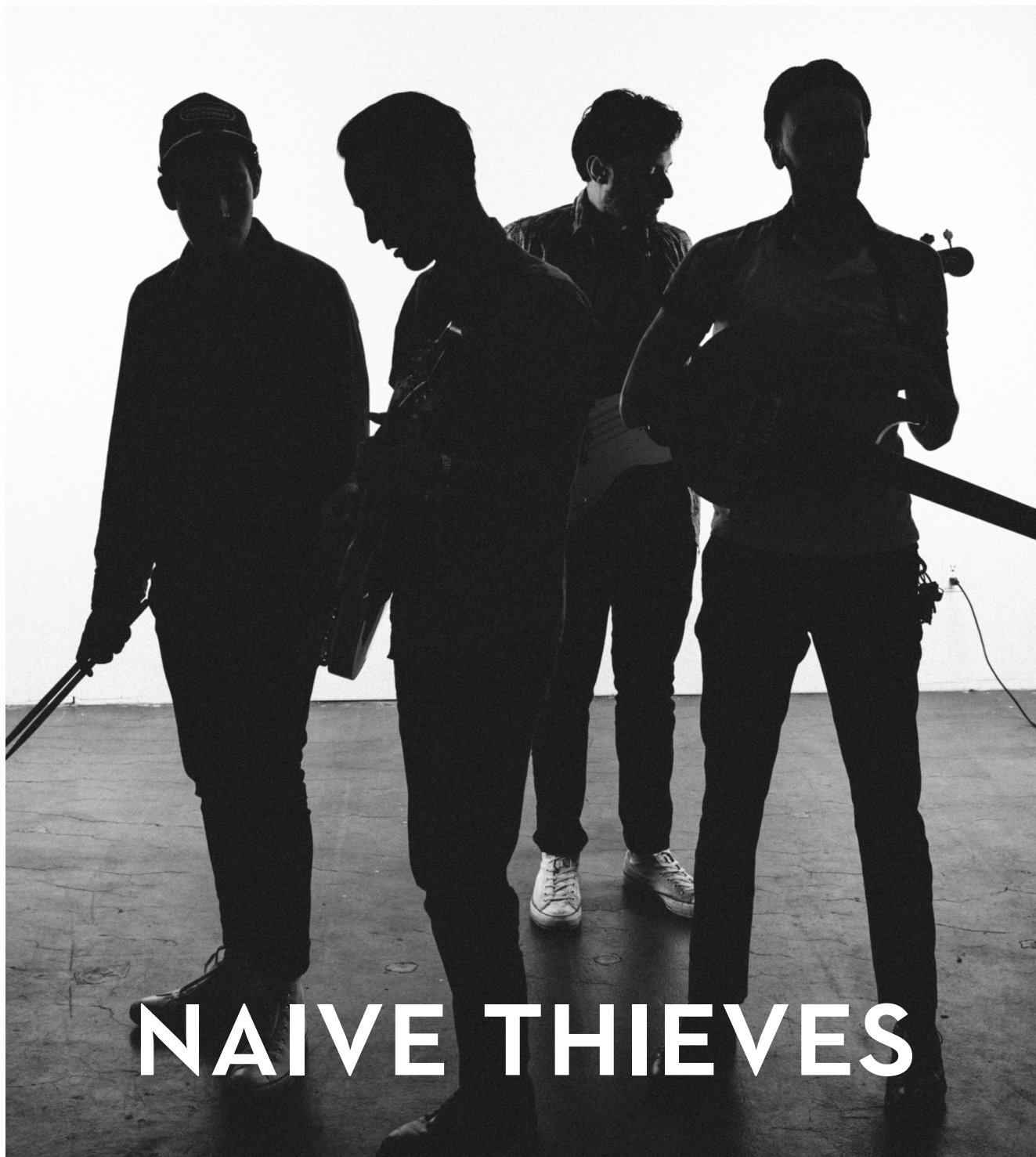


BUNCH

A GUIDE FOR THE DARING CREATIVE



THE *music*
ISSUE

CENTERSTAGE

We know that the journey to success can be beautiful and rewarding but what happens when the doubt and obstacles are too much to bear? Designer Vanessa Hernandez pulls the curtain back on the taboo topic of depression in the creative community.

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“Vanessa, I know. Me too.”

It's that small, quiet affirmation that stops me in my tracks and makes me calm. It's kind in its tone, gentle, and says more than I could hope to remember. I close my mouth and I can feel my jaw ache from the anxiety attack that made me just want to get it all out, explaining away everything that had enveloped me. Fighting against the beginning of a stutter, I say over and over how I feel trapped and how nobody knew. Nobody could. Not even five minutes after the beginning of a perfectly uneventful conversation, it came at me hard and fast. At first, I didn't even realize what was happening, something I find funny given the circumstances. My face is sweaty and hot and looks like I've spent the day hiking up actual mountains than just the ones in my head.

“Breathe. You don't have to explain anything to me. Let's just breathe.”

My brain loses steam and finally slows from its million-miles-per-hour course, something that's been its number one bad habit for as long as I can remember. This goddamn stubborn brain of mine. It does things on its own time, at its own pace, and

now more than ever it's one I can't keep up with. It takes me from zero to a thousand in an instant, overanalyzing, snowballing, burning out, or it does the opposite: forgets to keep being a brain. I lose places in conversations, I forget words, I have the ‘wait, what did I come into this room for?’ feeling that we've all experienced. It's all new and it's all unwanted. There are more and more of these little things I keep finding that I need to work on. I add them to the list in my notebook.

I try to make good with what I've got, see the positive in it, but it's not easy. The notebook helps because it's a tangible record of how many new tricks my brain learned to do without me, and I don't have to keep a mental list of my mental health. It's affirming to me: this is not you. There have been so many times when I've felt scared for absolutely no reason; then I learned that it was because it was like there was a complete stranger living with me all the time.

It's kind of funny to me how that word can be more than one thing: a stranger, someone you've never met. And at the same time: stranger, even more strange than you already felt yourself to be. This person is so

unfamiliar that my normal becomes a thing I chase all day. It's a side of me I didn't imagine myself meeting again, especially at the age of 31. I still have that elementary childhood mentality of imagining my 30s: Girl, of course you'll have it figured out! You'll have it figured out long before then, probably 23 at the latest. I've given up on trying to keep up with everything and everyone else, because the alternative was to keep giving up on myself.

The sun moves quickly, casting my room in light. I try to move to get some of it on my face, and I feel my whole body come alive again. My back hurts from tension and I can start to feel my bones loosen. This always reminds me of the updo hairstyles synonymous with nearly every party in my culture—if you've ever had a Mexican mom do your hair, you know what I'm talking about—for which you pull out every single bobby pin you own and shellac them down with a gallon of hairspray, and then dread taking them out at the end of the night. Even when you had all these pins poking at your head for hours, it doesn't start to really hurt until you let it all out.

I laugh at this. It's so fitting for most of





my days now, how I can ignore these pins poking at me for as long as I choose, but when I pay them some attention, trying to get them out of my hair and ultimately be free, it's the most painful. My eyebrows are sore from their furrow, my clavicles feel like they're stretching back into position, but it's all a relief. In a few minutes, things will be back to normal, and we will start this long process again.

"Vanessa, I know."

I've been on both sides of that phrase, the "me, too" sentiment that tells somebody they're heard, they're important, and you're showing up for them.

It's all I needed in that headspace at that moment. Acceptance, love and understanding.

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"Some are born with unwavering faith in themselves and their efforts, but there are those of us who have to conjure that faith. We have to demand it be there when it isn't, especially when we can't see it."

I found this written on the inside of an abandoned sketchbook recently and can't remember where I heard it or why I wrote it down. I add it to my list-something that's become kind of a rap sheet of my brain's misfires: I forgot how to spell "fix," I forgot how to spell "coffee," I'm terrible with names, I stutter when talking in front of groups of people, I lose my place in conversation, I need to make a physical note for everything, I started using a planner, et cetera.

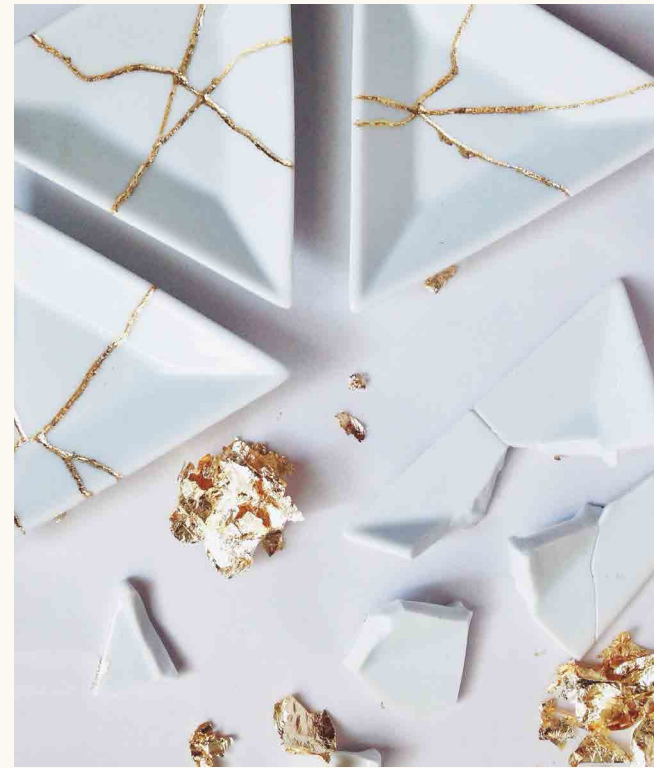
Innocuous things, sure, but for me they came on suddenly and were 180 turns in the way my brain normally operates; I used to be able to recall a name, that person's birthday and what they were wearing when I met them without much effort. I used to be great

with remembering my commitments without having to write them down and doing the 'let me check my planner' thing, I used to project confidence when speaking about subjects I'm well-versed in, and I won four spelling bees in grade school. These new hiccups aren't what I'm accustomed to and that's what makes them scary.

I take this list with me to my acupuncture appointments twice a week like it's my religion. I know, so LA, right? I love my acupuncturist. I started seeing her at the end of 2014 when it wasn't only me who was noticing changes in my behavior and cognition, things that I didn't connect to anything other than getting older. I was in between 30 and 31 and figured my brain was one of the many things that were going to change. Nobody tells you this, and maybe it's only me, but I definitely felt like I was learning about myself all over again. So much was new and so much of it was my body calling the shots this time, instead of my cocky 20-year-old attitude thinking I could do whatever I wanted without any ramifications.

I expressed this to my acupuncturist during my first session, breaking down when I told her that most of it-especially the brain issues-made me feel like I just didn't know who I was anymore. I remember feeling so small and mousey during that visit. I had to will my voice to be strong and clear. I had to monitor my breathing. I had to be cognizant of all the things my body is supposed to do on its own, and I hated that. I hated that I had to talk about it again. I hated the fear I had that this would just lead me to another wall. I hated that she couldn't just read my mind like she could read my pulse and make everything better.

I told her how I felt scared all the time, like I was waiting for something bad to happen around every corner. I was in a constant



brain fog and while I could still pull off everything in terms of work and maintaining relationships, it took a hell of a lot more effort than usual. You know that feeling when you walk into a room and can't remember what you're doing there? That was most of my days.

I've been dealing with depression and anxiety for a majority of my life, but only now began to see how it was taking its toll and physiologically changing me. Even on days where I felt balanced and happy, there was still the physical affects: very little appetite, hiccup fits (this is less cute than it sounds), no energy. I started seeing my acupuncturist thinking the therapy could help quell these physical issues that I originally didn't even attach to my mental state. It wasn't until one session when she told me I was deep in adrenal fatigue that I realized how serious it had become.

I had so many questions, the first one being, "What the hell does that even mean?" She explained how depression and anxiety puts us in a constant fight or flight mode, and running on that heightened operation all the damn time made my brain rewire itself to believe that was normal. I'd essentially become so rooted in my anxiety that anything I tried to do to combat it would have been deflected because it was now a physiological issue, rather than just mental or emotional. It contributed to my weight gain despite eating relatively healthy, although rarely, as well as to my need to sleep all the time and other TMI issues. I'd seen so many psychiatrists and therapists over the ten or so years that I'd been actively trying to figure myself out, and none of them made had ever made this clear to me, even though it was so obvious once it was pointed out.

I was so glad to finally have an understanding of what was going on with me and knowing that I could change it the way I felt

comfortable with, but there was still a very big part of me that kept harping on how different it made me from my peers. I believed that if I were to talk about it, I'd lose the trust of my clients and friends, which is the last thing I wanted.

Like a lot of people who deal with mental illness, I kept it hidden as long as I could and thought that dealing with it publicly would make me a case for the stigma that still surrounds these disorders, one that I was frustrated with but perpetuated anyway. I grew up a sensitive, emotional kid in a family that does not communicate emotion, good or bad or otherwise, and I have vivid memories of trying to express love or fear or anger, only to get it all shut down. I thought this was normal and this is just the way things were, but I was never comfortable with it.

It finally came to a head when I was in high school, going from a B average to not even being able to maintain a D. As punishment, I was removed from the only things that made me feel safe and secure, which were extracurriculars involving art, music and dance. I became despondent and detached, only doing what I absolutely had to do to get by. I was placed in alternative education and stayed long enough to try to get my credits back up, but I was so far gone by then it didn't matter. The only thing I wanted to do was sleep, and when I wasn't sleeping, I was just figuring out ways to make it minute through minute.

I eventually dropped out of high school, only to test out and receive a GED six months after I was to graduate. What makes me upset about it now is the fact that nobody looked at this behavior pattern and thought something may be wrong; they looked at it and said I was lazy. Every choice that was made for me, from being withdrawn from activities I loved to the decision to place me on a different campus with the 'bad kids,' was served alongside a clear





message that this was punishment and I was going to have to prove myself in order to get back to anything that resembled normalcy. I gave in. I didn't have the energy or the will to prove anything to anyone. I was tired, I wasn't myself and I was done. I figured if the cause/effect was being outed and chastised, I may as well act like I was none of these things.

After high school, I made a conscious effort to keep it under wraps. I attended art school, I acquired a design internship with TOMS and I started my career, which eventually led to The Vaguely, my one-woman design studio. I did everything I was 'supposed' to do, but the whole time I felt like I had a secret.

The thing is, when I offered up this secret as explanation for my reactions and my

behaviors, too often the receiving end would resonate with it. Every single time, I was surprised that other people were also dealing with this and wondered why we weren't being more upfront about it. Since depression is deeply rooted and often a struggle for a lengthy period of time, I imagine it's become something that we live with that we just keep in the closet. There's so little understanding of what it really is and though there are definitely people with good intentions, it's impossible to 'just snap out of it' or 'just make a decision to be happy' or follow through with most advice we're given. Even failing to be able to do those things perpetuates the feelings of inadequacy and despondency that attach themselves to us, so we shut up about it.

It became more and more frequent, though, hearing about it from others. Being the oldest of five kids, I'm automatically an empathetic, take-care-of-you person, and I found myself having more and more conversations with friends about their experiences. Too often, they mentioned feeling relieved of a burden once they'd 'confessed,' and I kept thinking maybe I would one day have the courage to do the same. It wasn't until a very dear friend of mine shared their experience with a suicide attempt that the gates opened for me. I was angry that that drastic of a measure had even come to fruition, not at the person, but because they mentioned feeling like they just didn't have any other options. It pissed me off that we as a society were still so young in our

knowledge of depression that people were killing themselves because they felt they had no other way, and that the advances we made to further educate ourselves were slow and too unsteady to curb the numbers.

The reality of our world is we are not one finite person. We affect others and there's no way around that. It's the reason why words like we and let's and ours and together exist. There is such a great relief in the camaraderie that's offered to those of us struggling to feel like we're not alone on a daily basis. I know.

It's the same reason why, in this wonderfully messy community of creative human beings I've found in my city, I can finally feel like I'm at peace with myself and my struggles and bring them to the surface. Because I am dealing. Because I am trying. And so is everyone else, and to hear that maybe we don't quite have it all together at the same time feels like such a soft space to land. I know.

I feel more free talking about it and sharing it with others than I ever have in my life: that I am a human, and I am just trying to get through human things. It doesn't make me bad or worthless, and it certainly doesn't negate any of my skills or abilities. It forces me to figure out what I've loved and what I can look forward to loving. It reminds me that fear is an obstacle for as long as I let it be, even though fear is still a necessary obstacle to get up and over.

There are those of us who will never be fearless, but that doesn't mean we're not strong. There are those of us who need to get through something versus getting over it, but that doesn't mean we're stuck. I know.

For the first time in my life I feel like the whirlpool I've felt at the center of is finally calming, and it's because of those people who have put their hands up and said, "I know, me too," and those who may not know entirely what we're feeling, but offer unconditional support anyhow. We are not only ourselves, but the culmination of those we love and those who love us.

It's an interesting thing, being a creative person who's gone from a primal need to create anything to a complete lack of interest and back. I've shifted my focus quite a bit recently, from creating work on paper to creating a new life for myself. I will be the first person to tell you that if given the option, I would choose to work 80-hour weeks in perpetuity versus the uncertainty and hell of trying to figure myself out. But that's also the fun of it. I've been broken and wholly opened, and now I get to decide what the future looks like. I get to make decisions for myself that I wouldn't have even been faced with had my life been 'normal' (can we eradicate this word already?) or had I not been exposed to the heartache early on.

There are days when this mentality falters, for sure, and I am left feeling like I lost any grasp on the logical knowledge that everything will be okay. I'm finding if I hold out long enough, the good will elbow

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its way back in. Sometimes the simple act of holding on takes more effort than it should, and that's okay. Sometimes we have to push ourselves just to get out of bed, and that's okay. It's all taught me to honor myself and my stubborn brain and let it all run its course without barreling over all of the obstacles that present themselves. If that means I can't keep up, that's okay. If I need to find my own pace, that's okay. And this is what I have been saying to others since I've found my footing again. In a new world where we're prone to letting ourselves compare our efforts and accomplishments to those of others', it's okay to feel like we don't have to keep up. It's okay

to step back and see the bigger picture and invest in ourselves more, even if it means we don't get that contract or that perfect photo. And it's okay to feel.

I want my relationships, even business, to be fulfilling and fruitful for both parties, and that doesn't happen if I keep pushing away the person I really am. A bleeding, beating heart, who loves being excited and is loud and cries at lots of things and whiplash laughs and genuinely, ultimately, just wants to experience life and cultivate all of the curiosities I have.

I want to love hard and fast and not apologize for it. I don't want to be tied to an idea of what I should be based on my profession or my culture or my interests. And I want that for everyone else, too. I really do believe that being yourself shouldn't require breaking down walls, but sometimes it's necessary. I really do believe that once we come apart at the seams, it gives us the freedom to challenge the predisposed notions of who we are imposed by others, and especially those we've imposed on ourselves.

And if you're struggling with the same, I understand how it's not enough to hear people say that you're not alone, but to feel it. And if you're a friend of someone who is struggling, reach out. I realize how flower child this sounds, but kindness is completely contagious.

Action is the only thing that will save us, and sometimes we need a push from others. We can continue to be that light and laughter and value in our communities with a little help. If you're scared or tired or done, I hope you know that there is value in that. There is value in your shortcomings and failures and fears. There is value in not feeling whole, even when you feel completely and utterly ripped apart. There is value in having an experience that is purely human and shitty and sometimes beautiful.

I know. Me too.