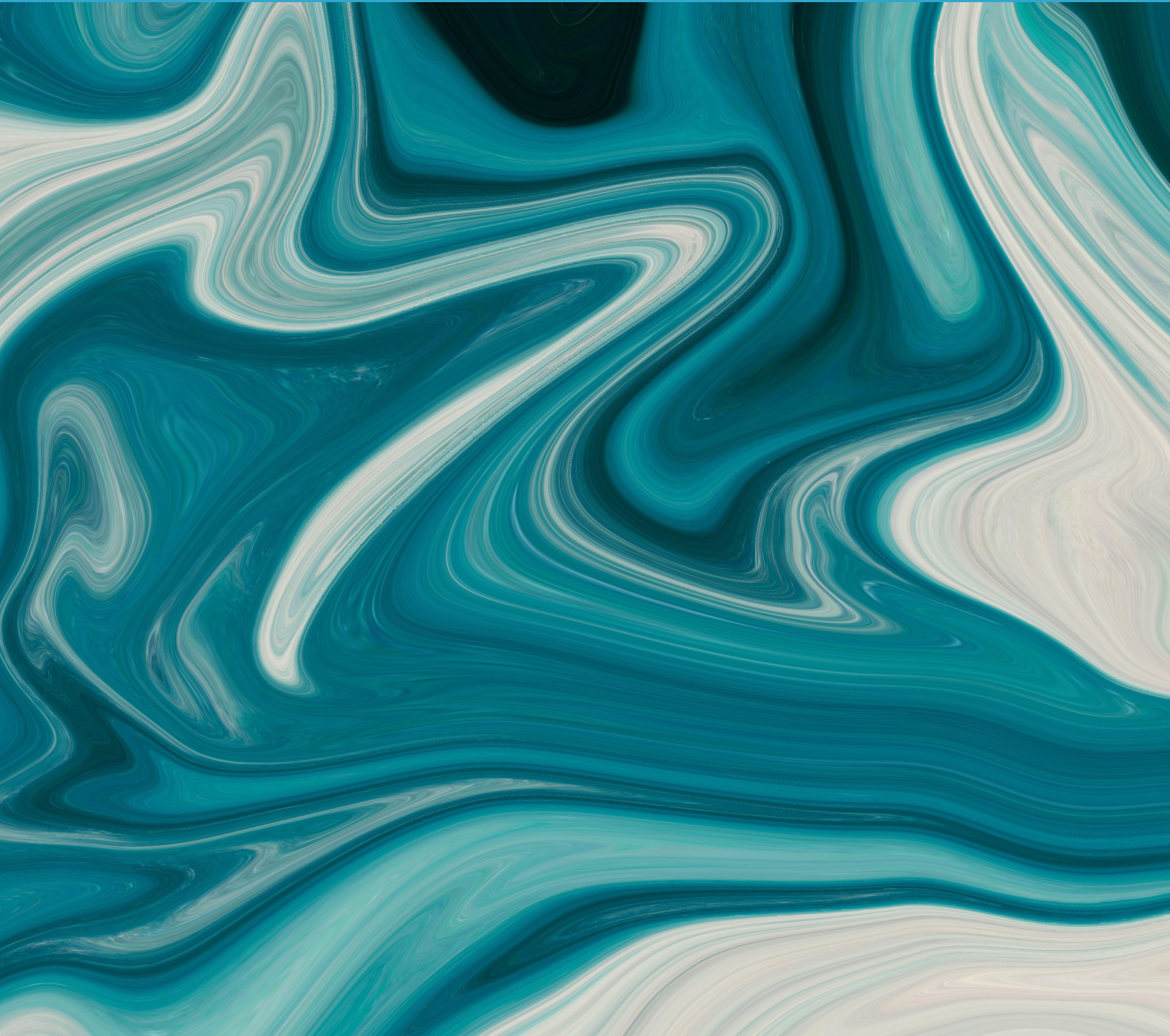




04/18
Vol. 4
ANTHEMS



Memoir Mixtapes

Vol.4: ANTHEMS

April 4, 2018

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Letters from the Editors



Welcome back Memoir Mixtape readers, listeners, & friends!

It is always a pleasure to be reunited with you. Can you believe we're now on our FOURTH volume? Me neither. Time flies when you're having the most fun ever.

So here's the thing about Vol.4: when we announced the call for submissions, I was a little nervous that the prompt was too specific, and that we wouldn't get enough submissions to complete the issue. Luckily, I was wrong, and we, once again, received more brilliant writing than we had space to showcase.

I am incredibly grateful to all 35 of our Volume 4 contributors for sharing their anthems and baring their souls to us. Within these pages, you'll learn about the songs that helped them define or redefine themselves or their view of the world, or songs that helped them understand and connect with their loved ones on a deeper level. You'll read stories about their struggles with religion or sexuality, and how those can often become intertwined. Songs that encapsulate the experience of growing up in a seedy hometown, where the same things are bound to happen, over and over again, ad infinitum like an extended mix of Darude's "Sandstorm." Stories about full bladders, inspirational roommates, friendships that ignite our souls, and acquaintances who, for some reason, stay present in our minds years after our final encounters with them.

I hope you enjoy these pieces as much as Kevin and I did, and we hope that you'll consider sharing your own music-inspired personal essay or poem with us soon.

Until next time,

Samantha Lamph/Len
CREATOR & CO-CURATOR



Hello again.

Welcome to Memoir Mixtapes Volume 4: ANTHEMS.

For this Vol we knew it'd be a tricky prompt for people to wrap their heads around. Writing about personal anthems is tough—how do you pick just one song that functions as your personal anthem? Also, how do you even go about defining what "anthem" means in this case? We weren't interested in treatises on patriotism or hymns (unless these really moved people); instead, we hoped that everyone who sent pieces in would embrace the "Memoir" in our name and look to this particular definition for guidance:

"ANTHEM (noun) - 2: a usually rousing popular song that typifies or is identified with a particular subculture, movement, or point of view"

- The homeys Merriam & Webster

Let me tell you, our contributors nailed it. They came forth with an incredible mix of anthems. While not all the songs in this volume are specifically "rousing" or "popular," when we listened to each one in conjunction with the piece they accompanied we knew that nothing else would do. Once again, thanks to our contributors, we've managed to put together a joyous, heart-rending, wonderful volume that truly reflects the complexity of the human condition.

Sam's got you covered already on what awaits you within these pages, so I won't reiterate everything she's already said, but I will say, as I always do, that I'm very proud of this volume, and I earnestly hope you will enjoy it as much as we do.

Thanks again for joining us, friends. We hope you continue to stick around.

Kevin D. Woodall
CO-CURATOR / EDITOR

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Fleetwood Mac

"Rhiannon"

Fleetwood Mac

07/1975

Reprise

On "Rhiannon" by Fleetwood Mac

Karissa Morton

In one of my favorite childhood photos, I'm two years old, completely naked but for the pacifier in my mouth & the giant mop of jet-black hair on my head. I'm standing in a perfect ballet stance, winged foot, pointed toes—the starkness of my tiny legs reflected in the giant Rolling Stones mirror propped against the wall behind me.

Like this, classic rock was the backdrop of my entire childhood, oftentimes in the same violent juxtaposition with my hypersensitive girl-self. I'd sit transfixed in front of the record cabinet, slowly turning knob after knob on the receiver. I didn't know what they did, but I found comfort in the soft clicks & whispering static they caused. I'd ask for Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, The Who, & my parents would amusedly comply, doing the very adult work of removing records from their sleeves & nestling needle into groove. I would lie on my back on the quintessentially early-90s grey carpet, & stare up at the ceiling—a precocious five-year-old parody of a 70s stoner kid—not understanding the music, but *feeling it nonetheless*.

Music was a communal experience in my house. Whether it poured from that bulky record cabinet in the basement, or from cassettes in my father's Buick Riviera, I acquired his musical taste via osmosis—all the men near his age, their similarly callused fingers & long hair, their growling voices shaping the way I saw not only the world, but myself. I accepted the hyper-masculine world my musical exposure painted without much question. I was just a *girl*—my job was to point my toes & sit up straight, & as long as I made these things my priority, it was okay to still worship music, too.

Amidst the guitar riffs & basslines, I started elementary school. My first day, I wore a blue flower-print dress, long wavy hair sprayed back from my face. I don't remember picking out my own clothes as a kid, but based on photos, wherever my parents bought them may very well have been the same place the costume designer for *Blossom* shopped. Everything feminine, flowing, floral. Unfortunately for my teacher & classmates, my budding personality was the opposite of all those things. I was aggressive, demanding, attention-seeking. If I wanted someone to be my best friend (a label that, for seven year olds, changed on a weekly basis) & they said no, I would become furious, balling my fists up & hitting the row of backpacks hanging near the door. If someone wanted to share the Matchbox cars with me, I'd throw them at the poor kids' heads until they relented. If Ms. Brodie wouldn't let me have the white flag in the color game, I would seethe & refuse to speak the rest of the day, the anger consuming & reddening my tiny body.

About the same time, I started having panic attacks—I became suddenly convinced that my parents didn't want to come pick me up from school, in spite of the fact that they'd never even been late to get me. One night, I sat at the kitchen counter—my mother's black boombox playing next to me—& insisted I was too sick to go to school the next day. *My stomach huuuuuurts*, I over-acted. *I'm probably gonna throw up if you make me go*.

It was the next afternoon, bored out of my mind during my fake sick day, that I took it upon myself to go into the basement & open the plywood doors of the cassette rack. Climbing up on the back of the couch, I gingerly pulled open the splintered door &

started taking tapes down, one by one. I hid as many as I could in a Halloween candy bucket & carried them up to my bedroom before making a second trip for the Walkman & its tiny metal headphones.

I'd slide a tape in, listen for a few seconds, fast forward, repeat. This warp-speed method gave me my first exposure to the hair metal music that—based on how infrequently it was played around the house—must have fallen quickly out of my dad's favor. But more than that, it gave me my first taste of Ann & Nancy Wilson, Grace Slick, Janis Joplin, Pat Benatar, Debbie Harry, Annie Lennox. In retrospect, my father must have listened to some female-fronted bands... he had these cassettes, after all. I just can't remember it actually happening.

It wasn't until I reached the bottom of the plastic orange pumpkin that I found a tape I couldn't bring myself to fast forward. Fleetwood Mac's self-titled album. As soon as I heard Stevie Nicks' voice on "Rhiannon," I was mesmerized. (As an adult, the irony that it had been played through Lindsey Buckingham's tracks, but stopped by Stevie's first one isn't lost on me.) Her voice wavered with something my seven-year-old brain had yet to label *vulnerability*, but at the same time, it was so self-assured. As she soared from the low purr of *she rules her life like a bird in flight & who will be her lover* to the powerful belt of *all your life, you've never seen a woman taken by the wind*, she was at once delicate & defiant, adult & child-like.

I let the song play, free from the click of the fast forward button, & by the end of the four minutes, I'd been changed—though, of course, I didn't know how much at the time. Slipping the stiff insert from the cassette case, I learned only that the song was written by Stevie Nicks. That didn't mean much to me, of course, & in the pre-internet days I didn't have a way to put a face or any other context to the name, but her name itself became like a talisman I carried with me. *Stevie Nicks*: my little secret.

I piled the tapes—minus Fleetwood Mac—back into the pumpkin & neatly returned them to their places before my father got home from work. My new favorite album, meanwhile, rotated hiding places in my room over the next few months. First it sat on the shelf behind my Arthur books before migrating to the bottom of the pink plastic case where I kept my dress-up Minnie Mouse doll, then to the crate where I kept my winter boots & mittens—nowhere my mother would find it while changing my sheets or putting away laundry. I hid Stevie Nicks with the expertise & fervor of a teenager stashing her drugs.

I listened to the rest of the album, of course. Even as a kid, I knew Lindsey's tormented guitar playing on "I'm So Afraid" was impossible to ignore, & I was transfixed by the way Stevie emotionally ambled through "Landslide," but I always returned to "Rhiannon." It became the thing I'd look forward to each day—my father still at work, my mother cooking dinner, I'd retreat to my room with the Walkman & settle in for the four minutes of the day that made me feel like my own person.

School hadn't become any more comfortable for me, marked instead by perfectionism, anxiety, & the same lack of fitting in thanks to the hypersensitivity that'd come to define the next twenty-some years of my life. At age seven, eight, nine, I didn't understand the impact of a line like *dreams unwind, love's a state of mind*, but then again, maybe I did. I felt unwanted at school—too smart, too enthusiastic, too aggressive, too weird. At home, I often felt the same, hiding in my bedroom, teeth clamped down on the back of my tongue to hold back the nausea as I listened to one fight or another, tried to gauge people's moods by how hard they slammed the door, how many curse words they hissed at one

another, how loudly they sighed or yelled. If I heard feet on the stairs, I stifled my breath, hoping they weren't coming toward my room.

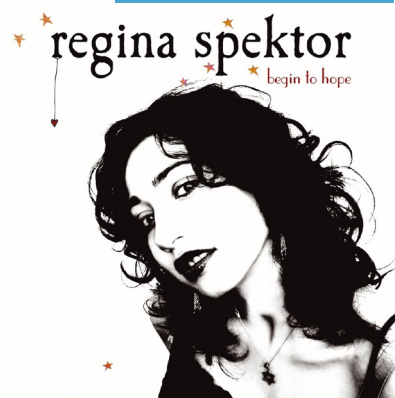
Trying to balance hiding from attention with my feral need for it caused my secretly held lyrics to come into sharp focus. Both the cat in the dark & the darkness itself, I began—ill-equipped as I was—to navigate who I was as I sat alone in that small bedroom every afternoon. Like this, *love's a state of mind* became my mantra.

The year is 1979. Stevie Nicks stands at the ballet barre, one pointe-shoe-ed leg up, stretching. After a moment, she shifts into passé, one arm fluidly sweeping over her head. As she slides down into a slow split, she doesn't notice herself in the mirror, but I do. All I can see of her is her reflection. She's tiny—5'1" on a good day—& her long gold necklace & pearl pink legwarmers are the only bits of color that stand out against her all-black ensemble. Stevie—ever in black, ever being accused of being a witch. In the wall-sized mirror, though, she is small—delicate, even. She trains her eyes on her feet & I watch as she points her toes.

If you have any problems or are worried about anything & you do ballet for just fifteen minutes, you can't think about anything but this, she finally speaks, her voice characteristically husky-sweet. The words, given as a gift in the same generous, all-knowing tone as *dreams unwind*, *love's a state of mind*.

I think back to that childhood photo, my toes pointed, small body reflected against the signature Rolling Stones tongue, as I see Stevie, reflected only against herself. In this way, the lines of expectation are drawn. *Rhiannon rings like a bell through the night & wouldn't you love to love her?* Just as quickly, though, they're dashed. Like Stevie, like Rhiannon, I learn to escape, to *take to the sky like a bird in flight*. I learn that *once in a million years, a lady like her rises*, learn that I am the her.

If you have any problems or are worried about anything... you can't think about anything but this. The year is 2018. I point my toes, play "Rhiannon."



Regina Spektor

"Samson"

Begin to Hope

06/2006

Sire

An Anthem for Sad Girls Who Don't Know Heartbreak, But Do Know the Bible

Hannah Gordon

*You are my sweetest downfall
I loved you first, I loved you first*

The first time I heard "Samson" by Regina Spektor, I cried.

I'm sure you did, too. It's just that kind of song.

I was in my best friend Rebecca's bedroom, staring at the ceiling fan going round and round, and pretending I was someone else. We were drinking her parents' liquor—too much Jack mixed with not enough Coke—and texting boys with our plans to sneak out later that night. All of our weekends were spent like this, so we knew that we'd never actually follow through with it. We'd end up re-watching *Pride and Prejudice* or *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, just drunk enough to feel dizzy and fall asleep early. In the morning, we'd make banana pancakes doused in maple syrup, lumpy and sticky sweet.

Hearing that song was a revelation. It was transcendent.

Maybe it was all the Jack and Cokes.

But maybe it wasn't.

At fifteen, I thought I knew heartbreak, if only vicariously: I'd read books, seen movies, and listened to songs like "Samson." My aching, teenage heart would shatter anew with each fictional iteration of something I had yet to experience myself. This hurt, this pain—I thought it was the real thing. Or, at least, I thought it could compare.

"What is this?" I asked her once the song finished. I didn't dare speak during it, and neither did she. It was like we both didn't want to break its spell.

"Samson," Rebecca told me, and her voice was quiet. I wondered if she'd been crying, too. "Regina Spektor? You haven't heard it before?"

I hadn't. I knew about Samson, though. Judges 16. The warrior with the long, flowing hair. The man who could bring down buildings. The one who loved Delilah so much, it killed him.

Yes, I knew him well.

*Samson came to my bed
Told me that my hair was red
Told me I was beautiful, and came into my bed*

We learned how to pray before we knew what it meant. We gave our hearts to Jesus before we'd gotten to use them ourselves. We memorized the Bible before we learned it was written by men.

In eighth grade, my class attended what was called Adolescent Awareness. (The name is hilarious, in retrospect.) We were all too aware that we were adolescents—the acne, braces, and perpetually sweating armpits had tipped us off.

Adolescent Awareness was my Christian school's version of sex education. The teachers split us up—Brothers and Sisters in Christ going our separate ways, to separate rooms—and while the boys got to learn about male and female anatomy, sex, and porn addictions, the girls had to learn about modesty, purity, and chastity. We learned that we must never tempt our Brothers in Christ—and this was the reason for the school's strict dress code: no tank tops, no shorts, no skirts above the knee, no low cut tops. Mary was a virgin, after all.

We didn't learn about dating or love or sex or condoms or even consent. We learned to be ashamed of our bodies and the attention we would attract if we weren't careful.

As we were leaving that seminar, many of us red-faced and silent, Rebecca turned to me and said, "You know that was all bullshit, right?" She was fuming. "You know that's not how it works?"

When we were reunited with the male half of our class, we asked our friends if they'd been given an hour-long speech about chastity, too. About making themselves a "gift" for their future spouses.

Of course they hadn't.

*Oh, we couldn't bring the columns down
Yeah, we couldn't destroy a single one*

Once I'd heard the song, it was all I wanted to listen to. Play it again. Put it on repeat.

We'd sing along, Rebecca and I, crooning and then wailing, turning it up so loud our ears rang, feeling everything we'd never felt before. We'd listen in the car as we drove too quickly through Michigan's Irish Hills. We'd listen through shared headphones, tangled as they were, our faces pressed close. In those moments, we knew what it was to love and lose, to give without receiving, to break irrevocably.

We'd lie in her bed and think about all the boys that might someday love us like Samson. She wanted someone tall and dark, with arms bigger than her body. She wanted to be swept up and carried away from our small town. I wanted someone who could make me laugh. Someone who wouldn't mind when I was quiet. Maybe someone who'd even be quiet with me.

Thinking about these boys was one thing, but interacting with them in real life was another.

I cried after my first kiss, a lackluster moment in a dark movie theatre. Remembering Adolescent Awareness, I felt as though I'd done something wrong—something sinful—no matter how much Rebecca assured me I hadn't.

"Even if sex was wrong, why would kissing be?" she demanded.

Still, I didn't kiss anyone for quite some time after that, and this feeling didn't go away easily. Even when I was off at a liberal college, years later, trying to shed the religion of my youth, it'd follow me. Religion and the fear it inspired crept into almost every facet of my life, but especially sex and dating. When I eventually lost my virginity—sans marriage—the only thing I could think about was the hellfire that awaited me.

Samson went into Delilah's bed, and he was still a warrior of God. A champion. He prayed, and God listened. His hair grew back. He brought the columns down.

And history books forgot about us

And the Bible didn't mention us, not even once

Recently, I listened to "Samson" again. And again. It was still as beautiful as the first time I heard it. I felt transported back to that place: lying in bed, hearing it for the first time, and wishing to be someone else, somewhere else.

If you had asked me, back then, what I was so sad about, I wouldn't have been able to give you an answer—not a clear one, at least. I think I know now: it isn't just love that breaks your heart. Sometimes, it's just a kiss. Sometimes, it's a school. It's religion. It's a song.

Sometimes, the teenage heart breaks on its own. Maybe this is how it grows stronger.

Samson let Delilah cut his hair. He knew it would kill him, but he let her do it anyway.

The first time I heard that song, I cried, because no matter how much my heart ached, I'd never known a love like that, and I was too afraid to let myself.

When you're young, you feel things immensely—vicariously or not. A song can be more than a song. A story in a book written by men can be more than story. And what other people tell you is right or wrong, you end up believing. It takes time to break this.

It takes time to bring the columns down.



Rush

"Bravado"

Roll the Bones

09/1991

Anthem / Atlantic

Crux

M. Stone

*have faith and be at peace,
they told me, even if life's purpose
is beyond your understanding*

while my teachers slept easy
I spent years alert to shadows
flickering on cave walls

*pride will be your downfall
they warned; who are you to question?*

finding no comfort in the old myths,
I could not offer myself to god like a bride

I tempted a lightning strike
but ventured forth, ignoring
early morning dread when I called
into the dark and was greeted
only with white noise whispering
no point, no reason

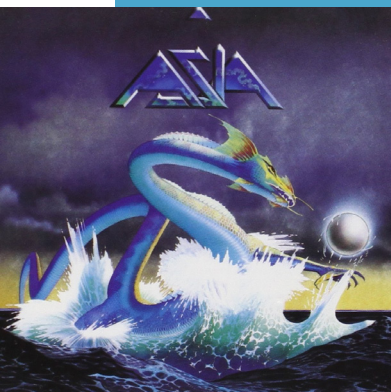
now after decades of seeking
a diagnosis reveals the metaphor, the meaning

perspective narrowed—pinhole projector
enabling a perfect view of what I dared not
glimpse before: eclipse, penumbral gloom
then brilliant reemergence, a thousand suns
blooming beneath my skin,

each one a pulse effacing fear
with the steadfast thrum of
Love Love Love



Black Flag
"Rise Above"
Damaged
12/1981
SST



Asia
"Heat of the Moment"
Asia
03/1982
Geffen

O, Pioneers!

Debby Wolfinsohn

1.

We were 14 and desperate.

Marooned on a shag carpeted planet, surrounded by ranch houses and streets named after Robin Hood characters, we searched for danger.

We found Pizza Hut.

We searched for art, excitement, and risk.

We found Foreigner, Journey, and Asia.

Our bland futures lay before us like dead fish.

2.

For the sake of argument let's call this place "Wisconsin in the middle 1980s."

3.

Z104 FM was the classic rock tranquilizer of choice, prog-rock anthems invading carpools and arcades and locker rooms and every keg party we weren't invited to. This music smelled like air-freshener and looked like bent mini blinds and felt like falling asleep in a giant pile of pillows and suffocating.

This music seemed like a bad preview of adulthood and we didn't want it.

We didn't want the singer of Foreigner to wait for us and we didn't want to catch the rain in Africa with the bearded weirdo in Toto and we didn't want to feel the heat of the moment with Asia.

We only wanted one thing, really.

To escape.

4.

We were the weird girls.

The ghost girls, the invisible girls.

Outsiders, not by choice.

I was a lone Jew in a sea of Norwegians, too tall/too loud/awkward; she brought schnapps to school in a baby bottle and hid her freckles with powder.

Together we made a good team.

In 6th grade, we were in bad moods 70% of the time.

In 7th grade, we played trumpet in the band, the only girls in the section. Since she was first chair and I was last, the boys tortured us for completely different reasons.

In 8th grade, someone stuck a Z104 bumper sticker on my locker and we freaked out and actually set it on fire, and the craziest part of the story is how no one even noticed us doing it.

Did I mention we were invisible, which is a super power, until it isn't.

5.

We hit high school ready for the worst years of our lives to begin. Ready for things to suck. Ready to suffer.

This is not what happened at all.

6.

We found the college radio station on the far left side of the dial, like it was hiding from that jerk Z104. How had we missed it before?

There was a song about a car accident on prom night and I don't think we breathed for two minutes, until we were sure it was over, and every song that came after was equally amazing and we just sat there, listening, in a kind of shock, until my mom called us for dinner.

The music sounded like needles, like knives mixed with hot coffee, like night and dirt and running away, like grown-up love, like cities that lived only in our minds, like it was beaming down from a young and angry planet and we had to get there or we would literally die.

But we had no idea how.

We had no map.

7.

We taped our favorite songs off the radio, editing them into a super mix. And we stuck this super mix into my boom box and lashed it onto the rat trap of my bike and went pedaling around the neighborhood broadcasting the voices of Darby Crash and Exene Cervenka and Henry Rollins to the unwitting residents of Nottingham Lane and Friar Tuck Circle, every hellishly beautiful chorus expressing so perfectly what we could not.

rise above

we're gonna rise above

8.

We followed a man with a mohawk around West Towne Mall for 20 minutes until he finally gave us the name and approximate location of a record store where we could find the music we were looking for.

9.

It took two buses and an elaborate lie to get there, a narrow room above a laundromat with a blue neon sign in the window. It was filled with records, hair dye, and magazines from England, and the floor creaked when we crossed it.

We were terrified.

The records were arranged in long wooden bins, hip-high and blocked by hard-faced men in leather jackets, flipping through them in a way we quickly copied—palms down, fingers crawling, showing no emotion.

We stayed that night until the streetlights went on, allowing ourselves one record each.

Babysitting money well-spent.

The one I bought was called WILD PLANET, and it was red and showed two beautiful ladies and three interesting men and I hoped one day I would get to that planet, too.

10.

Saturdays were now spent record shopping. While other kids were out playing soccer or learning how to ski or hanging at the mall, we were hunched over bins of vinyl, looking for our escape route.

Because we had figured something out, early on.

These records were the map.

These records would show us the way out.

we are born with a chance

I am gonna have my chance

11.

In the end, I went to New York and she went to California, a decision that appeared to be based on things like jobs and schools but really came down to this: my favorite bands were from the East Coast and hers were from the West.

We promised to keep in touch and we hugged and she got into her car and that was it.

We were like pioneers, or something.

It was a long time before we saw each other again.

On “Push” by The Cure

Adam Sear

It's 1985, I'm 15 years old, and my mate John has a cassette of the new album by The Cure. This cassette, like most of John's music collection, actually belongs to his older brother, Andy.

Ah, Andy; tall, skinny, clad in black, unruly hair and a cheeky smile. A cool-as-you-like sixth-former, he might have been my first man-crush. He played guitar, knew all the cute girls, went to all the right parties... He was smart too; I've always found people with interesting minds attractive. Also, as an only child, my friends and their elder siblings were the people I looked-up to. They were my true brothers and sisters, and music was our shared language.

So. 1985. Up to now, I've been a sugary pop-kid. Howard Jones, The Thompson Twins, Frankie... The darkest explorations of my musical taste have stretched only as far as Depeche Mode, who, I suppose could get pretty dark and weird for a band who regularly appeared on Top of the Pops. I knew about The Cure, of course. I'd probably danced on one leg to "The Lovecats" and "Let's Go To Bed" at some point at a school disco, but that's about all. To me, Goth was a big, cobweb-covered, leather-bound, antique-padlocked, firmly-closed book. (Not that I see The Cure as a typical Goth outfit. Like their spiritual sister band, Siouxsie and the Banshees, they're too good, too diverse, too damn interesting to be pigeon-holed like that.)

So, we're in the attic of John's centuries-old house (pretty Goth, right?) His dad is the town vicar, and they live in a huge, rambling pile of a place. Big enough to find a space to play loud music far, far away from disapproving parents. John slips the tape into his shiny silver ghetto-blaster, he presses play, and away we go.

The classic "Inbetween Days" opens the record, and what a fine way to start. From memory it had already come out as a single—forgive me if I'm wrong, but in honour of 1985 I'm not Googling. It had that unforgettable video, with a camera swinging from a rope, and another lashed to the fretboard of Robert Smith's acoustic guitar... Man, it looked like they were having a ball. I really wanted nothing more than to be in that room, in that band, playing that beautiful, crazy dream-pop. The weird, Japanese-inflected "Kyoto Song" follows. I blush now to inform you that back then I had no idea who or what a 'Kyoto' was. I vaguely guessed it might be an instrument of some kind. I'm happy to say that some years later, in 1994, I both visited Kyoto and played a koto, so my ignorance on that point has been corrected.

I could happily go track by track, but I'm here to tell you about my anthem: "Push".

There's nothing quite like the head (on the door)-rush of "Push". That thrilling intro, all two minutes and twenty-three seconds of it, itself the length of a '60s single, the way the guitars chime, and then Boris Williams' big old drums rattle in, all '80s gated-reverb, smashing around in the mix. Then the bass begins to pulse, classic Simon Gallup - simple, effective, not too busy. Robert Smith has a habit of letting the intro run long, giving you an insight into the structure to come. Then, by the time he starts to sing, you are 100% familiar, riffing along, air-drumming. Dancing on one leg...



The Cure

"Push"

The Head on the Door

08/1985

Fiction / Elektra

The surreal lyric is pure Cure, of course, and the dream / nightmare quality fits with the rest of the record perfectly, but it was the simple refrain of:

*Go go go
Push him away
No no no
Don't let him stay*

that got to me; gets to me even now.

I expect there was a girl, it was usually a girl, a girl I wanted to be with who was with an unsuitable (in my biased eyes) boy... Story of my teenage years. There was someone around this time, who I thought might have been The One, but I messed it up. I know I did, and I'm still sorry. *Push him away, don't let him stay...* My mantra, my anthem. As I write this, I can still feel that longing and loss in the pit of my stomach.

And the music, it's like a claustrophobic, insomniac *Born To Run* if Bruce Springsteen had been born in Crawley, instead of New Jersey. It made me want to run—not literally, I've never been given to jogging—but run, go, travel, explore, expand my tiny, rural backwater horizons... *The Head On The Door*, and "Push" in particular, were brain-stretching and life-changing for me. The way I approached music, writing, the way I dressed, the desire to *mine the different* across all aspects of culture; it began here.

The Head on the Door contains two more legitimate anthems: "A Night Like This" and "Sinking". Let's face it, it's a goddam, full-on anthemic album through and through. Anyone who has witnessed the mighty Cure live will attest to this quality, pulsing in grand swathes throughout their catalogue. The sweeping keys, the delayed guitars, the other-worldly oddness of Smith's voice... Yes, *that* voice. There is no one else like him. What might come across as merely mewling and querulous, is somehow rendered plaintive; the sound of a soul lamenting, sometimes in torment, sometimes tormenting, but always strangely warm and uplifting.

It's 2017, I'm 47 years old, and my mate John has just got in touch via Facebook. We haven't spoken since the last century.

We meet in the pub of our youth; our old sixth-form haunt. The bar where his brother Andy told me to forget about my dream of being an actor... 'Seventy-five percent unemployment, mate...' I've never been sure if I should've thanked him for that advice or not. I followed it, and of course I might never have made it anyway... Who knows? (I know, deep down, I'd never have made it. Thanks, Andy.)

It's strange, being in the pub with John. This pub. So different now. Free of smoke for a start, also free of familiar faces. There are no sixth-formers pretending to be legal drinkers since ID cards put paid to all that. It seems a shame for them. Some of my best nights involved an illicit pint or three, talking nonsense with my brothers and sisters about music, 'til last orders sent us reeling home.

Our phones are on the table. Another big change since the '80s.

"What are you listening to these days?" I ask him.

"Music? Not much. Bit of Radio 3 here and there..." he says.

"Do you still play?" I ask.

Like his big brother, John played guitar.

"It's gathering dust, mate," he replies, ruefully.

I swipe the screen of my iPhone, and call up Apple Music.

"Well," I say, "the last five albums I listened to are: *The Head on the Door*, *Brett Anderson Live*, *The Walker Brothers Greatest Hits*, *The Stone Roses* and *ChangesBowie*."

"Still a bit white-boy indie, aren't you?" John laughs.

"A bit," I agree. Not entirely these days, but a bit.

"*The Head on the Door*, though," says John. "That takes me back... Rehearsing, playing gigs in my back garden..."

"Crappy Technics keyboards and borrowed mics..." I say. "I should thank you, John. That record opened my eyes to... everything..."

He laughs. "What? Really?"

"Yes, really. I was never the same again..."

It's true. When I left school I carried on playing in bands, and trying to emulate my heroes. I found '70s Bowie, Lou Reed and The Velvet Underground, and the late '60s Stones. Then The Stone Roses, Happy Mondays, Blue Aeroplanes, Divine Comedy, Scott Walker, Pulp... All of them well within the frame of pop, but all of them pushing out... *Push*, push, push... Changing the formula... *Don't let him stay*... Opening me up to new possibilities. All of them with anthems of their own; beautiful, distilled epiphanies for the common people, common people like me.

I've never got over the thrill of "Push" and *THotD*, but since then, like an addict I've been constantly seeking my next fix. I still return to it, but I'm still searching, drawn by the lure of pop's powerful spell.

QUEEN QUEEN QUEEN QUEEN QUEEN



Queen

"Don't Stop Me Now"

Jazz

11/1978

EMI / Elektra

Don't Stop Me Now // Queen

Danny McLaren

from the passenger seat of her car
it's music loud as thumping hearts
windows rolled down so that quiet suburban streets
aren't all that quiet anymore.

it's faster, faster, faster,
and then stomachs lurching forward with every sudden stop
until there are no more stop signs
only open road, an aux chord, and laughter.

it's the two of us
revelling in our youth,
riding on the edge of girlhood and something else entirely,
just out of reach.

it's the urgency of the moment.
a song that ends too soon,
but we rewind and play it over again.

Patti Smith Group
RADIO ETHIOPIA



Patti Smith
"Pissing in a River"
Radio Ethiopia
10/1976
Arista

Pissing

Gabrielle Gilbert

Let's talk about the space before change and how it's starving—for a moment. Let's talk about desperation in the wake of change and in lieu of it, how I get sick of places after three months but cling to minor interactions with unfulfilling people—how I've learned to become more selective, how my anger is hilariously strong that, after six beers on a tepid night in Brooklyn, the only thing I felt was how full my bladder was. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In the carnival tilt of nineteen, I watched the buildings grow. The New Hampshire trees that circled the moon and hid my friends and our bathtub gin hung back as I skimmed the coast to Savannah where the height limit was four stories and the humidity reminded me what it was like to feel suffocated by state lines. By the time I transferred to school in New York, the buildings shot straight up, but so had the cages. I had plans once I got there, and the dearest friend I would find.

I want to talk about a night before classes started, a night that I'm going to make feel much more quixotic than it was, I assure you.

My mother is groaning already.

We had met at an apartment, a bunch of us, who only knew parts of each other; except Kelly, she and I knew worlds of each other. We had met at an apartment before meeting at another apartment, one with more people and more causeless revelry. How thoughtless of Kelly and I to leave our bags in this First Apartment. Or not thoughtless, just thinking of other, simpler things. There was a boy for her to talk to. I was just running on anxious energy.

As the night progressed, the people around us were revealed to be, as most are, disappointing. We grew tired of sneaking past freshman in fur coats snorting coke off the counter and boys who couldn't sit still, songs we didn't give a shit about, just to get to the bathroom or the other side of the 2 x 2 fire pit. The parts of our friends we recognized had been long gone and Brooklyn was awake without us. We made a break for it when the only seats left were on laps, gulped what was left of our howevermany beers, and watched them bounce off of the temporary gate of the tiny backyard in Bedstuy.

I'm sure our voices carried as we howled our frustration (as anyone who steps foot in New York can understand): how dare we expect momentum and 'Never-Before-Seen', how dare we expect anything besides makeshift glamour and juvenile preoccupations like warm beer and art school and strangers to hear about who you were in high school. We got outta there.

On we walked, three blocks down and around, a dark game of Candyland, never needing to pay too much attention to anything besides the color. All we needed, before we could return to our 16-story dorm, was to get back to the First Apartment and collect our things—IDs from other states, shameful school IDs, cherry flavored chapstick, metrocards old and new, pens and sketchbooks and God, whatever else we had in there. Though, of course, our prayers to Patron Saint Plumpy and all-mighty King Kandy were thrown back at us. The First Apartment was locked threefold. We could see through the bars on the first floor window - all the lights off, glasses left on the coffee table and our

small bags on opposite ends of the Ikea couch. We tried calling the boys who had lived there, three of which, we knew, were back at that party, wearing somebody else's hat backwards and sidling up to someone we would have a Drawing II class with. No one was answering their phone that night.

As I tossed my head back in a bellowing laugh, fed only on irony, I finally told Kelly, "I have to pee like a racehorse." We stretched the minutes out, taking steps circling the few slabs of sidewalk outside of the First Apartment. No one was coming. We knew that before we left, but our disappointment hadn't yet materialized into something greater than passing disappointment. It now transcended into predicament territory and my bladder was the star of the show, making me walk a little faster and think of less and less important things. Global warming, the stark poverty line, Kelly's and my skyrocketing student debt—it all escaped me as I finally held onto the stoop railing and sat on my heel, squeezing just about everything my body was made of and laughing severely.

Kelly finally suggested what I was hoping she would. "Gab, just, here," she said, walking over to the alley, just past the First Apartment, where the only things nestled within were someone's Honda motorcycle and some broken glass somewhere in the corner. "I'll guard you, just pee here. Just squat. I got you."

Thank God she laughed a bit. It wasn't long or narrow, but it wasn't on the welcome mat of someone's apartment either. I had peed in stranger places, and that's what I was thinking of as I stretched my high-waisted jeans wide enough to birth the anger-baby of urine that had been conceived that night. I thought back to New Hampshire and the backwoods I had marked because the closest house was miles out. I could go deeper and deeper and always find my way back out, to where all the trees were dead at the top from the bonfires we had out there. How, usually, it was just me, as the boys need only turn around to relieve themselves. But when other girls came around, we would claim a tree for the night, and laugh at the hasty trickle against the dirt, compare the benefits of leaning your back on a tree or hugging it close to you, and, of course, the little bare-assed wiggle you had to do in lieu of toilet paper.

Kelly was kind enough to be my tree that night, but when it came time to wiggle dry and pull those tight jeans back up, we had company. The NYPD came around the corner and slowed in front of us—a whole van of 'em. Even if I had been quick enough to button up and regain my composure, there were a few ounces of evidence against me. The pained laughter can start any minute now, you know. My mother has already stopped listening—having heard this story too many times and remaining to be the only person who hasn't found it funny.

Only one officer got out of the van, the other two or three smugly hanging back and watching. We answered their questions, wide-eyed, honest, innocent or, at least, human. It wasn't until they handcuffed me that my stomach flipped and Kelly ran up to the van, to each of the bemused officers, and plead my innocence, reciting my name and birthday and "please please please!"

As I explained myself, I found myself stumbling over any excuse that wasn't "When you gotta go, you gotta go," and "What would you have rather me do, wet my pants?" To which the officer would reply, "Well, the law would have preferred it." Panic came out in wet sighs as I tried to prove my identity along with trying to assure the cops that I was not trying to deface property, I was simply trying to do what people do every single day, just usually on a toilet behind closed doors. They had made it illegal in New York not to have your ID on you at all times (some awful law put in place only to get more homeless people off of the street into jail cells), and mine was behind locked door after locked door

in the First Apartment “literally, right there.” This was explained a few ways before the officers mumbled and conspired together in their unnecessarily large van.

I was left to stare at the dark puddle that, as I was hanging back, handcuffed, on the sidewalk, was pooling into thinner and thinner streams heading into the street and hugging the curb. The arresting officer returned and Kelly had been on her third round of “We’re students. We’re sorry. Let us go home.” The officer hovered, not saying much, just looking over at the cops in the car listening to this beautiful, frantic girl while her friend was about to be charged with Public Urination in the state of New York. It was then that the scene was penetrated by a passerby, walking their bulldog or Boston terrier or whatever, at 4 in the morning. I watched, knowing my own marking would only draw this dog in. The cop behind me smiled a tight smile and nodded at the man in basketball shorts while I kept my eyes on the ground, hands pinned behind my back, in arrest and anticipation. That little dog stopped inches in front of me, tugging its walker along, so it could take a whiff of the strange, dehydrated urine that ran through the streets and, bless its feral soul, made eye contact with me, squatted, and pissed right over the curb. This pup and I had a connection and, as it sauntered off, its walker convinced himself he didn’t see anything.

I felt a smile on my face, despite myself. I didn’t really mean to, but I said, “I wish I was a dog,” meaning, I wish this wasn’t happening because I just did what dogs all over this city do, meaning, I wish this wasn’t taboo, meaning, I wish I was home. The officer was less than amused, saying, “Yeah, well, you’re a human.” And that felt worse than he could have meant it.

The same officer had proceeded to ask if we had been drinking and we were wishy-washy—as underage girls have to be—but we damn-near gave them the address of that shitty party around the block and they never even turned down that road. Instead, the officer asked if I had Facebook, LinkedIn, “anything that can tell us you are who you say you are.” I stretched the handcuff chain best I could so I could slip my phone out of my back pocket and pull up Facebook, for once, a saving grace.

“That’s me, right there,” I explained, as if the officer were an alien or an aging uncle, “and that—that’s my birthday, tagged pictures, you don’t want that—uh, see, I go to school over at Pratt and I—” Rambling self-affirmation was all I had. The officer laughed at my cover photo, showed it to his buddies, and returned with a ticket. Kelly’s pleas had supplemented only to the officer’s comedic interpretation of the night, as well as my confidence and relief to know her. They had quieted and I had been released. The van rode away.

We were left in a city that smelled like piss and felt, already, like it was weeding us out. Worst of all, we were in the exact same situation we were in before, well, almost. I didn’t have to pee anymore, but now I owed \$175. We were still locked out of that goddamn First Apartment. Our only option now was to head back to the backyard party and see if the boys were ready or drunk enough to be convinced to leave. They weren’t, but Kelly and I managed to convince one of them to head back with us after saying, “Something happened and we want the get the hell outta here,” guarding our strange, shared experience.

I guess I was embarrassed, at the time. But that didn’t last. I had to laugh at it somehow. This is me laughing about it, again and again, and missing my friend, again and again, and listening to a song. A song about being amidst change, change that you asked for, fought for, but aren’t ready for. Or, not a song, a hymn, really, especially at its start, for freedom.

Freedom! Some version of it, even if it's feral and desperate, to piss where you're not supposed to—because there are places you're not supposed to. There are places where you're not supposed to even go, but we want to and some of us dare to, ready or not, and that changes something in us. Some of us break laws to hurt while some of us break laws because they get in the way. Some of us give ourselves gifts that end up turning against us—a future, a school, a plan—and in youth, what else could they do? And this song, it brings it all up to me, at whatever precipice I have found myself on the edge of since this mess. The river is mine and the piss is mine and, amidst all these big questions, I'm still just a human, no matter how bad that feels, and I'm gonna keep singing this song.

If there is some kind of "natural order," I don't think we have many arms that can touch it anymore, but pissing in that alley felt closer to it than anything I had felt in my four years in that city. An emptying in a corner next to a Honda motorcycle and my best friend as my tree. It was one of those beginning moments I think about often. I hadn't dropped any classes yet nor had I any work published. Kelly and I hadn't eaten any hashbrowns in the sunlight yet and her face held so much more hope than it has lately. Less plants kept in the bathroom and fewer First Apartments and fewer disappointments that only New York can deliver. One of those beginning moments where we can then trace ourselves—where we were inspired, where we did things we didn't want to fucking do, and where we started dipping off of the path we told our mothers and fathers about as we begged for this exact city, this exact school. But we come out of it with a laughter that morphs over the years. From nerves and embarrassment, to irony, frustration, coping, and ultimately, uproarious joy and nostalgia—as that is the only laughter than can be uproarious.

Long live, Patti Smith, the true queen.



Echo and the
Bunnymen

“The Killing Moon”

Ocean Rain

05/1984

Korova

The Killing Time

L Mari Harris

I’ve always wondered if Duncan wanted to die that night.

The kid who shot him, a fellow student, was a troublemaker, always willing to raise a fist at someone in the halls, stealing from backpacks and lockers, drinking under the bleachers during lunch, doing whatever he felt like, whenever he felt like it, consequences be damned.

Other kids at the party couldn’t understand why this kid was even there that night, why Duncan had even invited him. Duncan came from one of the wealthiest families in town. His group of friends were from equally wealthy families, and this other kid was from our town’s one trailer park. This kid did not fit in, like a square peg in the concise, round hole of their privileged lives.

But a few, including me, purely by accident, knew this kid was whom Duncan bought his drugs from. Pot, pills, occasional baggies of coke when the kid could score it for Duncan. I’d seen the two of them outside the Kmart several times that year, Duncan’s BMW parked next to the other kid’s rusted Gremlin, their driver windows both down, arms reaching out toward each other, all of this partially hidden by the store’s huge metal garbage containers in the rear. Sleight of hand, money and Ziploc baggies exchanged, off they’d go in separate directions out the parking lot.

Duncan and I were on the outskirts of each other’s lives. His father, a dentist, regularly hired my father, a handyman, to repaint rooms in their large house by the lake or to lay down new tile throughout. It seemed remodeling was always going on at Duncan’s house. I was only there once when I tagged along with my dad. Dad had told me Duncan’s dad was a big-game hunter, traveling to Africa each year to shoot another exotic trophy to hang in his downstairs game room. I wanted to see these giraffe, lion, water buffalo, and zebra hides for myself, but once at the house I lost my nerve and hung close to my dad in their kitchen. Duncan wasn’t home that day, but his older sister was, and she passed by me without a word of recognition, even though we had honors English together.

Duncan and I were physics lab partners that year. He was a year behind me, and I was counting down the days to graduation that was now just weeks away. He always called me by my last name when we talked while working on our latest lab assignment: “Harris, what’d you do this weekend? Study?” I was the bookworm, he was not. But he didn’t need to be. It all came so easily for him. He loved it when he discovered I’d give him shit right back—“Fuck you, Appleton.” He’d snort and tell me I was alright.

April came, unseasonably warm, several days hitting in the low 70s. We were all antsy, struggling to pay attention in school, wishing the days would fast forward to May. Duncan had started off-handedly commenting on how nice my dad was, how he hated thinking of another year of high school, how lucky I was to be escaping soon. More and more frequently he’d slip onto the stool next to me in lab, glassy eyed, not quite focusing. He’d chuckle quietly to himself after every little off-handed comment, and I had no clue what to think about any of it. I figured most of it was just Duncan being Duncan, always loving to see how far he could take something without getting in trouble.

Conflicting versions from other kids who'd been at Duncan's house that Saturday night quickly made their rounds. Some said the kid who shot him suddenly appeared in the living room, holding a revolver, saying, "Look what I found!" just before the shot shattered over the boom of the stereo. Others said no, that was all wrong, that the kid just quietly walked up to Duncan and pulled the trigger. A few closest to Duncan, though, swore that Duncan mouthed "Do it" just before ungodly amounts of red spread out across his white polo as the force pushed him back and he crumpled to the living room carpet.

I didn't find out until Monday morning, when I walked into 8 AM lab and saw all of the girls crying, and the boys stoic, dry eyed, arms crossed, not knowing what to do or think. I just sat there, listening to the others whose lives were so deeply entrenched with each other's, talk about Duncan and how much they hated the other kid. A few boys puffed their chests out and threatened retribution.

I just kept looking at the empty stool next to me, tears welling up that I'd wipe away with my hand, feeling alone in the quiet grief that grew inside me. I wasn't one of these kids, even though we'd all known one another since kindergarten, so there were years of secret histories among them that I was left out of. But Duncan and I were friends of our own strange definition, and his death tore at me. All the strange comments he'd made to me over the last few months replayed in my head as I watched the others try to console each other.

The funeral, people overflowing into the church's parking lot, was held a few days later. Within a few weeks, involuntary manslaughter charges were filed against the kid, and then he was sent away to juvenile detention. I never saw the kid again. I ruminated on Duncan a lot those first few months after his death. *Did he want to die? Were some of the whispers correct? I knew a part of him wasn't happy, maybe a bigger part of him than I realized. But unhappy enough to orchestrate the end? I still don't know to this day.*

All these decades later, Duncan's sauntering stroll into physics lab or his throaty chuckle will randomly pop into my head. Suddenly, he's sitting next to me again, we're both teenagers again, and he's teasing, "What'd you do this weekend, Harris? Study?"

STARSHIP



knee deep in the hoopla

Starship

"We Built This City"

*Knee Deep in the
Hoopla*

09/1985

Grunt / RCA Records

80s. Love. Song.

Tom Stern

I love you, Sara Kirk.

It has taken me more than twenty years, but finally I can call this out over the incomprehensible, unrequited, humiliated mass that has obscured it from us all these years. Granted, not every love story is a grand and enduring one. Ours certainly isn't. But it touched my soul, which is how I know it is love. Even if it started and ended with the banal, vapid noise-turd of a song that is "We Built This City," the shame-inducing somehow #1 single that takes me always instantly back to the moment we shared in 1989, a moment so confounding that it has buried and disguised our love ever since.

The first confusing aspect of our unconventional love affair is the fact that the song at its basis was released and charted in 1985, placing it, in the year in question, squarely within that Top 40 no man's land well after a humiliatingly crap song somehow commands the culture's attention but well before it resurfaces via some demented sense of nostalgia prompting people to claim they actually love the song *because* it's so bad.

My second point of stupefaction hinges on the fact that, out of literally every single song recorded during or before the year in question, this is the one you chose to perform at the 1989 Ladue Middle School talent show. And I remain convinced, to this day, that somehow no other song would have done.

To be honest, I did not know you back then like I know you now, possessing nothing more than that uniquely cursory type of knowledge one has about another's basic existence when two people attend the same school for years but have never had a single conversation. I saw you in the halls sometimes. You were rail thin, pasty pink pale, and had hazel eyes, round not almond, peering out beneath sand-colored hair trimmed across the midline of your forehead and in a straight line just above your shoulders, giving the impression of a helmet more than a hairstyle. You walked without moving your arms or head, your chin always tilted slightly down and to the right, eyes flitting between the ground and the space in front of you at a disaffected pace belying a nervous energy that nowadays would be diagnosed as anxiety. You seemed painfully quiet to the point of meekness, but on the three or four occasions I overheard you speak, your voice proved surprisingly assured and intelligent, even if your facial features never seemed to animate, every word unsupported by a flat, unconcerned affect.

The talent show took place on an oddly placed stage on the south end of a massive, wood-floored gymnasium, opposite the tiered bleachers that unfolded and compacted back into a strange, monolithic wall, wooden slats slapping and jolting into and out of place with ear-splitting, thunderous thwacks. The gym ceiling arced easily fifty-feet high, creating an undiscerning sonic orgy that gathered, melded, and bounced all sounds into a single cacophonous mass of reverberating muck. But that night, performer after performer looked right past such trifling unfavorables, seizing this opportunity to let their truest talents ring out, each act greeted by an adamant round of applause from the friends and family on hand to witness the moment when their loved one's boundless potential would be unleashed upon a soon to be adulating universe.

The show opened with a tremblingly nervous flautist, diaphragm aquiver.

She was followed by the half of a Shakespearean monologue that Scott Davis fumbled through before going up and staying up on a line.

From there, the order of things gets foggy, but I recall a diminutive yet sure-handed violinist. And an unaffiliated, pre-teen cheer squad that eventually found its way to a moment or two of synchronization. There was a magician whose tricks would only play in a space one-sixteenth the size. And two different sets of friends who choreographed their own dance numbers. One of them designed their own costumes by cutting and glittering mustard-orange jersey tee-shirts, a choice lauded as creative by several audience members within my earshot. And there was a tie-dyed, greasy-haired rock band called Turbulence trying very hard to look like they didn't care as they befouled a Led Zeppelin cover.

Then you walked out from the wings stage right. At first I was certain you must have taken an unfortunate wrong turn on your way hastily back from the bathroom. But you did not stop, you kept coming. Your footsteps made not a sound as you walked at your usual straight, steady clip to the single mic stand in the barren stage's middle where you took a hard right to face the crowd. The microphone, positioned too high, blocked most of your mouth and nose, leaving only your unreadable eyes visible over it.

And then you waited. Motionless and completely silent. Except for the sound of your breath, rippling and distorting now through the loudspeakers dumping out into the room.

On the gym floor, 20 rows of metal folding chairs were filled with onlookers and the unfolded bleachers behind were scattered with another 150 people easy, every last one of us staring on in wait. It was the type of silence that couldn't happen nowadays. It died back in the '80s, before we started running purely on media time. Now we lose our minds in such silence. We shout or scream or leave, irreparably convinced our rights as an audience have been violated. But back then, we just waited. And eventually, somehow, some way, the A/V guy finally figured out how to push play on the tape you had given him, the cassette single version of "We Built This City" replete with vocal tracks just as you might find on any radio station across America... four years prior.

The song started with that mortifying pang of its chorus belting out in a near-falsetto. Two syllables in and the only thought I could process in my reeling mind was the word, "No." Over and over again. Insistent if not emphatic. My eyes went wide, my breath tightened and shallowed, needles shot through my every synapse as what was about to transpire dawned on me undeniable. Had you lost a bet? But with whom? I had never seen you with a friend. Did your family put you up to this as some brutally misguided attempt to address your social phobias? But wouldn't they be cheering you on?

All coherent, rational efforts to explain away the horror unfolding before me were absolutely obliterated the second you started singing.

If one can truly call it that, my love.

You had missed the first bar, as the tape had started with no warning. But you scurried and caught up as the second "We built this city..." hit.

Your voice was a shrill, tone-deaf falsetto. A quivering and lost sound. The kind you hide and simply don't admit—no matter the circumstance. But of course, since life is

unflinchingly cruel, your voice managed to clearly distinguish itself atop the vocal track on the tape flooding into the sonic free-for-all that was the gymnasium.

Your expression remained blank and flat as you sang. Your body did not move an inch to the music. Not a foot tap, not an arm sway, nothing. Your eyes held wide and round and fixed no different than they had been in the endless silence that I now pleaded with a clearly absent God to bring back. You were a voice and only a voice, my love. A sonic desecration of a voice. A noise dagger eviscerating all of the senses, rendering them flaccid and fallow. Squeaking out lyric after lyric of the pandering faux anthem shaking the room with its boingy synths and split-track harmonies and skin-crawling lyrical and musical earnestness. By the time the lyric about someone playing the mamba hit, my gaze was buried irretrievable into the waxed wood of the floor, the question *why?* now screaming over and over again in my mind in a futile effort to block out the sound.

And then, the single most unimaginable thing happened.

To this day, when I play these events back in my mind for the thousandth time, still I am stunned every time my memory takes this turn.

It started somewhere in the back of the gym.

A small group of people.

At first just barely discernible.

Then it elevated. Quickly.

Into the unmistakable sound of people clapping to the beat.

I pried my eyes from the floor and looked back, expecting to find a mocking group of middle-schoolers. Or maybe a nuclear and extended family of entirely monotone mutes staring blankly forward and clapping their hands in an odd and belated version of support for their daughter, sister, niece, and granddaughter. But it was neither of these things. It was a group of high school kids who, contrary to everything that logic itself stands for and the order it kindly provides to so many aspects of our world, seemed to be honest to God enjoying the performance.

The claps gained immediate traction, too, snowballing almost instantly into a thunderous and emphatic drum track. Then the hoots and hollers began erupting. The bleachers even started toggling and squeaking with the inherited motion of bodies dancing. And, I shit you not, people even started to sing along when the chorus next hit. Utterly inexplicably, the entire room had shifted electric—a truth that surely left *Turbulence* in the wings dejectedly second-guessing their own musical prowess.

I scanned the room again and again for even a shred of irony in the crowd's fervor, but there simply was none there. At which point I turned my eyes back to the stage, ready to find you transformed into a joyous, expressive, impassioned performer finally pulled swan from the layered sediment of your shell. What I found instead was you, unaffected and persisting. Just as you had been before my eyes fell miles from the stage to the floor. Seascape dwarfed by the same oblong, sky high proscenium, arms at sides, face obscured now as then, body holding motionless, expression offering nothing, eyes still lost in the space overhead the bafflingly exuberant audience, your voice flat at every single turn imaginable—and some unimaginable, too—all the way to the end of the song, until the tape finally finished with its gradual fade out, amplifying your piercing voice by subtraction.

The crowd replaced their percussive accompaniment with booming applause and whistles and varied exclamations. But you just turned, as if you perceived none of it, and walked right back off the stage as you had entered it: flatly, impassively, already unfettered.

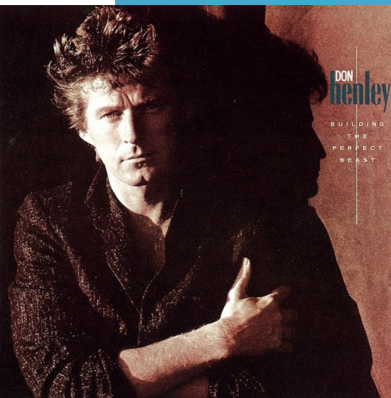
I would not understand it throughout high school as you went Goth and then metal and then landed somewhere in between, your hair black and then purple and then green and then purple and then black, your complexion somehow managing to get continuously paler. I would not understand it several years later when I heard some old friends discovered you stripping at Roxy's in East St. Louis. Nor would I understand it when I read your update on our high school alumni website, that you had moved to Colorado with a man you met, took a road trip with, and then married—and now you have a daughter. But when I stumbled upon your memory not long ago while sitting yet again sleepless under 3am stars stewing over the difference between a savvy life decision and a compromise, it finally became clear to me that my feelings for you were love. Not the kind of love upon which a new family is built. Not even the kind that results in fumbling naked experiences selectively stored in memory. But the kind of love that lets you really see another, to their core, finally making it obvious to me that of all the songs in the world, you chose that awful one to sing simply because you liked it. And you chose to sing it in that talent show just because you wanted to. Consequences, appearances, perceptions, and expectations be damned. And I love you for this. I have for what might as well have been forever. Even if I only know it now.

But if you see me at our upcoming reunion, please don't stop to talk. We've made our choices, built our respective cities, so to speak. Some loves are like that. Perfect until turned into something they are not. Ours can go on just as it is forever, shared together alone.

Besides, I could never start a life with someone who authentically likes that festering ass-crap of a song. How would I even pretend to defend your honor should a friend or a stranger, let alone an actual, informed fan of real music, ask us how we fell in love?

So I guess this is hello and good-bye, Sara.

It has been life-changing only maybe knowing you.



Don Henley

"Boys of Summer"

*Building the Perfect
Beast*

11/1984

Geffen

Anthem Against Summer

Ivy Grimes

Sun is poison.
Sand is spittle
from the infinite
dry coughs of
the sick ocean.

He says
he sees me
with the top down,
basking in the sun
like a satisfied reptile.

Lies.
I was born
walking fast
across a patch
of ice.

Drive past empty houses
all you like.
No bright shell
at water's edge ever
held my body.

Unless another
self is out there
warm and known
by summer's troubadour,
he's singing

for a show.
He is the gone one,
summer's child
whose song is foul
and fair.



Fugazi

"Bad Mouth"

Fugazi EP

11/1988

Dischord

Bottle Rockets

Hillary Leftwich

Ryan Gardino wants to go down on you. He tells you this over the phone while you're halfway on and halfway off the couch in your basement, nervously wrapping the faded yellow telephone cord around your left ankle, then your right ankle, and now you can't move.

Your dad is working late and your brother is setting off bottle rockets at the neighbor's house two blocks down when Ryan Gardino shows up on your doorstep. He's two years older than you, in the tenth grade, and has a Mohawk. Your hand is stuck to the latch on the screen door as you watch him take a long, relaxed drag off his cigarette. He scrapes the cigarette on the bottom of his black combat boot, tossing the butt into the flower pot next to the door.

You hesitate for a second but open the door to allow him inside. He brushes against you as he walks through the door, a scent-cloud of leather and nicotine floating behind him. His leather jacket jingles from the small chains and music buttons pinned on like war badges. His slow spreading grin stops midway as he asks you if anyone else is home. You tell him you're alone, but your brother might be home soon. You remember last week acting out the entire movie *The Princess Bride* with your best friend. You talked all night; fashion magazines spread out like a picnic blanket, wondering why the girls in your class smeared makeup on their faces and wore Victoria's Secret bras. You are scared shitless of the boys in your class. They walk down the halls in noisy packs, laughing and punching each other, smelling like gym class and cologne.

Ryan's fingers are tapping on the small of your back like a piano as you lead him into your room. You see it through his eyes: puffy pillows, a daybed with a rose comforter, and your favorite stuffed horse your dad won at the school carnival in fifth grade. Panties hang halfway out of the dresser drawer like blue and red bird wings. He walks over to your stereo and flips the switch on, turning the music up as he slides out of his jacket like a snake shedding its skin and stares at you. He has a sideways smirk on his face as he approaches you, hands out, not playing the keyboard of your back any more but still ready to touch you. When he does—touch you—your stomach, already in painful knots; flips and seizes. Your heart is a dying bird in flight. He takes your hand and leads you to your daybed. You can still see your stuffed bear, Mr. Noodles, shoved between the wall and bed frame, gaping at you with a look of abandonment. Before childhood guilt can creep in, you are falling backwards on your pink quilt as he lands on top of you, his mouth on your neck, sucking, leaving hickies—you're almost positive—that you will have to cover up with makeup you don't own yet. There's an oven in between your legs, gobbling its way up until it reaches your throat. You're thinking about how people kiss in the movies and you're trying to imitate them, but your tongue keeps hitting his and you try to stifle your giggles.

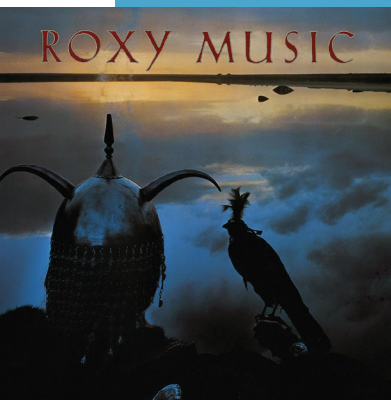
Your room faces the baseball field and you can hear the neighbor's boys shouting and the sound of the steel bats as they hit the ground. You try to remember what first base and second base are as he smuggles his hand inside your bra, cupping your A cup breasts that are still in the process of shaping themselves, still growing into their full potential. He plays with your nipples like pegs on a Battleship game board. You swore to your best friend to never let a boy go up your shirt, to never be like the other girls in your class. Now, there is a boy panting on you like a heat exhausted dog and his crotch is a steel

poker between your legs. There are ten of him now, all doing different things to you, and you can't keep track. You feel like your brother's bottle rockets, dizzy as you launch into the sky, exploding into a thousand pieces. This isn't how you imagined it. Your mouth is covered with his mouth as his fingers unbutton your pants and slide them down to your ankles. His hands are giant spiders inside your pink polka dot panties.

You think about your mom and all the men she brought home over the years; how fast she could switch from yelling at you and your brother to laughing at everything when a man showed up at the door, flirting in the kitchen like you weren't there, like you didn't exist, but you were there, standing in the corner in a pink nightgown, holding your glass of chocolate milk.

The distant sound of bottle rockets shooting off can be heard as your room slowly fades into a dirty, yellow haze. Your hands have found their way on either side of his shaved head. You cautiously rub his stubbles, reminding you of the sand on the beach in Florida when you used to visit your grandpa. You don't know if this is right or wrong, if this is where it all starts, or how it is supposed to start. You think you need to listen to your brother and just shut up and grow up. Ryan Gardino's head is moving down now, his Mohawk like the fin of a shark as he drags his tongue past your belly button, blazing a trail like Red Hot Candies down, further down, and somewhere in the background you can hear Fugazi singing: *You can't be what you were, so you better start being just what you are.*

A version of this piece was first published by [WhiskeyPaper](#) on January 1, 2016



Roxy Music

"More than This"

Avalon

05/1982

E.G. Records / Polydor

More Than This

Mary Thompson

I could feel at the time

You tiptoe over to the horseshoe-shaped pool and swim thirty awkward lengths in your lurid orange swimming costume, while he feasts on your skinny ankles from his lifeguard chair.

And a year later you spot him again when you pop into the job centre in search of work as you need money or you can't go out (and you have to go out as at 17 you're yearning and restless), and he produces a card for a job in Lowe's, slicing cheese and chopping up ham on the deli counter, and when he calls to see if it's still available, the whole time he's speaking, his eyes are on you.

Then after, when he says, *meet me for a drink*, you say, *yes, okay*, and as you're descending the stairs, you can't help smiling as you know he's watching you again.

There is nothing more than this

After a dinner of steak and red wine, the fluorescent lights of the restroom bore into you as you're sticking your fingers down your throat.

All you really want is to be normal.

And when he drives you home, the car vibrates with tunes you don't know. You lean forward and pick up a cassette case. It's covered with song titles scrawled in black ink: "Avalon", "Jealous Guy", "Love is the Drug"...

He parks up on the verge in the shadow of your father's church. Then his hand is on your thigh, his tongue in your mouth. And as you kiss, the sultry sounds of "More Than This" transport you from this remote village to a place you don't yet know.

You dream of sex that night, but the next day you're still a shy girl with wispy hair, slender wrists and a protestant priest for a father.

It was fun for a while

He takes you to your first party, in Glasgow, in another universe, and people his age cluster round you in a darkened room pulsating with sound. They ask you sweet questions and talk to you softly as though you're a pet, something to be admired and protected. You kind of like this, and yet you don't. But the music beats on regardless and the drugs and wine soon take hold.

There was no way of knowing

When the summer arrives, he says, *let's go camping in France*, but your mum says no, unless you have separate tents that is, to which you agree, saddened by the fact she believes you.

You crash out on the ferry, disorientated after too many beers and are gently awoken by an assistant saying, *we're in Calais, love*, so you wander below deck to find your beau back on the coach listening to his walkman.

Where were you? he mutters. *When we get back, we're finished!*

And you sob quietly as the coach meanders through the quiet suburbs of Paris and the rolling countryside of the south.

But by the time you arrive in Avignon he's seemingly forgotten, so you smile a little and begin to relax. You allow yourself to think that this really could be quite romantic, until you zip up the tent and discover tree frogs in your sleeping bag.

It's a joke, he says. *Lighten up*, while you are shaking and hyperventilating and trying not to show how you truly feel as you want this to work. You really want this to work.

Like a dream in the night

He moves away six months after you meet and you stay in touch by letter and telephone.

One day he says, *come for the weekend*, so you're in London for the first time. It's 1988 and he has tickets for New Order. But you feel invisible next to him, your small hand in his; cool, older people all around you.

The next afternoon he plies you with martinis then pushes himself inside you on his big double bed, and you sunbathe afterwards in your tiny bikini, in his tiny garden, your head rolling from the booze, the sun all tingly on your unprepared skin.

Maybe I'm Learning

You want it to last, but he says it won't. *You're only 18. It's all going to change.*

No, you plead. *Uni is three years, not long at all.*

It's longer than you realise, he says.

And you cry and cry, unsure how you'll ever get over this, but a month later when you're starting your next relationship, you start to realise he was right.



The Police

"Every Breath You
Take"

Synchronicity

06/1983

A&M

Summer Heat / Every Breath You Take

Stephanie Feuer

A hypnotic baseline ushered in the summer of 1983, a summer when the heat in Boston broke all the records. Broke us. It was fitting that our anthem was a breakup song.

You were caretaking a mansion behind Brattle Street during renovation. Dust and destruction made it hard to breathe. We drove up to the North Shore to escape the thick city air, and rolled up the windows of my old green Saab when we heard that catchy intro. At a picnic table at a shack of a place, we ate chubby clams, juicy and steaming under a perfect crust. They left oil stains on the paper plates.

Every breath. That voice; longing, tuneful, through speakers on the parched lawn. There was no breeze. You were different than the skinny boys in all black in more-than-decent bands I'd usually bed. Your muscles strained against the pure white tees you wore. A road manager for bands, it didn't hurt that you looked like you worked security. You said you were just passing through. At Singing Beach, you told me of suiting up in a storm to surf the swirling waters. With me folded in your arms, you whisper-sang to me. *It's you I can't replace.*

Every move. Undertow disguised by the pop guitar riff. I had a weakness for bad boys. My fourth-floor walk-up in Jamaica Plain was so hot I didn't know if it was better to keep the windows open or closed.

Every night. Your small room with an air conditioner in the window was our refuge. A string of days in the upper 90s. Endless sunlight, streets spongy from hot tar. Unrelenting heat. The exquisite edge of wanting. The pitch intensifies before the chorus. *You belong to me.* The drumbeat, marking time with increased urgency, snare and cymbal and mallets. My skin was always damp from the relentless humidity.

Every single day. The bar at Swift's, a Cambridge music club, a long basement room with low ceilings. You downed vodka like water. The backbeat of our demise. Heat rose up from the pavement in a haze that distorted. *Every single day.*

Every breath. More than once the electricity goes. Stifling. I found sweet relief with another skinny boy in an air conditioned hotel room.

My poor heart aches blasting from the speakers in your living room. An undertone of menace. *You belong to me.* We tussled. *Baby, baby, please.* You were not the only strong one. Crash, not the cymbal. Off-kilter you fell first, your ribs connecting with the edge of the speaker.

Every step. It would be another year before we both finally let go.

I'll be watching. A vow we would not break.

Every Breath. Inexorably altered, transformed by the heat. Knowing it was over is what let us fall in love.



Lana Del Rey

"Ultraviolence"

Ultraviolence

06/2014

Polydor / Interscope

Escape from Paradise

Stephanie Valente

*"Jim taught me that/
Loving him was never enough"*

– Lana Del Rey, "Ultraviolence"

some time ago, we were spies
in the dreamhouse, a house
built on palm tree dreams,
spilled bourbon, careless cigarettes.
a house that whispered:
meet me in the past. a place
where only good girls count,
for the price of admission. darling,
i watched you give me the prettiest
red dress to cross the threshold.
it was lovely, until it hurt. smoke burned,
even if you promised, they weren't real Parliaments.
i built that dreamhouse, in a red dress,
without panties, my sweat poured on you.
building was easy, a good girl with
the right credentials: tiny, fresh, worshipping
stars. darling, i chose the wrong gods.
there was no safe place. so, i burned it.
took your fingers out of my mouth. i ruined
our history. i put the stars on altars, made
ruined gods. i burned + you burned.
rib wounds, black eyes, awful trophies.
it was terrible, our cult. i'm the spy standing on ruins.
the truth is, everyone wants to win the prize fight.
in the end, i chose this life.

LANA DEL REY



Lana Del Rey

"Ride"

Paradise

11/2012

Polydor / Interscope

Lana Del Rey's "Ride," Cancer, and the Struggle to Be Free

Anya Silver

This is how metastatic breast cancer makes me feel: helpless, powerless, out of control, fated to die young of a death not of my choosing.

This is how Lana Del Rey's song "Ride" makes me feel: fucked up, and likely to die young, but in some control of my own life, and free even in the worst of circumstances.

Those of us with cancer have many anthems from which to choose. Most of them are not written about cancer, but they celebrate toughness and resilience. They rally us with the reassurance that we will beat the disease, that we are fierce warriors in a battle of life and death, and that our fighting attitude will help ensure our victory. See: Rachel Patton, "Fight Song"; Kelly Clarkson, "Stronger"; Katy Perry, "Roar"; Beyoncé, "Formation"; Tom Petty, "I Won't Back Down"; and, for those with more treacherous inclinations, Tim McGraw's cancer ballad "Live Like You Were Dying." Songs that take a more unsparing look at cancer, such as Jason Isbell's "Elephant" and Sufjan Stevens's "Casimir Pulaski Day," usually don't make the anthem list, because people in the song, you know, die.

I enjoy my fighting goddess songs. But Lana's "Ride" is, for me, the perfect anthem because it isn't about winning, overcoming adversity, or having a good attitude. It's about day to day survival. In its refusal to guarantee victory over one's problems, it speaks to me as someone with incurable, terminal cancer. It speaks to anyone who isn't able-bodied, or mentally "stable," or happy, without patronizing to its listener or preaching. There are remarkably few songs like that.

People undergoing cancer treatment are tired. When we're not in front of our families and friends, trying to comfort others, we often fall into an abyss of fear and despair. When Lana sings, "Don't break me down/I've been traveling too long/I've been trying too hard/With one pretty song," I empathize. Her voice is mine, singing to my disease, to my body, to life, to God. I can try and try, but chances are that I'll still break down. Smiling isn't a cure. A pretty song isn't a cure. "That open road" isn't just a place of possibility; it's also a place of deep loneliness. To the ire of some critics, who evidently lack an understanding of the mental state in which she's singing, Lana seeks the comfort of a man, anyone who will take care of her in her despair. Healthy people usually don't understand one simple fact about dealing with people with chronic illness: we don't need syrupy, clichéd advice about "fighting like a girl," etc. We need someone to listen to us, to care about us, to comb our hair and make us dinner, to hold us. Sometimes we need someone not to just to care about us, but to take care of us.

Then the song shifts. In the chorus of "Ride," Lana converts her loneliness to a feeling of freedom. Now, echoing Springsteen and the whole driving-all-night tradition of rock, the road becomes a place of redemption: "I drive fast, I am alone at midnight//I just ride." From her loneliness, Lana gathers up her inner resources. She finds independence. She fights "the war in my mind." She fights it alone.

A terminal disease can grant a person a tremendous sense of freedom. There's the freedom not to worry about small concerns, because death is so much greater a fear.

There's the freedom to ruthlessly and guiltlessly cut people out of your life who no longer serve your needs. I say whatever I want. I spend too much money. I call bullshit when I see it. I reject the fake theology of "Everything happens for a reason." I cuss if I want to. Do I make you uncomfortable? Well, bless your heart. I dare you to judge me when I'm dying.

Of course there's a war in my mind. How long will I live? What should I do with the rest of my life? Do I throw aside my responsibilities and go *carpe diem*? I don't want to make cancer sound like fun, because it's not. It's horrific. But it's my war, and as long as I can, I'll make the choices.

So, I forgive Lana the easy romance of an early death in the lines "Dying young and playing hard/That's the way my father made his life an art." We all know that live fast/die young is a rock and roll cliché with little reflection in the reality of being hooked up to oxygen and liquids, drugged unconscious on morphine, losing control over one's bowels, coughing up blood, and begging for higher pain killers. But it's an appealing fantasy, so I grant it to Lana. No, I'm not living fast. I have a kid and a mortgage. But I'm not taking the world's crap anymore, either. If I'm going to die young, then I want to be loud. I want to write poems that make people mad. I'm not drinking all day and riding around with bikers, but that's OK. It's kind of comforting to know that I could. And the freedom from old age, of dementia and decrepitude, brings an unexpected relief. Not much, but some. Whether or not M.I.A. is correct when she sings, "Live fast, die young/Bad girls do it well" is irrelevant. I pump my middle-aged fists to those lyrics. Some stories, even when we know they're not true, sustain us. I'm not a bad girl, but I like the idea that I could still be one if I really wanted to. And it's an appealing idea that dying young somehow makes me special and exciting, even though I know there's no truth to that idea. Mythology helps one get by.

And yet, Lana doesn't offer much comfort in "Ride," which I like. She's still "feeling crazy" at the end of the song. She's still out there, alone, driving, trying to find her place in the world. To have ended the song with some sort of arrival at self-awareness and safety would have ruined the song's appeal. When, in life, is there a clear and final point of "I did it. I'm done"? Never. Illness, in particular, doesn't have sign posts. There's no road map, no menu. No one has gone through the precise experience that you are going through before. I could have six months or six years left. Each one of us on the earth could have six months, six years. I'm riding, just riding. Most days, that's enough.

In the video for "Ride," Lana includes a Jack Kerouac-fueled monologue, little of which pertains to me. However, the last two lines have a motto-like quality that I can't deny: "I am fucking crazy/But I am free."

Freedom, for a cancer patient, is elusive. There are the appointments, the waiting, the scans, more waiting, the rigid treatment schedules that turn one into a walking embodiment of illness. Will the tumors grow? Will they shrink? What side effects will we suffer? So survival depends on an inner freedom, on a core of dignity and self-worth, and a knowledge that one still has choices and purpose in life. There's a little bit of the French existentialist in Lana. Can I admit that "Ride" reminds me of Camus? He writes, "The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion." The existential hero recognizes that freedom and choice in an absurd world are possible, but that they must be *actively chosen*. One must make one's own meaning in the world, regardless of the world's expectations. One must become oneself consciously, and in doing so, a person earns the possibility of a life with meaning in a world that does not provide any inherent meaning.

What does this mean for me?

I can choose to take this medicine or not.

I can choose to struggle despite the side effects of treatments, because my life is worth living.

I can choose to die.

I am at the mercy of my dividing cells. I will leave my son motherless too soon. I will never be free of time and death slowly taking their inexorable snips out of me. But ultimately, nobody is free of time and death. I'm just more aware of that than able-bodied people are. As writer Anatole Broyard pointed out about sick people, I'm just smarter.

Like Lana, I claim my own freedom. Lana understands trauma. She has experienced loneliness. She doesn't offer me a cup of comfort, or an answer, or facile theology. But when I see her in the video, scrambling across the desert, screaming, that could be me screaming. My scream would say, "I exist. I am." I will love. I will create. I will sing in the car. Cancer will not destroy the beauty of my life, despite the suffering that it puts me through.

So I ride. I'll ride until I'm pulled out of that car. So would Lana. She gets it.

War Sounds

Terrell Fox

We were amped up and crammed into our Amtrac. Our packs were slung over the sides to give us more room to stand on the seats and poke our upper bodies out through the top of the open hatches. The sharp aluminum edges of the hatch seals dug into the backs of our SAPI plates as we leaned against them. We tried to let our knees absorb the bumps and jostles of the tracks on the uneven sand. We were excited, suspicious, and nervous. We didn't know what to expect about the coming fight, but the thick black smoke from the distant oil fires announced that it would probably be an aggressive one.

The air was hot and dry. Remnants of the previous night's sandstorm added fine grit to the wind. It coated and abraded my throat. I sucked down uncomfortably warm water through the tube of my Camelback and swished it around in my mouth to rinse out the sand.

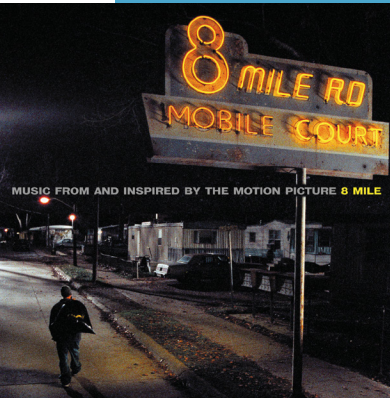
I had the radio handset jammed in between my helmet chinstrap and my left cheek. The hard black plastic dug into my ear. Occasionally the Marine next to me would shift his position and snag the coiled line of the handset that linked me to the radio, yanking my head hard over and to the left. Bits of comm chatter filtered through and I half-listened to PosReps, northings, updates, queries, and acknowledgements, waiting to hear my call sign. The steady rumble of the diesel engines and the shouted orders and exclamations of the Marines around me made it difficult to hear anything specific. It blended together into a wall of noise.

Over it all I could hear the squeaks from the strained suspension and the sharp taps of our rifle barrels as the motion of the Amtrac made us bump them around on the lip of the hatch. The track commander shouted and gestured at the other vehicles around us as he repositioned them in line or moved them out of our way. I felt the transmission grind and I heard the fast slap of the thick rubber track pads as they passed over hard patches of sand. I couldn't hear my heartbeat anymore.

We pulled up and halted, on line and in columns, stacks of green amphibious vehicles spread out across the pale sand of the wide-open desert. I heard the buzz of scout motorcycles as their engines argued with the deeper growls of idling diesels. They zipped between and around trucks and tanks and tracks. Humvees, some hardback, some soft top, and some open air, were scattered throughout the columns like tan colored punctuation marks in sentences of olive drab. I heard all the different engines, running at different pitches and tones, and their timbres combined into one all-encompassing mechanical voice.

I heard the Marines behind me, facing outboard on the other side of the track, excitedly shout something so I shuffled my cumbersome gear around and looked out over my shoulder. Four Psy-Ops Humvees pulled up in a line at the front of the entire armored column right on the bleeding edge of the Line of Departure (LOD).

The speakers mounted on the backs of the Psy-Ops Humvees crackled. I saw distorted movement behind their thick windows. The Psy-Ops guys were preparing something, either for us or for the enemy. The radio chatter petered out and all attempts at conversation died. Our attention focused on the Psy-Ops guys.



Eminem

"Lose Yourself"

*8 Mile: Music from and
Inspired by the Motion
Picture*

10/2002

Shady / Interscope

The hiss of the high-gain speakers increased in volume. It was the sound of pre-noise. It was amplified anti-silence. The non-sound from the speakers made my teeth feel tight. I wanted to bite something.

The speakers erupted. Sound blasted out. The treble and bass fought each other for supremacy. Eminem's first few piano notes shot over the diesels and reverberated across and through the triangular ridges of the up-armor on the Amtracs. The thumping bass guitar kicked in and strummed with violent potential. The music drowned us. It burned in my lungs when I breathed it in. No one cheered.

We collectively started to move to the rhythm. It was a gentle back and forth, a subtle helmet nod. At the first lyric, "Look," I glanced at the Marine beside me. We locked eyes and then looked away from each other and back out to the horizon. The engines roared. The Psy-Ops Humvees stepped off. Our Amtrac surged forward across the LOD. Feeling invincible, we charged north towards Baghdad.



Godsmack

"Voodoo"

Godsmack

08/1998

Universal / Republic

Sociopath

Amber D. Tran

They did not have "Living Dead Girl" or "Bodies" or "Coming Undone" so I danced to "Voodoo" instead.

I crawled atop speaker boxes in nothing but knee-high leather boots and a pair of red panties. The multi-colored lights from the gay bar counted each of my Irish moles. A man stepped down from his stool and slid a five-dollar bill into my underwear. Another man followed. As the chorus slithered around my trembling body and snaked through the skulls of the crowd, I bent over and closed my eyes.

Still.

When they announced me as the winner of the stripping contest, the bar folk seemed to momentarily forget that I was just a regular college student dancing to rock music instead of primping myself to someone like Katy Perry or Lady Gaga or Prince, as other competitors did, and they all cheered and screamed and toasted to me, the little girl with dark hair, the one with **Jasper <3** written on her palm in Sharpie, the monstrous thing that just took off her skin for free alcohol.

A woman in a tight pink dress wanted to buy me a drink. I found another bill in my panties as I continued to walk around the bar in leather and lace.

Two men invited me to snort a line of cocaine in the back of the bar. So I did.

Still, still.

The DJ decided to play "Voodoo" a little after 1:30 AM, "To honor that little Goth thing who came in here out of nowhere and wrecked shit." People shook me by the shoulders. Fingers pointed at me. I sat at the bar with my legs crossed at the knee, a straw between my lips, as I sipped on tequila with powder in my nose. The noise of the bar swallowed me whole, its teeth a sharp sort that could cut me without me even knowing. I did not know I bled out the alcohol I consumed.

Last calls filled the room. The same woman in the tight pink dress invited me home with her. In her hands she held my black and pink floral dress, the one my mother bought me from a discount store after my finals, the one I stripped off and tossed aside when Godsmack invited me on stage. She batted dark eyes with fake eyelashes, "Babe, let me take care of you." She dropped the dress in my lap.

I pushed a piece of honey-blond hair out of her face. She pushed her cheek into my palm, the same palm that read your name.

Still I had more self-worth then.



Black Moon

"Who Got Da Props?"

Enta da Stage

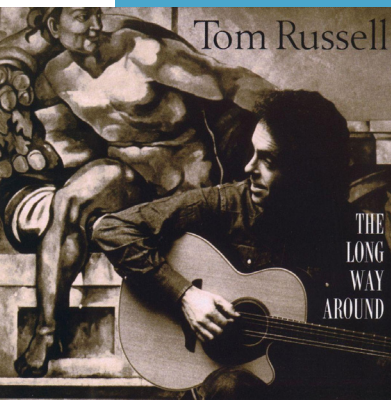
10/1993

Nervous

Who Got Da Props?

Justin Davis

Not you. Not you, wack MC. Not you, sharpening the butter knife. Not you, sneak dissing. Not you, half-stepping, fronting, move-faking. Nah, not even you in a Kill Bill banana jumpsuit with the black streaks. Not you, money eater, uncredited feature, wannabe Sonny Chiba. Not you and your Ku Klux patois. Not you and your Russian twitter bots. Not you, misogynist son of Kemet, not you, misappropriated ankh. Not you, in the front yard, with the 2nd Amendment. Not you with the poverty wages. Not you, sitting pretty in the valley. Not you, colonizer, gentrifier, chronic liar, not you who told me there was such a thing as justice. Not you, when I yell at my captors and they ask for money to loose the chain an inch. Not you. I'm allergic to you. You're a stuck Chevy, a busted 'fro.



Tom Russell

"Blue Wing"

The Long Way Around

05/1997

HighTone Records

Blue Wing

Matthew Woodman

I can't decide. Sometimes it's an oak tree, and sometimes it's an owl.

The moon phases a horizon across my shoulders. Or a vertical stripe down one or the other of my arms.

The "Blue Wing" in question could be any one of at least three distinct but related blue wings. The opening line establishes the first: "He had a blue wing tattooed on his shoulder." Tattoos function as a form of nonverbal communication, the blue tattoo pigment originating as copper carbonate, sodium aluminum silicate, calcium copper silicate, cobalt aluminum oxides, and chromium oxides. From crushed azurite, lapis lazuli, and turquoise, flight, ascent, and freedom.

The otherwise unnamed "he" in that line becomes the second avian anterior limb, a man distilled to the appellation Blue Wing. What do we know about this man? That, having been found guilty of an unnamed crime, he has been sentenced to Washington State Penitentiary, a.k.a., Walla Walla. That he dreams of running free. That, near the song's end, he dies. What do I know about myself? That I'm drawn to assemblage... that I'm drawn, too. It's all a series of boxes; if we're not living in one, on one form or another, we're marking through one with an X.

The third is "Blue Wing," the song written in prison by Little Willy John about Blue Wing the man and/or Blue Wing the tattoo. This in turn becomes the "Blue Wing" chorus: "They sang, it's dark in here, can't see the light / but I look at this blue wing when I close my eyes / and I fly away, beyond these walls / up above the clouds, where the rain don't fall / on a poor man's dreams." Indeed, William Edgar John—a.k.a., Little Willy John—best known for his classic 1956 No. 1 R&B hit "Fever," having been convicted of murder died at the age of 30 in Washington State Penitentiary on May 26, 1968.

There is also, of course, the bird to whom the blue wing belonged. As the song's second line indicates, "It might have been a blue bird, I don't know." To which bird is this tattoo meant to allude? In terms of place, the song references both Seattle and Los Angeles, so the bird in question would need to be from the Pacific coast. Perhaps the western bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*) or lazuli bunting (*Passerina amoena*). More likely a jay. Could be a Steller's jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*), a Piñon jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*), a western scrub jay (*Aphelocoma californica*), or, of course, the blue jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*). I prefer to think of the wing as belonging to the garrulous black-billed magpie (*Pica hudsonia*), an avian trickster whose call can best be described as cursing in verse, a conversation, poetry. I watch the blue blurs in the backyard and try to whistle back. I even purchased a crow call online, but nothing seems to come of it. They seem to ignore me in that, to mangle a Leonard Cohen line, they don't want to compare mythologies.

One's heart distilled, the anthem, an unwieldy stone in the mouth. Synecdoche refers to this concept of comprehending the whole by detailing and coming to know a single one of its components, William Blake having inked the Platonic Ideal in "Auguries of Innocence": "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour." There are so many strata on which to etch, before which to read, by which to hear an anthem: in blood, on paper, in vinyl, on cinderblock walls, as a digital series of ones and zeroes.

According to the 1913 definition, the anthem must be sung in alternate parts, one half-choir answering the other. We all have our strengths. Mine do not include musicality in any form other than whistling through parking lots and empty halls. This might explain why a song can transport me so viscerally. I'm not sure *vicarious* is an accurate label for this experience, though I understand how it could be seen as such. A live recording, my favorite version of "Blue Wing," is a duet between Tom Russell and Dave Alvin from Russell's 1997 *The Long Way Around*. Their alternating time-worn voices accompanied by a subtle acoustic guitar, it sounds dark in there.

According to Scott Sillett, a wildlife biologist at the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, blue birds do not exist; the "blue" we see on a blue wing is a structural color that results not from pigment but from the wave interference between light and the feather's keratin structures of protein molecules. That makes sense, but not really.

Though I still haven't gone under the needle, I do have a wing-sized patch of skin, and I do sing in my ragged way at the blue shapes streaking the sky.

Francis Forever: An Anthem for Being Over-Dramatically Melancholy for No Reason

lauren a. boisvert

1.

It's that time of year again when I can only write poems about one specific time in my life because I never got closure and I am haunted by my unconscious mind who thinks I need to imagine how happy we could have been while I try to sleep.

Everything reminds me of lavender roses and pearly purple fingernails and my dirty feet skipping across the cracked parking lot of the Greek Orthodox Church, nighttime stretching its arms out forever and fat bands of stars like salt spilled across a black velvet tablecloth. You held my shoes swinging by the heels from two fingers and when I looked at you I knew you had me by the heels too but I never said anything about it.

I never say anything about anything and look where it's gotten me seven years later.

2.

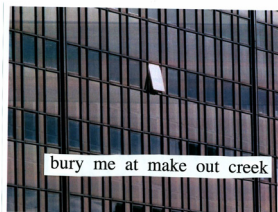
One time I made you a mixtape and wrote *this is good shit I promise* on the front but of course it wasn't and I was just projecting, handing you a declaration of my whiny hopeful fantasies of holding hands and living in the mountains (I can't listen to Ingrid Michaelson without thinking about my desperate eyes on you and the speakers too loud in my car and you asking for the name of that song so you could play it for your girlfriend). At that point "Francis Forever" hadn't been written yet and at that point you were still around.

3.

Last year I wrote a chapbook about you that turned out to be the poetry equivalent of "I'd Rather Be Blue" from *Funny Girl* played on repeat at a party from the other room.

I ache inside with the dreams and the anvil of our unresolved tension sitting on my chest. You ran away somewhere and I feel it like birds eating my liver. I am dramatic and maudlin and maybe that's why you left or maybe that's why you stayed so long but either way it molds itself around this one Mitski song and makes a home there, screaming for two straight minutes into a void that feels like being pulled in all directions and no directions at once.

I feel the dreams revving up like trying to start a chainsaw, just getting there but not quite, leading into something big, something loud and destructive and dangerous like it used to be when we were teenagers. You made me bleed, once, on accident, but I can still see the round white scar on my finger when I press it back and all the blood rushes down.



Mitski

"Francis Forever"

*Bury Me at Makeout
Creek*

11/2014

Double Double Whammy

We used to have all the same friends, and they sort of knew, and I made them read my chapbook, and then they knew too much; God forbid any of them read this now.

4.

Sometimes I think about you sitting between me and her at the movies, your girlfriend, and your leg bouncing next to mine, hands wringing in your lap, how I wanted to touch my fingertip to your knee to make you stop and I laugh at our boldness, how innocently shameless we were just the two of us, perched in my open hatchback with your hand so close to the edge of my skirt, smelling of smoke and pizza grease and my mouth tasted like Mountain Dew and if we sat for a little bit longer you would have found that out.

My pulse was in my finger, then, wrapped tight in a napkin to stop the bleeding, and I could have pressed it to your lips to make you feel my heartbeat on your mouth but I think of everything too late so I just sat still with you and bled from that little butterfly scrap of skin.

When Mitski said "I miss you more than anything" I felt that.



Jawbox

"Savory"

*For Your Own Special
Sweetheart*

01/1994

Atlantic

We Were Teenagers, Akin to Being on Fire

Joey Gould

those abrupt three notes I would air guitar
brutal like I'd destroy the invisible strings
bend the neck screeching
savory rather than sweet what
an unsettling riff consider this position
knock on the glass of Jeremiah's hatchback
condensation the crumbly hometown pavement
the small rented house holding out a portable phone
tragically you're 15 years old lying to mum
consider the basement I went down
& never returned left the window open all night
when you peeled out to Greg's then Kat fell asleep
on my lap whoops! assigned seat between high school
antagonists both slept as I tracked the mile markers
trying not to disturb the delicate hatred
how could I learn to prefer coffee black savory
joe all night Bickford's chain smoking watch Jeremiah
walk away all X'ed up then moshing at the espressobar
one hand will come down on the back of your skull
whoops! [teeth] stop motion strobe *I drove you home*
then you moved away whoops! but one hand will
wash the other like savory not sweet when you saw
him again he was [quote] not in a kissing mood I came out
of the closet wearing Allison's shirt whoops!
Julie's dress whoops! as close as I was I didn't
consider how many riffs never knew sweet
[something about how I used to have teeth]
sang about what's set *a-flame to be consumed*
becoming husk like after the car Adam bought
for a buck exploded I watched

& did that really happen? they redid the pavement
where the shattered glass landed & I never
kissed her again after wondering if it'd ever be
yes Allison I am only half-
kidding confessing hey angel whatever
the non-committal hey game back then
too cool for every single fucking thing
regret only ever pretended to play the guitar
in front of the stereo but screaming for sympathy
for your hand for currents reaching a sea
& these years when I kissed someone I pretended
you never moved away you started straightening
your hair easy now the strings bend around our frets
soling to the fade so much noise but so few words

Do You Like Me I Guess

Sarah Skiles

The nicest thing that could have been said about his car was that the engine ran okay. The exterior was an ugly maroon freckled with rust spots. The passenger side door only closed on the second or third slam shut. The AC was broken. There was no stereo to tempt would be thieves. People would steal anything from your car in Philly.

We rode with the windows wide open. Jay's shaved head was impervious to the wind, but my dyed black hair had been whipped into a nest of snarls. I didn't care. The previous day I'd blacked out from heat stroke and the wind gave the slightest of reprieves from the intense mid-August heat and humidity. As a bonus, it was so loud that any communication other than shouting was next to impossible. I didn't want to talk to Jay. He turned up the volume on the boombox sitting on the middle seat of the Oldsmobile and then began pounding the steering wheel to the relentless beat of Slayer's Reign in Blood.

We were driving through New Jersey.

We were in a fight.

Weeks prior, we argued at the midnight launch of the newest Harry Potter book. I'd always loved kids' books, but the series had come into my life when I was clawing my way out of the void of depression by dancing to David Bowie songs and taking high doses of anti-depressants. It was significant to me. Staying up all night reading those books filled me with unadulterated joy. As someone who was prone to bouts of profound sadness, that's all I wanted. I didn't care if waiting in line with ten year-olds made me uncool. But Jay did. He stood with me for about ten minutes, then snarled insults and abandoned me. I spent an hour in line by myself, my cheeks burning with the humiliation at what had occurred, while kids in witches' hats giggled and gossiped about the characters like they were real people.

The subway was shut down by the time I purchased the book. On my walk home across town to my apartment near the Philadelphia Art Museum, I'd been accosted by a group of homeless people. Instead of reading the book, I'd sat in darkness on the roof of my building until the sun rose in the sky.

We'd always bickered. Sometimes it was intellectual play. Sometimes it was flirting. Sometimes it was dead serious. But since the book launch it had begun to occur with an uncomfortable frequency.

That afternoon we both said horrible things to each other. The type of slights that tear at a person's self-worth. There'd been no apologies. I turned on the TV as a distraction. A news bulletin came on the air. The Northeast was in a blackout: a cascading failure along the power grid that had left New York, Connecticut, New Jersey and even parts of Ontario without power. Pennsylvania was probably next. So, we packed up Jay's crappy car, fleeing east on I-95 to a family cabin in New England. It was either that or kill each other.

Slumping back in his seat, Jay popped his knees up to the wheel and steered with them, something he knew I hated under normal circumstances, but especially freaked me out when we were barreling down the Jersey Turnpike. I stared out at the dim outlines of the oil refineries along I-95. The sun dipped below the horizon, plunging the landscape into a

Fugazi

"Do You Like Me"

Red Medicine

06/1995

Dischord

darkness I'd only witnessed on the rural roads in the Midwest. I heard him rifle through the music he'd brought for the drive and pop a CD into the boombox.

"Do You Like Me" started to play.

The songs starts off with distortion, a blown out bass beaten with precision. Rhythmic clanging comes in. It could be someone on a drum kit or it could be an intruder knocking over garbage as they're chased out of a junkyard by a snarling dog. Then fuzzed out guitars dance above it all. The intro to the song is also the intro to Fugazi's album Red Medicine. It's raw, a bit ugly, and hypnotic. Just as you're getting used to it, the noise comes to a sudden halt. The clanging and distortion drop out and the guitars settle into a quick rock rhythm. Over this Guy Picciotto wails lyrics that are about a crush, the prison industrial system, and a different kind of joining: the merger of Lockheed to Martin Marietta. It's not your average love song or even like song.

But if any song was our song, it was that one. Before we confessed our mutual feelings, but had the low buzz of love humming throughout all of our interactions, we'd been lounging in his kitchen, cramming neon-yellow slices of lemon meringue pie into our mouths, when the song came on the stereo. He turned to me, mouth full of meringue, and sang along with the refrain.

Do you like me?

Do you like me?

Do you like me?

I tilted my head at him in my best approximation of coquettishness, singing back.

Do you like me I guess.

Of course I more than just kind of liked him. But I wasn't quite brave enough yet to look him in the eyes and sing that he should pay rent in my mind. That would come soon.

Jay playing "Do You Like Me" was a conciliatory act of sorts. But I was still upset and he was still driving with his knees and my thoughts turned to another guy: the one who introduced me to Fugazi. We'd met on the playground when we were twelve. He made fun of me for being a mathlete in that tease-insult way that boys often flirt and instead of flirting back, I'd told him to fuck off. Later, he told me that his only conclusion was that fucking off must have therefore been cool.

A few years later, we ended up at the same high school. Fifteen, angry and pockmarked, he would skip class on the regular in order to find me in whatever stairwell I was hiding during lunch period in order to finish the homework due that day. It annoyed the hell out of me, so one day I confronted him.

"Why do you keep following me around?"

"Can't you see? I worship the ground you walk on."

Then he asked me to a concert and I rejected him.

He dated a girl with the same first name as my own and wrote a poem that was supposedly about her, reading it aloud in a tiny theater decorated like a gothic cathedral. Everyone knew which girl it was really about. I spray painted that he was an asshole on the wall of the university humanities building, full name and everything, in jagged red letters. Still he asked me to the big dance and named his band after a character in my

favorite Fellini film. For years it went on that way, taking us from the seventh grade through our first years in college.

It was bewildering, frightening even, to have someone think that I was just really fucking cool. To like me that much. I did my best to scare him away. Broken, more opinionated than a political pundit, cowboy-mouthed, sad and fucked up almost half the time, caustic even, I flaunted my worst qualities in front of him with glee. It still didn't matter. I finally ran him off by sleeping with a motorcycle-riding bass player for the hell of it, swearing that I would give my heart to no one.

But eventually I'd given my heart to Jay.

He was older than me and we'd met by chance due to a mix-up by the processor for our film classes. When we'd opened the plastic cases marked with our names, which should have contained our newly processed film reels, we each found someone else's footage.

I wandered the dimly lit back halls of the film department, interrogating students hunched over hulking 16mm flatbed editors until I found the only person as freaked out as I was. Jay. He looked more like a scarecrow than human being: a rail thin man in a ragged flannel that was missing most of its buttons, with dyed red hair that looked like he'd attacked it with a pair of paper scissors. He stared out from behind his crooked glasses with pale blue eyes brimming with intelligence and manic energy.

As we exchanged our reels of film, he interrogated me.

"You didn't project it did you? Scratch it? Tell me you didn't fuck it up," he said.

"What the hell is that sheep doing to that car in your footage?" I said.

The sheep was having sex with the (sentient) car, then teaming up with it in order to defeat an evil drug dealer and save a farmer's life. He didn't ask me about my own odd film, a retelling of *The Bloody Chamber* involving a machine that transformed a nerdy guy first into a water pistol toting school boy, then a nipple-clamped Dom, then a martini-swilling lothario, and finally a sweaty, sobbing version of his true self. At the time I wasn't concerned that he showed little interest in my own work. Directing a film is all consuming: draining your intellect, your emotional well-being, and even your health. I made excuses.

But riding down that dark highway, I began to think I should have asked for more. I didn't want to track down the boy who introduced me to Fugazi and try and make him my own, but I began to ask myself what the damned problem was in being adored. That I should have wanted a lover who took delight in the stories I wanted to tell or wanted to read, whether they were sad, or funny or strange. Someone who wouldn't deride me for liking children's literature. Someone who'd not only love me, but *like-me-like-me*.

We crossed over the George Washington Bridge. The air had finally begun to cool a bit and we rolled up the windows, exchanging vague pleasantries in lieu of making up. I took Jay's right hand in my own and stared out the window, my heart heavy. *Red Medicine* came to an end and neither one of us bothered to play another album. We rode past Manhattan in deafening silence.

Absent of its lights, the city was eerie and mysterious instead of bold and brash. That night New Yorkers gasped as they looked into the sky. For the first time in decades, stars were visible above the city.

On “Satellite Anthem Icarus” by Boards of Canada

Jamie O’Connell

i see a dream transcript in the air, a gust of honeyed waves. i breathe my life into an ocean. into a paint swept sunset. your hollow bones sprinkle diamond dust. i smell the colors of a distant river. mosquito buzz in twilight. i once flew into a planet and felt my soul break.

//

hold your thoughts in a mason jar, throw them into a drifting storm. your phantom limb pulling a star scape. ride into moon clouds. salt water tides, fueling schools of fish. a counter to a loneliness no one knows. i can't say what it means to be a ghost.

//

you never know when the ground will quake. mountains become rocks. become sand. become dust. milky way wrapped around earth. light years beyond light years beyond light years. we exist as planetary rumbles. swim a chorus into our sighs. the way a whale breathes. whisper to the night, you are not leaving me quite yet. let me rest inside your sky.

//

doom of dawn. mumbles of a flickering firefly. sea monsters ready to run the current. capsize and collapse the horizon, kaleidoscope sunlight with star scars. falling into a static gloom. a blazing mirage. you collapse, you collapse. i collapse, i collapse. we bring bodies into clouds, organ dust falling, eclipsing into a lunar labyrinth.

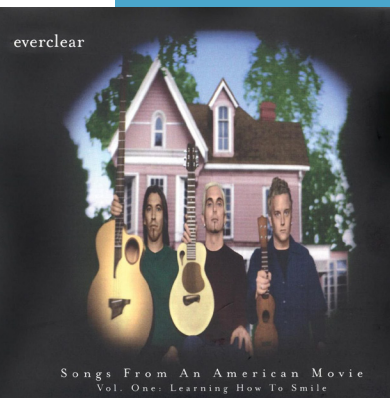
Boards of Canada

“Satellite Anthem
Icarus”

The Campfire Headphase

10/2005

Warp



Songs From An American Movie
Vol. One: Learning How To Smile

Everclear
"Wonderful"

Songs from an American
Movie Vol. One: Learning

How to Smile

07/2000

Capitol

Wonderful, Somehow

KPT

I am nine and it is a hard year, but I won't understand why until I'm older.

When I'm bored in the tub, I sometimes pick up Dr. Atkins' book and read all the foods my parents can't eat. My dad sometimes dips string cheese in peanut butter and calls it a snack. My mom takes Ephedra, and I don't know anything about it except sometimes it means she'll stay up late with me, even if she has a midnight shift the next day.

Sometimes my mom and I stay up late watching TV and eating Cheetos, and then she throws them up.

I know this because of my dad, but it's not his fault.

It's the kind of hot day where I am drunk on the awareness that we do not have air conditioning when my dad pulls me aside and tells me about bulimia and how my mom has it.

He says *Mom is sick and I need your help. She will lie to you. She will say she's brushing her teeth, but if you hear her throwing up, I need you to tell me.*

I say her birthday is coming up. *Let's make her a feast that she can't resist eating.* He says that won't help in this situation.

This is maybe the first time I truly understand that my parents, only in their twenties, are vulnerable to illness and death. This gives me a chill that I've never known before this moment, but will get to know a lot more over the rest of my life.

My dad tells me this secret because he is afraid. He called my grandma, my mom's mom, before talking to me. Instead of offering her concern, she told my dad what to say to my mom to help her throw up *better*. As if purging is an art that takes practice. It is not my grandma's fault. She has her own history of eating one apple slice a day and fainting on the kitchen floor so nonchalantly it almost looks scripted. Like a Victorian woman, whalebone thin, cresting over a velvet sofa. A director somewhere calls cut, and my grandma foggily gets back up, re-applies her lipstick, checks her weight on the bathroom scale, and continues to prepare dinner.

I am a last resort, here.

I wonder if my dad wishes he could call his own mom to help. I wonder if it hurts to know he could have just three months ago. I wonder if the freshness of that loss makes his heart beat as hard as mine does in the middle of the night.

I do as I'm told and I listen outside of the bathroom door. My mom doesn't know I do this. Every time I pretend to be playing in the hallway, she comes out and says something about how it's good to brush your teeth after you eat every meal. Her sickness becomes an aphorism for dental health. I know she is lying, but I don't know how to call her a liar. It isn't her fault.

I tell my dad what I hear, but I also want my mom to know I know what's going on. I think maybe this will help her stop.

I concoct a scheme. I place stickers, sticky side up, around the toilet. I imagine my mom kneeling to purge and then emerging from the bathroom with Lisa Frank unicorns bedazzling the knees of her jeans. I imagine saying, *if you were just brushing your teeth, how did my stickers get all over your legs!?* It would be a perfect GOTCHA moment. I try this plan a few times, but it never works. I don't completely know what it would accomplish, anyways.

My dad and I go on knowing that my mom is sick. And we don't do anything about it. We don't know what to do. I don't think it's our fault at the time, but maybe it really is. She gets better sometimes for long periods of time, and I breathe out and think *see, it's all worked out!* The truth is I just don't know what I'm doing. The few times I've searched bulimia on Ask Jeeves, the internet takes me to sites that offer similar advice as my grandma. Many of those sites make me consider throwing up, too.

On a later summer evening of this same year, my dad sits me on his lap in front of a gigantic Dell computer in his mom's old bedroom. Mp3s are getting popular, and he plays the song "Wonderful" by Everclear for me. He tells me the song is for me, my own anthem, and that he's sorry for treating me like an adult when I'm not. He says everything will work out okay. He says it isn't my fault.

Everything will be wonderful someday. Though, I don't think he really listened to the last verse, but it's okay because by the time the song gets to it, he's already crying.

In the future, my little sister and I talk about how sometimes all that dark body-sad sneaks up on us, too. How we sometimes only eat one tomato sandwich a day or we break down in tears when we see a photo of ourselves where our jeans look too tight.

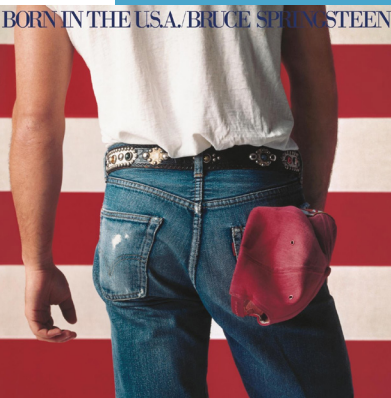
We sit in the backseat of my car, and "Wonderful" comes on the radio. She knows that this is a song my dad gave to me, and she also knows why. I told her once because, in a way, I guess it was an albatross on me. I still wonder if I should have though. I grab her hand, and we both start crying.

You're beautiful, I say.

You're beautiful, she says.

We say how beautiful our mom is at the same time like a spell, hoping she really hears it like a truth.

We smile at each other through the tears, and for the moment, things feel somehow better, somehow they're getting *wonderful*.



Bruce Springsteen
 "Dancing in the Dark"
 Born in the U.S.A.
 06/1984
 Columbia

Can't Start a Fire Without a Spark

Betsy Housten

For as long as I can remember, my mother has been obsessed with Bruce Springsteen. She owns over 50 of his albums—studio and live and compilation—as well as tour DVDs and posters and buttons, the autobiography he published last year, and every book ever written about him. She's got 56 Springsteen T-shirts and 10 hoodies. She's been to roughly 75 concerts, plus documentary showings and photo exhibitions. When I was a kid, she'd tie up the phone line for hours the morning ticket sales went live, dialing and redialing Ticketmaster on our kitchen extension until she got through. Now she's the first one in the virtual line, ready to pay hundreds of dollars, scouring online fan message boards for a resale ticket when she can't get one the regular way.

She's driven for hours, by herself, from her home in western central New Jersey to Philadelphia and Hartford, Albany and Manhattan, Newark and Princeton and Asbury Park, to see the Boss perform live. She loves to watch him wail on his guitar and tear around the stage and sing his little heart out for upwards of 4 hours. She dances in the aisles and hollers until her throat stings and sings her little heart out along with him, knowing every word to every song, not caring that she won't be able to talk for two days after each show. She turns 70 next year, and shows no signs of slowing down.

When I was growing up, I couldn't stand Bruce. My adolescent musical palate found his gritty garage-rock rasp irritating and off-putting. I preferred the more melodic folk tunes my mother had on cassette tape: Harry Chapin and Jim Croce and Simon & Garfunkel. But Mom also had debilitating asthma, and after several particularly severe attacks, during which I stood terrified while she wheezed into a paper bag so hard and fast I feared she might die, her doctor prescribed regular power-walks on a treadmill to build up her lung capacity. And the only thing that kept her motivated to keep tackling those exhausting workouts was a 45-minute VHS tape of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band: *Live, 1975-1985*.

Four days a week, for eleven years until I left home and another nine after that, that tape played from beginning to end, my mother puffing and grunting on the machine, arms pumping, sneakers pounding on the rotating tread while it whined under her feet. Four days a week, she kept her eyes trained on Bruce as he strummed and sang in music video backyards and baseball fields, shouted and sweated and pulled a young Courteney Cox up on stage with him, over and over, the exact same every time. I couldn't understand how it didn't get boring for her. But it never did.

And then I moved to Brooklyn in September of 2001, at the age of 22, nine days before two planes flew into the World Trade Center. All of New York City was traumatized, broken and reeling with grief. Ash from the fallen buildings thickened the air, coating the sidewalks and the streets. For weeks, candlelight vigils and chalk drawings took over Union Square. No cars were allowed below 14th Street. People walked around wearing disposable surgical masks. After President Bush declared war on Afghanistan, I joined a group of activists who were protesting on a near-constant basis, speaking out against the bombings abroad and the mass immigrant detentions at home.

One day a few of these friends were talking about Bruce, how they loved him for being a champion of the working class and a storyteller for the underdog, how righteous it was that he'd written a song denouncing the police killing of an unarmed Black man the previous year.

"You're from New Jersey," one of them said, turning to me. "You get it."

I said nothing, just nodded like I agreed, though I didn't. They were so smart and motivated and political and interesting, and I wanted them to think I knew as much as they did. So I kept my dislike quiet—my dirty little Jersey secret—then went home and listened to Tori Amos and Ani DiFranco like I did most nights, wondering if there was more to Springsteen than I'd given him credit for.

A few months later, my mom came to visit, saying she had something to tell me. She sat at my kitchen table and tried to drink her tea, hands shaking as she explained that she'd decided to leave my father. I think she was afraid that I would be upset, but I mostly felt relieved. My parents had never been a good match, an unlikely combination of a tree-hugger and an NRA supporter who had little in common besides a lot of shared history. They'd been friends in high school, known one another most of their lives, and tied the knot in their late twenties after one previous failed marriage each. But they also fought all the time. The tension between them had never been lost on me, my two older brothers, or any of our friends. No one understood why they were still together.

"I can't do it anymore," she told me. "I'm tired of feeling unhappy, of waiting for him to be less angry, of apologizing for the person that I am. Now that the three of you are all grown up and on your own, I'm done."

I hugged her, told her I supported her and said I thought she was making the right decision. We both cried. She went home that night to begin the process of moving out of the house I'd grown up in, packing up her treadmill and her Bruce tape and the rest of her belongings, en route to a totally new place she knew she had to aim for, but couldn't yet see.

I don't remember how old I was when she gave me very specific instructions regarding the two songs she wanted played at her funeral: a bagpipe rendition of "Amazing Grace," immediately followed by Springsteen's "Dancing in the Dark." I think I was a teenager. I probably rolled my eyes, but I know I promised to make sure her wishes were fulfilled. I thought about her request that night as I went to sleep after she left, hearing both songs in my head, wondering what would come next for her, for me.

Soon after that, a friend lent me *Born in the U.S.A.*, the album "Dancing in the Dark" appears on. I cued up track 11, the song that was both so familiar and so new to me, and really listened this time. The earnest scrape of Bruce's vocals over the pop-synth drumbeat as he spun a vulnerable yet spirited tale of starting over again in the face of exhaustion, depression, loneliness and self-loathing caught my attention and kept it. His voice didn't sound annoying anymore. It sounded honest. Raw. Real.

I ain't nothin' but tired, man I'm just tired and bored with myself.

I check my look in the mirror; wanna change my clothes, my hair, my face!

Stay on the streets of this town, and they'll be carving you up all right.

And then the chorus rolled around:

You can't start a fire without a spark.

You can't start a fire, sitting 'round crying over a broken heart.

You can't start a fire, worrying about your little world falling apart.

Holy shit, I thought. This song is really good.

In the coming months, my mother occasionally questioned her decision, unsure if she could really handle everything that comes with dismantling a partnership of a quarter century. There were so many things to do, so many people to deal with and so much disheartening paperwork, and she wondered if maybe she should just stay; it would be easier, require less energy. I told her I'd leave my cell phone ringer all the way up every night, so she could call me if she ever felt like going back to him, and I could talk her out of it. Even if it was the middle of the night. She never took me up on my offer, but I like to think knowing she could helped her stick to her guns through the darkest parts of that time, to leave her bad marriage behind in search of a better life. To keep the spark alive and start that fire.

My mother traces her origin story with Bruce's music back to February 1975, when she was newly single after her first divorce, 25 years old and living in a tiny apartment with my three-year-old brother. "Poor as a church mouse," she recalls. "Heartbroken and frightened." A friend of hers wanted to take her to a Bruce concert to cheer her up. Though my mother was reluctant to go because she had no money and no babysitter, the friend insisted it was her treat, saying she'd already asked the downstairs neighbors to take care of my brother. So off they went. That night, my mother's whole outlook on life was transformed by the show: "POW-ZOOM!!!" she enthuses. "He seemed to speak to my core." After that, she saved her pennies until she had enough money to buy his first album, *Greetings From Asbury Park NJ*, then asked for nothing else for birthdays and Christmases until she had them all.

More than four decades later, Bruce's music still makes her feel happy. "Alive. Joyous. Wanting to dance all around the room. Wanting to sing. Sad but knowing it will be okay. It will always be okay." In particular, "Dancing in the Dark" reminds her that no matter how down she might get, she can always dance it out. She calls it her "inner anthem." The song came out in 1984; by that time she knew her marriage had gone off the rails, though it would take her another 17 years to summon the strength to leave it. Until then, that song, and the videotape that helped her do the right thing for her lungs years before she was ready to do the right thing for her heart, would carry her through.

She's happily married now, for the third time, to a quiet and gentle man who loves her and supports her and goes with her to Bruce concerts. He's a much better match for her than my father ever was, and they give me hope that it's never too late to find love. I turn 40 this year; I've been single for 5 years after leaving my last relationship because I was tired and bored with myself and I needed to figure out a bunch of things that felt wrong, and I've not yet found the next right person to run with. Most of my friends, co-workers, and grad school classmates are married, engaged, or in long-term partnerships. I'm surrounded by couples. It gets lonely. But then I hear my mom and her husband tell stories about the first time he saw the Boss with her and loved it, how they both shook his hand from the front row when they went to see *Springsteen on Broadway* last year, and it feels like maybe everything will work out for me too, someday.

My mother and I saw Bruce together once, at Madison Square Garden during his 2006 Seeger Sessions tour. I'd since acquired a few more of his albums: *Born to Run* and

Nebraska and *The Ghost of Tom Joad* and *We Shall Overcome*. We danced in the aisles and hollered until our throats stung and sang our little hearts out. When Bruce and the 18-piece band he'd assembled for the tour launched into "Dancing in the Dark," I didn't have to look over to know she was crying, just like I was. Ten years later, I copied the rest of his albums from her before moving from New York to New Orleans, sitting at a table in my childhood library with my laptop and a pile of battered CDs while I waited for a doctor's appointment. Keeping a little Jersey with me, for when I went south.

I've sung that song at karaoke. I've danced to it at wedding receptions. I've put it on my running playlist. I've played it in my bedroom at top volume when I feel sad and lost and afraid and frustrated with my life, with my choices, with whatever's keeping me stuck in a situation that no longer feels right. I play it when I ache for freedom. I play it when everything's falling apart. I play it when I need a good fist-pump. Every time I hear those catchy opening bars, I get a lump in my throat and take a deep breath, ready to belt that shit out. I know that by the end of the song I'll feel catalyzed, transformed, remade into a slightly different version of myself who will know what to do next and be fortified for the journey. I've known that song my whole life, like I know my mother, who is brave and loving and kind and trying her best to live out her truth every day, who is in my blood and my bones, no matter what. A Jersey girl until the end, like me.

KATY PERRY



Katy Perry

"Roar"

Prism

10/2013

Capitol

The Lioness Wakes

Juliette van der Molen

I thought I was going to vomit the first time I packed the kids in the car and went to the domestic violence shelter. I sat in the car, squeezing the steering wheel and looking at the large privacy fence that surrounded what I would have thought was just an ordinary house. My daughters, 13 years old, were old enough at the time to understand why we were there. They'd had a front row seat to the disintegration of their mother for almost ten years. Signing up for group therapy and getting a divorce lawyer was proof that I was going to do better by them. I would finally put myself first and, in the process, bring them along with me.

When I tell people this story, I get asked the same question by almost every person. I've almost stopped confiding in anyone because of it. So, why tell it here? Because it's too important not to tell. Not only that, I start to feel like it's irresponsible of me not to share.

"Why didn't you just leave?"

It's a slippery slope, abuse. My life with him didn't start out that way. There were also complications. He was bipolar and sometimes it felt impossible to sort out him from the disease. It didn't help that he refused to manage himself with medication. I walked a tightrope, trying to keep the peace and not wanting to break up the only family my children had ever really known. I somehow believed that what everyone else needed was more important. I come from sturdy Midwestern stock. Sometimes life is tough, and you roll with that. You're also polite and not demanding. My family can argue with a smile and cut each other with so much tenderness that it's a shock to see the bleeding. Over time, I became a person I didn't even recognize.

*I used to bite my tongue and hold my breath
Scared to rock the boat and make a mess
So I sat quietly, agreed politely
I guess that I forgot I had a choice
I let you push me past the breaking point
I stood for nothing, so I fell for everything*

Oh, Katy knew me; her words embarrassed me when I realized how true they were. Most women in my situation don't get the chance that I had to change things. I was lucky enough to go away on a long term work project in Canada and bring my kids with me. I left my husband behind for almost two years. He couldn't cross the border—that's a whole different story full of lies and deceit. Going to Canada on my own, as basically a single mother, taught me a lot about my capabilities. Slowly, the ice inside of me thawed. I never thought I'd lose the winter of my life so far north.

We were happy. I didn't dread coming home at night. I was tired, worked to the bone and exhausted with middle school girls to ferry back and forth as I tried to figure out a new city and country. Even so, it was nothing compared to what I had been dealing with before. My bruises faded, but it took longer for my confidence to grow back. I was able to shelter it in the cold Canadian windswept plains and give it enough sunshine to grow.

The foreign language of laughter filled our house. Frown lines faded. My girls and I were silly. We played loud music that we chose; we danced in the kitchen. We had chocolate chip pancakes on Sunday mornings and sprawled over the couches in our pajamas. Smiles were easy. Even his demands to be included via Skype felt like a hollow echo far away, blessed by a bad network connection.

I didn't miss him. Not for a moment.

Distance gave me strength, experience gave me courage. I knew I would have to go back to the United States once the project was over. I also knew that it was time to cut ties permanently and seek a divorce. It was going to be messy.

I stood up to him in person. I planted my feet in the ground and told myself I was ready. If he was going to hit me, it was going to be the last time. I was prepared to call the cops. I made my demands. And then something magical happened. I saw his eyes begin to water. He wouldn't cry in front of me, but I finally saw the tiniest crack in his armor. I took my opening and pressed hard, I wasn't going to back down. I held my finger over the send button of my phone, just in case, where I had already punched in the numbers: 9-1-1.

I won't lie. I was scared.

Sometimes when I read stories or watch movies about heroes that go in to slay dragons or fight beasts I think, I could never do that. I'm not calling myself a hero. In fact, I've beaten myself up a long time for staying in such a bad situation for so long. But I did understand in that moment how it feels to stand up and ride a wave of courage. Righteous adrenaline shoved aside my fear. Clarity shot through me and electrified my heart. The 'self' I had lost for so long was back. I was finally ready to battle, and he never saw it coming.

*You held me down, but I got up (hey!)
Already brushing off the dust
You hear my voice, your hear that sound
Like thunder, gonna shake the ground
You held me down, but I got up
Get ready 'cause I had enough
I see it all, I see it now*

I had been biding my time, making plans, squirreling away money. He never knew because he was the one that taught me how to hide my feelings and shrink myself so no one noticed me. Abused women go back an average of seven times before they can break free. Sometimes they don't live that long. That wasn't going to be me.

It was a hellish roller coaster ride, that divorce. When the police in our little town told me that they couldn't find him to serve him a restraining order, I was indignant. While I knew the order wouldn't stop him from doing something outrageous, I also knew it might scare him enough to leave us alone. Out of desperation, I took matters into my own hands. I stalked him as carefully as I could from a distance. I called the cops and told them where he was, I watched them serve the restraining order to him from a Five Guys parking lot. I felt a deep sense of satisfaction when he completely lost his shit over it.

I didn't sleep well. I looked over my shoulder constantly. I became a helicopter parent that drove my kids insane. I had plans to leave the area when the divorce was final. Each step was difficult and frightening. But, it was all worth it. I found my voice, I found my roar, and I was unstoppable.

*Now I'm floating like a butterfly
Stinging like a bee I earned my stripes
I went from zero,
to my own hero*

My daughters and I became a tight knit group, an all-girl band singing from the same song sheet. We packed up our lives and moved across the country. Two thousand miles later we re-branded ourselves, got a new contract. I still worried that maybe the damage for my daughters had been done. My biggest fear was that the cycle would repeat itself for them; until one day, when I heard my daughter on the phone with a guy.

She said:

"The way you're treating me is unacceptable, and I'm not going to stand for it."

I don't know what he said to her from the other end, but her last words made me want to hug her so tight.

"Guess what, we're done!"

When I asked her if she was okay, she said she was great. She shook her head at the stupidity of what happened. She smiled at me. She didn't need anyone to save and protect her; she would do that for herself from now on.

*I got the eye of the tiger, a fighter
Dancing through the fire
'Cause I am a champion, and you're gonna hear me roar
Louder, louder than a lion
'Cause I am a champion,
and you're gonna hear me roar!*

She found her roar. I was proud. Katy would have been, too.



Taylor Swift

"Picture to Burn"

Taylor Swift

10/2006

Big Machine

It Started with Fire, and to Fire I Return

Benjamin Rozzi

The sky above us singed in
reverse—cerulean construction
paper chasing the blaze back to

the horizon, birds leading the
sun from one end to the other
by string. We watched &

watched & watched—until the
ethereal-*v* flew beyond the
curled edges, until the paper-thin

air exploded into hues of
regret, flittered on your wind
like backyard ash.

I carried a shoebox filled with
time, cradled in the memory
of this north side of 6am.

I watched & watched &
watched—until the heat once
again handled me how only

hope did, until smoke made
me the weightiest memory of
what was instead of what could.

& then, I jumped in, too.

*As far as you're concerned I'm
just another picture to burn.*



Lorde

"Liability"

Melodrama

06/2017

Lava / Republic

The Constellations Within

Jennifer Rodriguez

You can light a candle with past memories, and keep it glowing by living in them. Time advances like a layer of hazy fog obscuring my view.

He don't wanna know me

I run a finger across my face until it reaches my lips—I trace around them in a circular motion, attempting to close the gates to my soul. I am a whirlwind of unleashed chaos contained within this human body. All you had to do was reach inside and touch my heart. He was the first to take a peek of what was behind the curtain, but unlike Dorothy, he didn't stay and chat.

I was a little much for him and I understand, I'm a liability. Get you wild, make you leave.

Says he made the big mistake of dancing in my storm

I shared my soul, gave my light, and lost a piece of myself in the process. This couldn't happen again—close the book and let them admire the cover, I told myself. A picture book is easier to understand than a novel.

Says it was poison

The glittering colors shining on the outside are artificial but that makes no difference to those who know no different. The words within were far too complex, overpowering, and beautiful for them to see or comprehend. Closed off to the world—that's how they like me best.

I go days without looking at myself in the mirror. Maybe I'll catch a glimpse as I walk by, but I don't see myself; rather, I view a reflection of what people **want** to see. The passage of time fools us all, and as the leaves change color, the separation between self and soul amplifies.

It's a perpetual free fall into the unknown, where I'm sustained by the memories and ideas of who I am, but the present identity has been lost. The tears prickle my eyes, and I repress explosive sobs from within because I miss her terribly. Only a shadow remains of who I was, and I yearn for her uproarious laugh, her captivating outlook on life, her daring spontaneity and her dramatic monologues.

Pictures of yesterday can't bring back who I was before, but I tried arduously with the desperation of a doctor attempting to resuscitate a dead patient.

I had the sensation of being isolated, faraway, lost at sea under the star-lit sky with no compass or map. Daily life events were transpiring like gusts of wind moving past me, yet invisible to my sedated self.

Silence abounded in the solitary parking lot.

My eyes were transfixed on the lamp post as it shed a clear stream of light into my tinted car windows. Tears descended rapidly and violently against the fresh wounds on my skin. Maybe if I stayed still, I could become one with the universe, my soul would rise from my body and transport me to another realm where all was calm.

*I know that it's exciting running through the night,
But every perfect summer's eating me alive*

The overwhelming light burned my skin with recollections of softer nights, when warm breezes tickled my skin, music notes caressed my body, and the aroma of perfumed flowers filled my lungs. But alas, all flowers wither, and the sun set in his eyes, and, despite my efforts, I can't make it shine anymore.

Until you're gone

I closed my eyes to shut it all out, but instead found myself tumbling into the dark abyss I was resisting. Fire coursed rapidly through my veins like serpents hunting down their prey. My hands became fists and then it happened. It was a bloodcurdling, glass-shattering scream, the kind that escapes your soul without hesitation, precursors, or anticipation.

Better on my own

A match was lit, setting my soul aflame and igniting my deepest passions. Awakened, I realized that the part of me I was searching for was gone—that version of her is only a faint memory—only because she isn't who I need to be anymore. I wear the memory of her on me, a beautiful scar, reminding me of the innocence I once had. Occasionally, I'll hear her song and feel a tug on my heart, reminded of the person I was before the storm drowned her.

Old versions of ourselves will always remain in our personal night sky. Dead stars can still shine on.

*They're gonna watch me disappear into the sun
You're all gonna watch me disappear into the sun*



Bob Marley

"Positive Vibration"

Rastaman Vibration

04/1976

Island / Tuff Gong

Ant the Five Foot Sage

Jon Johnson

"Fuckin A, man, how could we forget about the light bill? We can't get groceries now." I tossed the reusable bag on the couch.

Anthony was sitting on the floor, thumbing through a book on mandalas. "I know man, but it's gonna be okay. I'm teaching a yoga class today at 6, and I heard they were doing a vegan potluck; let's go there after."

"Can't. Supposed to meet with a kitchen manager at that place I was telling you about, we'll see how it goes." I plopped down next to him and started fidgeting with a lighter.

"Dude, that is awesome! That's what you wanted right?"

"I guess. Back into the system, but I gotta do something. I can't live like this."

Anthony had this hopelessly positive attitude. He just smiled and sighed, touching my shoulder. "We got this, man."

The day before we skipped breakfast, had rice for lunch, and went to bed for dinner. "Got this" isn't exactly the phrase I would use.

To add to this, I was running out of excuses why I couldn't see the woman I was dating. The other day I was "feeling sick". Then I said I couldn't take my dog on the train. We met up for a walk on the beach, and when she said she was getting hungry, I told her I had to go help Anthony with something. It was partly to save face, but also partly because I'm not her responsibility. Nothing like dating a full-grown manbaby to burn "Men Ain't Shit" into the back of your eyelids.

So I woke up one day, particularly hungry, pissed, and hopeless, and what is Anthony doing? Fucking meditating. Incense, yoga mat, the works. Like he is just gonna "transcend" his hunger and escape the Matrix with a quick jaunt into nirvana or something.

Something about it just pissed me off—like figure your shit out man, do something. I'm doing job interviews with conscious companies, finding new clients, fucking day labor, all this shit, and you are sitting here collecting an unemployment check and meditating that the fridge is full and your brother Rich has money for the bus today.

It was just like him. I would get a fat tip from a client and bring home groceries. He'd throw his smile around for hours. "See, the Universe always provides!"

Nah, man, I did that shit. Against all odds, with a big fuckin' middle finger to the economic oppressors, I did that. Because I got up off my ass and worked for it; but now he got to feel justified in his "just be" attitude for another day.

One day in November I did my stretches and drank water, and heard Anthony clicking away at his computer. A familiar voice sang an unfamiliar tune as he turned the speakers up. Anthony noticed the sour look on my face. "Come move with me man!"

He started swaying back and forth, snapping on the off-beats and singing with uncle Bob.

"Dread, natty dread now..."

I shook my head, but got up all the same. I was still stiff, still resenting this unfair existence.

"You gotta let it go, man," was Anthony's reply. "We think we have to do everything all the time. But that just makes us stress and fight over nothing. No one is willing to do something as simple as letting go and thinking positively."

It was coming up now; I had to let it out. I had been living with him for months after I lost my job and house, dealing with this same attitude. "Ant, you can't just 'think positively' and think the world will revolve around you and make everything okay. You have to go out there and do it."

Anthony gave me a little smile, "You mean like you are doing? Struggling, stressing, and worrying all the time man? I don't know if that's the way to go." He was still swaying back and forth. I had stopped.

"Maybe not, but at least I'm doing something. I'm not collecting unemployment checks and sitting on my ass all day."

He actually smiled. That disgusting, happy-against-all-odds smile. "People say that a lot. It's funny, I turned down a job offer last week. I'd be gone all day for a few extra bucks a month compared to my unemployment check. It wasn't worth it. It's more important for me to work on myself and take care of my brother. That means more to me than people calling me a mooch."

"Yea man, but don't you get tired of just surviving life? Just trudging through?"

"If you are trudging through, that is your mentality, dude. We are rich. House, electricity, running water, all of it. Most days we eat two meals; that is rich."

This was the sort of shit your parents would say when you wouldn't eat broccoli. It did nothing to actually alleviate the struggle you were having; it just made you feel guilty for struggling. The song was over, and Ant was back at the desk, clicking up a new song. He kept talking though.

"Look, I know it's not perfect man. And I know that just thinking good thoughts isn't going to create the world you want to live in. But it can change how you view the world, and that is everything. If you see the world as a decent place, you are probably going to act like it is."

The song was over. Despite Marley's best efforts, I was livid. Standing in the silence of this dirt-colored carpeted room, here was this little man and his stupid smile, regurgitating something out of *The Secret* at me. I wanted him to see how dumb he was, to see how wrong he was. I wanted to break him.

"Right, I'm sure all those kids getting bombs dropped on them in the Middle East just need to think positively and the bombs will disappear, right?"

The smile faded from his face for a split second. I was starting to win. Soon, he would feel just like I felt. *Let it in* I thought.

He straightened back up and looked at me sideways.

"Jon, did you put those kids there?"

"Where, in the Middle East? No, obviously."

"Did you drop bombs on them?"

"No but this war-machine tyrannical govern—"

He put his hand up, and something about it actually stopped me. "That's not what we are talking about. But say that is what we were talking about, what could you do about it?"

"Obviously, tear down the government, rebuild it from the ground up."

"Okay, so how do we start?"

"Well we spread the word, we educate the ignorant, we set up protests, we send letters to Congress—we fight back."

"Fight back?"

"Yea, we can't just lie down and take it. It's like everything in life—we have to take action."

"You just called them the 'War Machine'...and you wanna...fight them?...They're gonna win..."

He started laughing. It irritated me that it was just semantics, but I admit I laughed a bit too.

He clicked the next song and continued. "Look man, I'm just saying that maybe the greatest impact you can have is by changing what's inside you. And maybe changing that will change how you deal with people outside of you. And maybe changing how you deal with people outside of you will make their day better, make them feel a little less alone, make them feel a little bit of that belonging they are always searching for. And maybe they will treat someone nice in return."

I rolled my eyes, He was at least consistently naïve; I'd give him that.

He continued on. "I've been to a thousand rallies. I was part of Occupy, G20, Bilderberg, all that. The only thing I found there was another thing to hate. We were only together so long as we had a common enemy, and that is just the basis of a shitty relationship."

"It's better than nothing!" I almost shouted. Anthony shook his head and sighed.

"Why do people always equate dealing with your own bullshit to 'doing nothing'? You are the most important person in your life. Period. You are the only person you have to deal with all the time, the only one looking out at you from that mirror. You better be the best version of you possible. Be selfish for once, shit." At least I was getting to him. He was irritated, his smile was gone. We sat in silence while he browsed Youtube and I passed a now-empty cup between my hands.

He found what he was looking for apparently. "Look, man, I can't change you. It's not mine or anyone else's job. Only you can do that." He clicked play and turned the speakers up a bit more.

"I'll make you a deal. This song is like 8 minutes. We will listen to it once every day, and for those 8 minutes, nothing but positivity is allowed. You roll your eyes, but would you do that? Please? The rest of the day you can shout against the corporate elite until your

gums bleed, and I won't say shit. But just do me a favor and give me 8 minutes a day of happy Jon."

It sounded idiotic. But the guy was fucking perpetually happy, and eight minutes of that ignorant bliss would probably do me some good, so I agreed.

In reality, the first time I gave him like 5 minutes. It took me about a minute to shake the shitty feeling of our conversation, and another to get over my own pride. But the whole time he was here, bobbing and swaying, singing along.

*If you get down and you quarrel every day,
You're saying prayers to the devils, I say
Why not help one another on the way?
Make it much easier.*

At the end of the song he laughed and slapped me on the back. My pride was back. "You happy?" I said, leaving the room.

But every day after I stretched, I went back to that song with him. And more and more, I gave myself over, gave myself free space to be happy.

Past the guilt I was supposed to feel for existing, beyond the issues my parents had handed me at birth, through my own insecurities, and over my own mental blocks, I gave myself one song a day to feel nothing but beaming positivity.

I wish I could say it didn't work. I wish I could say I left Anthony's place with my Marxist fist as tight as it was when I first got there. But something in me changed. I remember the day too. It was December, a week before Christmas. We had been doing this little positivity thing for a few weeks now, but for some reason, this time was different. I heard Bob singing, I saw Ant dancing, I smelled the neighbors' cooking tortillas, I felt the carpet on my feet, and I tasted my own tears.

For the first time in a long time, since before everything fell apart really, I felt something move in me. Something had gotten in, it had broken the eggshell barrier I wear out in the world and started to wrap itself around the yolk of whatever was inside this skin-bag I carry around all day. Where before I was soft-boiled at least, something in the song was turning back time, liquefying the center before it was too late.

And I just stood there crying. Not in my usual, self-pitying, "my life should be better than this" way either. I was just...crying. For no reason other than to cry. I was still dancing, still looking at Anthony.

He just smiled back, eyes loaded with some since-forgotten secret he had just shared with me.

Within a month, I got the job, found a place, and said goodbye to that dirty ass carpet for good. I'd never say our little experiment did that.

Our routine didn't change objective reality. But no one exists in objective reality, do they? Perception changes everything. From then on, I focused all my energy on changing the only things I can control: myself and my perception. And that perception has shaped how I interact with the world around me. And who knows, maybe that rubs off on one person a day? I'm consistently naive, I know.

I have plenty of people tell me I'm blind for not seeing the world as a "realist" (which is the code name for a pessimist). And that's fine. At the same time I watch them struggle and fight and suffer and long for something externally that can only be found within. And that's fine too.

Every now and again some nihilistic go-getter will ask me what I have to smile about in this meaningless existence. If I'm feeling particularly self-righteous, I might laugh, slap them on the back, and say, "I'll make you a deal. I know this song that's like 8 minutes long..."

Unforgiven

Lisa L. Weber

I have always had this overwhelming need to be loved and accepted. Of course, there are psychological reasons for this, specific to my own life and experience. But, to be loved and accepted is a basic human need. We all want to feel like a special and important part of the larger family of humanity. Yet somehow, we spend so much time and energy finding ways to alienate one another. One by one, we stack bricks of judgment and hate and resentment, until we build a wall to keep out those who are different, or who don't look or think or act or love the way we do, or the way we think they should. We realize all too late those walls can become prison walls.

I grew up in a small, nondescript farming town in the Southern California desert. The population is about 25,000, give or take a few cows. This town was like most small towns, in that everyone knew everyone, and even if you weren't related, you were still treated like family. I myself was related to half the town. But as they say, familiarity can breed contempt.

I never felt like I belonged. I remember my mother had a book about the strange and paranormal in which I read an article about "star children." There was a set of questions one could answer to determine if one was actually from outer space. I answered yes to most of the questions, including, "Do you feel as though you don't belong," and "Do you feel as though you want to go home but you don't know where home is." Right then I was convinced I was from another galaxy. How I prayed for the day a flying saucer would appear in the sky above my house, pull me up via tractor beam, and whisk me off to my "real" home planet.

Yes, I was a dreamer from day one. My mind constantly wandered into faraway lands, and I was always wishing my body could follow. I was always wishing for an escape from reality.

My parents' divorce was a reality that was difficult for me to accept. Their love was broken by alcohol, anger, and infidelity, and the failure of their marriage forever colored my view of love and relationships. I don't resent them. They both dealt with emotional trauma in their lives, and I realize now they never felt like they belonged in that small town either. They had dreams that went abandoned and hearts that never completely healed. I tried desperately to gain their praise and attention. In some way, I wanted to be reassured of their love, to be reassured that they wouldn't abandon me as they had abandoned each other.

As I got older, my need for love and reassurance became a problem. I started having boyfriends younger than I should have; or, at least according to everyone's rules. Much like my parents, I became the subject of gossip. By the time I reached eighth grade, I had been labeled a slut. Girls would sneer at me and call out "bitch" when I walked by. I also got prank phone calls regularly. I didn't fight back the way I should have. I guess a part of me thought I deserved it.

It was about this time that I started listening to rock and heavy metal. This was music by, and for, those who were denied love and acceptance, and it became a soundtrack to the turbulence inside me. I soon discovered Metallica, and their song, "The Unforgiven."

Metallica

"The Unforgiven"

Metallica

08/1991

Elektra

When I heard it, I felt like James Hetfield was singing to me, about me. I felt like he had somehow snuck into my soul and yanked everything out.

*New blood joins this earth
And quickly he's subdued
Through constant pained disgrace
The young boy learns their rules
With time the child draws in
This whipping boy done wrong
Deprived of all his thoughts
The young man struggles on and on....*

I learned the rules. But I didn't, couldn't follow them.

In high school, finding acceptance was even more difficult. Girls hated me. They all thought I was trying to steal their boyfriends. They had no idea I was struggling with my sexual identity. Boys thought I was weird, or an easy target. I succumbed to the siren's song of more than one already-spoken-for smooth talker looking for some tongue swapping and heavy petting.

I also experienced racism for the first time when I dated a boy whose parents I couldn't meet because he wasn't allowed to date Mexicans. The irony is that some of the Mexicans labeled me a "coconut," because I didn't speak Spanish, dated gringos, and didn't "act like a Mexican," whatever that means.

*They dedicate their lives
to running all of his
He tries to please them all
This bitter man he is
Throughout his life the same
He's battled constantly
This fight he cannot win...*

All I wanted was to be a part of that family. I wanted, and tried, to please the people around me. But more often than not, I found a way to disappoint them. I wanted to be liked, to be loved, or at the very least, not be labeled, judged, and hated. But I was different. I thought too much, felt too much, wanted too much. I broke too many of society's rules. Sometimes I broke them on purpose, as a way to say "fuck you," and "I don't give a shit what you think." But I did give a shit. And after every transgression, I felt terrible. I had gone astray. I was lost, a sinner. I was unforgiven.

A part of me thought I would always be unforgiven. That I wasn't good enough, innocent enough, nice enough, or smart enough. That I would never be enough. Not for my mother, not for my father, not for my friends, not for anyone. Not even for this world. I became depressed and turned to alcohol and drugs. I had thoughts of suicide. And I cut myself. Darkness will accept anyone.

*What I've felt
What I've known
Never shined through in what I've shown
Never free
Never me*

So I dub thee unforgiven

I felt burdened by the weight of judgment and imprisoned by contempt. All I wanted was to be free. To be free from labels. To be free from the disapproving eyes and whispering mouths. To be free from the anger and pain. To be free to know acceptance, forgiveness, and love.

I left that town as soon as I could.

You labeled me

I'll label you

So I dub thee unforgiven

Over the years I continued to struggle. Not only with seeking love and acceptance from others, but also from myself. Throughout that time, "The Unforgiven" served as an anthem for my soul. It was the song of my struggles. The song of my sorrow and guilt and regret. The song that played while my conscience battled with itself. The song I played while I cried and screamed and fell to my knees and begged forgiveness. It was the song that roared in my head every time reality punched me in the face.

It was also the song that brought me comfort. The song that reminded me I wasn't alone in my pain. The song that told me we're all struggling to be the people we are meant to be. The people that can fit into the large, complex puzzle of humanity, without losing that which makes us different and special.

Somehow, I found my way out of the darkness. I found a way to accept all that I am and all that I'm not. I found a way to forgive myself. And I realize now that everyone in that small town had their own struggles. We were all fighting a battle to be loved and accepted. We were all fighting against subjugation in its many varied forms. We are all still fighting and will to continue to fight.

My heart still jumps when I hear "The Unforgiven." I still turn it up and sing along at full volume. Only now, it is more rallying cry than requiem. Now, I want others to hear it and know they are not alone. Now, I want it to serve as an anthem for all those fighting for love and acceptance. Now, I want to play it so loud, it brings down all those prison walls.

Endless Sandstorm

Meg Elison

A sandstorm is nothing but grit in your teeth. It costs you the horizon and the whole sky. It steals your vision and your perspective. It's something you can't see coming until it consumes you.

But most of all, it's a shitty techno song.

The town that I lived in as a teen existed at the intersection of many avenues of suck: it was the desert, it was inland, it was poor. It lacked easy freeway access and suffered from the attendant joblessness one might expect. Chief exports: oranges, meth, anyone with a B+ average or better.

These conditions meant that every party I went to was in some way deeply flawed; I have hung out in a lot of empty pools with people who had nothing to say until crossfaded and then had far too much. We stood around on concrete patios under bug-covered lights. We drank the cheapest thing that would fuck us up and smoked the same cigarettes that our mothers had quit ten years before. The year that I should have graduated high school, this nation of hyperconnected disaffected souls received its anthem.

The song was "Sandstorm" by Darude.

"Sandstorm" came out the year I dropped out of high school, but like many earworm hits it just wouldn't go away. It was the best song on Dance Dance Revolution at the arcade, it was on an episode of *Queer as Folk*. I remember it playing at clubs and on portable dance floors at graduation parties until 2005, easy. Around that time is when it became a meme.

The memification of Sandstorm seems like a foregone conclusion, looking back. It was easily the most well-known piece of happy hardcore in my part of the world; Eurotrash we were not. For a long time, it was funny to say that any song someone couldn't identify on the internet was "Sandstorm," by Darude. It became emblematic of some other world where cool parties were happening, where there were laser lights and people who spoke something other than English twitching all night on drugs we couldn't get.

I thought it would die with the early-aughts, gone with the Affliction shirts and tribal tattoos that always flash before my eyes when I remember my nightclub glory days, when my fake ID looked good and so did I. But "Sandstorm" keeps coming back.

This year, I got not one but FOUR Snapchats on New Year's Eve from people I know who still live in those ghost towns with "Sandstorm" playing in the background (or the foreground) of a short video of illegal fireworks going off in wide streets. Fascinated, I re-watched them all, trying to figure out HOW in the year of our Lord of Misrule two thousand and sevenfuckingteen the kids are still listening to "Sandstorm." These kids were raised on Skrillex and weaned on Deadmau5, they learned FL Studio like I learned to play the recorder. Why the fuck won't "Sandstorm" die?

Obsessed, I sought out cover versions of the iconic composition of Meister Darude. Two dudes on acoustic guitar. A meta-techno cover played on eight hard drives. A strangely appealing accordion groove. These cover videos were made in 2014, 2015. Why? I clicked one after the other; none of the musicians said anything. They just played the song. Nothing would satisfy, so I found myself pulling up the original on YouTube at 9am as I



Darude

"Sandstorm"

Before the Storm

09/2000

BMG

walked the streets of San Francisco, trying to figure out why this piece of music, out of all the embarrassing garbage I listened to in my late adolescence, was the thing that would not be ignored.

Popping impotently in my ears, the phrasing and melodic structure of the song itself seemed to encompass everything I remember about that life.

The medium is the message.

"Sandstorm" won't die because those kids are still living it.

"Sandstorm" sounds like a series of days that are indistinguishable from one another, like shifts in a big box retail store.

"Sandstorm" sounds like numberless semesters in an indifferent for-profit college that spits you out after a few years with nothing but debt.

"Sandstorm" sounds like your friends telling the same stories over and over, because their lives were only interesting that one time.

"Sandstorm" sounds like getting nervously fingered by a guy who has no idea what he's doing and knowing you're never going to come.

The song has no rising action. It has no climax. It chases its tail for a while, sometimes reversing direction for kicks, but achieving just as much as the dog that employs this tactic. Like a life made up mostly of quiet desperation.

Somewhere under a bleached-out desert sky, the same kids are having the same party they've always had. They're lighting their illegal fireworks, they're pooling their tips to buy an eighth. They're working my old job and singing my old song. They're lost in the sandstorm, and most of them won't make it out.



Bob Bellows

"Yes, You Can in
Spokane"

*Stranger at the Fair / Yes,
You Can in Spokane*

1974

Art Records

Homecoming

Michael Carter

Nearly twenty years after my escape, I returned to my hometown.

There's one long street that divides the place. It is speckled with fast-food restaurants of every kind. They're all there, each and every one. How else are people supposed to eat?

They have a "real" mall now, so they say. But there's still more strip malls than Reno. No gambling though, at least not the casino kind. You gamble with your life just by walking around town.

Every other yard is burned up, it seems. Sure, many are meth houses. On meth, it's probably difficult to keep up with watering the lawn, or mowing it.

The "knife-and-gun report" is on every day at six o'clock. Like any city, there has always been crime. But beating a World War II veteran to death in a grocery store parking lot, just for a few bucks? Surviving a world war was not enough for the poor soul—he had to die in this town by the fists of a thug.

The bicycle street gangs are still there. They ride with those ear-to-ear grins. Looking for trouble, or kids just having fun? I don't want to know.

The library is packed, but people are not there for the reading. It's nearly one hundred degrees out. The folks who live in their trailers are simply there to soak in the library air conditioning.

Speaking of trailers, in some parts of town, one is in nearly every side yard. The trailers aren't for vacation, though. That's where your kids will live when they're finally ready to leave home.

People wander the dollar store in the middle of the day, but they don't appear to be shopping for anything in particular. They have leathered red faces and turkey-gizzard necks. The dollar store smells like a county health building, so I leave.

The crown jewel of the city is the celebration of something that happened in 1974. The Expo was there, and they will never let you forget it. If you wander the remnants of the park grounds and listen closely, you might even hear someone whistling the bygone optimism of the Expo's "Yes, You Can" tribute to the town. *It takes a little while, but every stranger learns how to smile...*

The hamburger joint we hung out at is still nestled near the freeway. My classmate was stabbed to death there just for announcing where he attended high school—years after we graduated.

It's not all bad. There are good people, as with any town. There are some new restaurants that are nice. How else are people supposed to eat?

There are a few old restaurants, too, that are worth visiting. Perhaps refuge can be found within the greasy confines of that railroad-car-turned-breakfast-joint. Perhaps that's where you can take a trip away from reality, if even for just for the time it takes to enjoy a meal. When I show up for a bite to eat, I hope the line is long.

There's a sanctuary on the southern hill where you can pretend the rest of the city does not exist. There's also the mansion addition of yesteryear, when this place was a resort town. Mr. Brownstone has undoubtedly paid a visit, but the mansions are still beautiful. At least the lawns are manicured, not torched.

Residents and visitors can also hide in the historic hotel built during high times. They can even strut their feathers in a lounge, like peacocks, or go on a safari. They can pretend, and they can hide, but they know it's out there. The rest of the city is out there, waiting.

I'm not sure if things are worse, or if they were always bad and I just didn't know the difference. Perhaps they taught me that this is the way things are everywhere, so why leave? One can get accustomed to things. That's just the way it is, they might tell you.

It's no better in those far-away places, they might tell you.

Hello Spokane, my old friend. Everyone has roots; some have wings.



The Verve
"Bittersweet
Symphony"

Urban Hymns

09/1997

Hut

Bittersweet Symphony (for my unborn son)

Scout H. Bolton

How is it then, Crow, when the lanugo spritzes right off your red back will you come bounding in to us? This week we called you Bubble or Little Fish or Beautiful Goddamn Tiny Thing or a word we haven't learned yet. Black and white films are my favourite now, you swimming in them, your lips competing for First Face Place, that I recognised from my own face, and your father's geometry somewhere beneath that cherubim fat; here, in our mould.

Thrilled to notice you either love or hate to be spoken to, or about, to wonder where you'll nest on the *Beau Brummell's Irish Linen Obsession* to *Kurt Cobain's Dyeing His Hair Again With Kool-Aid* or *Whatever* bell-curve. Corners of all the rooms would creak if we could hear them expand for you; at the very least this house is breathing but not in a scary way, you understand. The woman who used to live here might have had a cat and it visits or perhaps doesn't and I'm here, in my mould.

Of course, halfway through and here, Daddy's mind takes quick vacations, celebrations through our towns and what might be twinned, running about the small, connecting runnels and prancing avenues like he's being chased by a cloth monster of silks, laces and some kind of glimmering threat beneath all that, like the whisper of a sword or not really, better safe than sorry, but I like to friend enemies and this mad swaddling athlete is no exception; we have it round for kitchen supper, writing group, study—see now, the clever bastard, *these* days it's because it teaches us things that we'll later teach you (that sword could even reveal itself to be, oh, I don't know, a suit of fantastic armour), like how to be a million different people from one day to the next. Halfway through and here, Mummy wants to know if her blood can reveal an immunity to raw meat and its toxins.

When the cake tasted of blood pudding, the vinegar like hot, sour raisins, the pasta like—don't, actually, I'll be literally sick—it was like I was getting to know your sense of humour. Brooding jester Crow, and the bright, silver sound of your hair which is either dark or very dark brushing quite charmingly against my abdomen, it feels as if I'm housing a guest I'd give the house to and ask to rent it back from, build a chair for, bury my outrage for, plant ficus in the garden for, and renovate for playmates; I let it cleanse my mind, I feel free now.

By ruin, this incessant, palatial joy, we're unaccustomed but learning alongside you, who doesn't know different. The day before my father died, I learned the truth of you implanted, not a day before time. For 22 hours of my life, I played quite the harmonious middle in this grand, generational pass-down and he learned you too, held on to learn about the news of you.

That six or so hours it really took—not his sixty years but six hours, I'd say it took, from start to end—grief began to prematurely scatter in nooks I only discovered that day, that endmost laugh of his as he breathed out and never back in again shone like the Long Nineteenth Century and all its gilded flock, leathers and feathers, O revolution, O war—and ache pinged from one daughter, one partner, one brother, sister, companion, and multiplied before settling real in each of us for a long, long time, now, Crow, and one day

you were there to breathe back in his name through my navel and O my embryonic bae, I had told Dad the day before he'd be somewhere nestled in the name of you and I meant it. Maybe that's that smile, then, Crow Anthony? Maybe the first smile you give us will be wholly yours, Daddy's teeth, Mummy's clumsy smile and Grandpa's last gasp before hiding out where he is now and gifting his boundlessness to you and we'll learn it all over again as new this time—the only road I've ever been down—

I can't change my mould. You can. You have.

Tea for the Tillerman
CAT STEVENS



Cat Stevens

"Father and Son"

Tea for the Tillerman

11/1970

Island / A&M

Our Song: Reflections on Cat Stevens' "Father and Son"

Jack Somers

It's not time to make a change. Just relax. Take it easy.

Mom worked late, so Dad picked me up from kindergarten each day. On the way home, we always stopped at the bar. He'd have a beer—whatever was on tap—and I'd have a Shirley Temple—a glorious glass of pink fizz topped with three maraschino cherries impaled on a miniature plastic sword. After I sucked down the cherries, I would pocket the sword and take it home to arm my G.I. Joes. I had a sizeable arsenal of the multicolored swords at home. I kept them stowed away in a plastic G.I. Joe carrying case under my bed. I knew even then that it wouldn't be good for Mom to see them—damning evidence of how often Dad and I went drinking.

The bartenders—in my memory all twenty-something women, all candy apple red lips and towering, teased-out perms—doted on me. They asked me about school. Did I have a crush on any girls in my class? Was my teacher a witch? They brought me paper and crayons, and taped my wonky sketches of dinosaurs and soldiers to the wall behind the bar. Once I proudly announced to them that I was wearing a brand new pair of Masters of the Universe underwear. I told them that there was a picture of He-man and Skeletor fighting on the back. "I have a battle on my butt," I said, and they all laughed. Dad shook his head and grinned at me. "He's a comedian," he said. "Just like his old man."

Sometimes we went right home after our drinks, and sometimes we went hiking down by the river behind the bar. When our hikes went long, I would start to worry. I worried about getting home in time for dinner. I worried about Mom worrying about us. "I think we should go back to the car," I would say as we tromped along the brambly bank. "It's getting dark."

"Just relax," he would call back to me, his tone calm. "We'll turn around in a minute. We're not in any rush."

Back in the Volkswagen Rabbit, he would feed his well-worn cassette of Cat Stevens' *Tea for the Tillerman* into the tape deck. We'd drive home in the purple light of early evening listening to "Wild World" and "Where Do the Children Play?" and "Miles From Nowhere." When "Hard Headed Woman" came on, he would say, "This song reminds me of your mother." And when "Father and Son" started to play, he would say, "This is our song" and tousle my hair.

I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy...

I started first grade at a new school—a Catholic school where I didn't know anyone. On the first day, I saw some older boys playing basketball during recess and asked if I could join them. I was immediately pummeled with jeers. "Get out of here, dipshit!" they spat. "Get lost, bucko!"

At the bar that afternoon, Dad noticed I wasn't guzzling my Shirley Temple with the usual gusto. "What's the matter, buddy?"

"Some big kids were mean to me at school," I said. I felt a prickling behind my eyes. "They called me dipshit and bucko."

He contemplated his half-full beer glass for a few seconds. "You know when I was your age, I got picked on, too," he said.

I cocked an eyebrow at him. How could anybody ever pick on a guy like my dad? He was fearsome—a bulging, burly goliath. I'd seen him play rugby in an old boy's game the week before, and he'd knocked several men clean off their feet. He was like a bull out on the pitch. No one in his right mind would call my dad a dipshit. "I don't believe you," I said.

"Believe it, buddy. I was small and frail. I had chicken legs and big buckteeth. Kids used to call me Bucky the Beaver."

"What did you do?" I asked, still not entirely convinced.

He took a swig of beer and licked his lips. A trace of foam clung to the bottom of his mustache. "I promised myself that when I got big, I would never give smaller kids a hard time. I didn't want to make anyone else feel the way those kids made me feel."

I studied my right hand, my stubby little fingers, my plump white palm. "I don't think I'll ever be big like you," I said.

"Big is overrated," said my dad.

How can I try to explain?

Rummaging around in my basement my sophomore year of high school, I unearthed my dad's sophomore yearbook. I flipped through the musty, yellowed pages and found half a dozen pictures of him. On page thirty-two, he was posing with the football team, broad-shouldered and beaming in the center of the back-row, only sixteen and already the star. On page forty-eight, he appeared with the French club. He was the lone boy in the group, and the girls who flanked him seemed to be pressing toward him, as if they couldn't get close enough. On page fifty-nine, he was pictured with the other members of student council sitting at the center of a table in the library. He looked just like a young JFK in his skinny tie and fitted blazer, his longish hair meticulously combed and parted on the left.

At sixteen he was the king of his school. And what was I at sixteen? The first word that came to mind was invisible. I floated through the halls of my school like an apparition, a gloomy mist. I had no friends and few acquaintances. I was on the soccer team, but I was a clumsy player and spent most of my time on the bench. None of the other kids on the team talked to me outside of practice or sat with me at lunch. Some days I skipped lunch so I wouldn't have to endure the agony of eating alone. I never spoke to girls. I was too self-conscious about my acne, my cracking, quavering voice, my underwhelming five-foot-seven frame.

I had no one to talk to about my misery. Mom always came home from work late and exhausted. I didn't want to trouble her with my problems. And Dad? What was the point of confiding in him? Why bother trying to explain to him what I was going through? How could he possibly understand? What did he know about being an outcast? Nothing. He'd never been ostracized or ignored or overlooked. The pages of his yearbook made that pretty clear.

Now there's a way, and I know that I have to go away.

College for me was an opportunity for escape—escape from my house, escape from my loneliness, escape from myself. As soon as I hit campus, I began remaking myself, transforming myself into the person I wanted to be—a freer, happier, less inhibited person. I joined the poetry club and the jazz band. I got a job at the student coffeehouse. I loaded my schedule with literature classes and started actively seeking out and finding people more like me.

I flew home for Thanksgiving that year and met my dad in the airport. In the three months since I'd last seen him, I'd grown my hair long, lost about fifteen pounds, and sprouted a patchy beard. I was a new man. When he saw me come out of the gate, he smiled, strode over, and wrapped me up in a tight hug. For the first time in a long time I felt the power of his body, the crushing strength of his arms. Still at the age of fifty he could snap me in half. Still he was formidable.

He released me and stepped back. "Look at you," he boomed with pride. "I don't even recognize you anymore. You look ten years older. You look like a man."

I shrugged and looped my thumbs around the straps of my backpack. "It's the beard," I said.

We walked over to the restaurant across from my gate and sat down at the bar. Dad ordered us both beers, and the bartender didn't ask questions. When the drinks arrived, Dad held up his bottle. "Cheers," he said.

I clinked my bottle against his and took a sip. I didn't particularly like the taste, but I resisted the urge to wince. I didn't want hurt Dad's feelings.

He thumped me on the back with his left hand. "Just like old times."

I nodded. "Just like old times."

But it wasn't. I knew that. He had to know that, too. I had crossed over to a different place. I had moved away from him. I had become my own person. I was no longer the chubby six-year-old who idolized him, who hung on his every word and copied his every move. I still admired him. I admired his toughness and his plain-spokenness and the immense joy he got out of simple things like having a beer with his son and hugging in an airport. But I knew we were different people and that we would never again be as close as we had been on those shimmering, peaceful afternoons fourteen years earlier.

Find a girl. Settle down. If you want, you can marry.

My dad liked Joanna almost immediately. Like my dad, she was a strong personality and didn't hesitate to speak her mind. Like him, she thought my mother and I worried too much and needed to relax. When Joanna and I got together with my parents for dinner, my dad would say fondly, "Joanna's on my team" and then look askance at my mother and me to let us know we were not.

At our wedding, my dad was happier than I'd ever seen him. He raised a glass and gave an Irish toast at the dinner and got teary-eyed when Joanna and I said our vows. It was the second time I'd seen him cry. The first was the night his father died twenty-five years before.

Look at me. I am old, but I'm happy.

Almost nine months to the day after Joanna and I got married, Jane was born. That fall, Joanna and I started a new routine. Every Sunday, we would drive to my parents' house with the baby for dinner. As soon as we entered, Dad would pour us each a generous glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, and then the four of us would sit in the living room, chit-chatting and staring wonderingly at our new baby in her car seat.

My dad loved Jane more than I think he'd ever loved anyone. He would hold her tenderly in his brawny arms and talk to her about all the adventures they would have when she was older. He had big plans. He wanted to take her skiing. He wanted to teach her hand-to-hand combat. He wanted to see her graduate from high school.

Occasionally he would glance up at me and say, "You guys did a good job," or, "I always knew you'd have a girl. You're so sensitive," or "She's a beaut."

In January of 2013, Joanna and I found out we were pregnant again, and in April we discovered it was a boy. My dad was jittery with excitement. He was going to have a grandson—a little boy to spoil and adore and mentor. He was counting down the days. The baby was due on September 25th.

On September 23rd, in the middle of a bike ride with some friends, Dad had a massive heart attack. The doctors shocked him twenty times but were unable to revive him. At the funeral, Jane, now two years old, skipped around his casket and sang gleefully as the priest said the final blessing. Dad would have loved that. He would have scolded the rest of us standing there, our faces streaked with tears. He would have said, "Look at that beautiful little girl and cheer the fuck up. Don't feel bad for me. Sure, I only lived sixty-three years, but I packed more fun into those sixty-three years than most people pack into a hundred."

I know Dad would have been proud of his grandson. Henry is built just like his grandfather—like a bull. He's athletic and easygoing and full of laughter like my dad was. I'd like to think my dad's spirit jumped out of his body in that emergency room and into Henry in the birthing room. I don't think it's a preposterous idea.

Not too long ago, I picked Henry up from pre-school. On the way home, I slid *Tea for the Tillerman* into the CD player. Henry listened attentively to "Wild World" and "Longer Boats" and "Hard Headed Woman." I could tell by his glassy gaze and partially opened mouth that he was transfixed by the music just as I had been at his age. About five minutes from our house, "Father and Son" came on.

"What's this?" said Henry.

"This is our song," I said.

On “Caledonia” by Dougie MacLean

Neil Clark

I knew the melody and all the words to “Caledonia” before I heard the song properly. That’s because I’m Scottish, and we like to get bladdered and sing things at the tops of our lungs.

At Scottish weddings or birthdays, or at any other excuse to consume a healthy skinful, there always comes a certain special point at the end of the night. An hour or two after, we’ll be passed out somewhere, snoring loudly. But not before the night reaches that boozy crescendo. We’ll gather in a circle—arm-in-arm, generation-to-generation, with family and old friends, with people we met two minutes ago—and we’ll sing songs in unison until there’s a tingle at backs of our necks and a warmth in the pits of our stomachs.

“Auld Lang Syne” is a favourite. “The Bonnie Banks o’ Loch Lomond” is another. I’ve heard these songs referred to as ‘Hospital Songs’, because when we sing them together and end up jumping around and jostling in ways that make no logical sense, our chances of ending up in hospital increase greatly. But that never matters. Not until the next morning, anyway.

There are those Hospital Songs, then there’s “Caledonia” by Dougie MacLean. It’s a sad folk song, written in ten minutes on a beach in France when Dougie was feeling homesick for Scotland, performed on an acoustic guitar. It fits perfectly in a medley alongside those other songs, and we sing it just as loud. But there are less injuries induced and there’s more hugging, maybe a bit of kissing if your luck’s in. It’s less of a Hospital Song, but just as much of an anthem. In the words of Dougie himself, “There’s not a pub singer, busker, or pipe band that doesn’t play it.” Add to that many pop stars, whose live rendition of it is always a sure-fire way to get a Scottish crowd singing.

I think that’s because “Caledonia” has the common touch. It’s not about armies conquering other armies. It’s not about getting all the biatches. In Scotland, we like our heroes to be like us. No fanfare. Just good people who we’d be able to have a pint and a wee blether with. And we love our lonesome folk singers—those with nothing but an instrument and some poems and the open road.

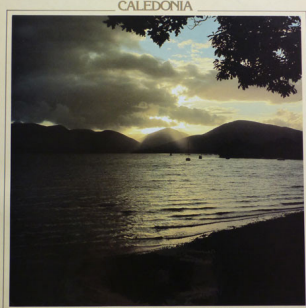
“Caledonia” begins:

I don’t know if you can see the changes that have come over me; In the last few days, I’ve been afraid that I might drift away

Simple, sad, and sweet. And relatable, for any person, at any time in their lives...

It’s 2013. I’m twenty-seven, and I’ve been afraid that I might drift away.

I’m in the check-in hall at Edinburgh Airport. Oddball life choices have brought me here. I’m not flying anywhere. I’m not dropping anyone off, not picking someone up. I’m



Dougie MacLean

“Caledonia”

Caledonia

1978

Plant Life

working here, earning minimum wage and trying to claw my way out of my overdraft. When I was twenty-five, I quit my nicely paid nine-to-five job on a whim. When I told my boss what I was doing, there was still beer on my breath from the night before. It's the dumbest thing I ever did. It's also my proudest moment. I have zero clue what I expected from it, really, and in the end, none of my creative pursuits came off. But I regret nothing and loved every minute of it. Even the bit when my nosediving bank balance inevitably crashed into the red.

When I had to get a job, I looked for something simple and stress-free so I could still write as much as possible.

So, here I am at the airport. My head is all mixed up. In real life, I'm seeing friends and acquaintances my age moving up in the world, getting nice cars, buying homes, getting married, doing a decent job of acting like they have their shit together. Out with real life, Amy Winehouse has fairly recently become the latest to check into the 27 Club, joining many others I'd consider role models and kindred spirits. It feels like I'm in no man's land. Not a homemaker, not a hedonist. Just a twenty-seven-year-old customer services guy on a zero-hour contract.

By this point, I've been doing the job long enough to have worked out the formula: older people (fifty and above) + airports + self-service ≠ a good idea.

I approach an older man, about my father's age. He's at the self-service check-in machine, trying to scan his passport. The document is the wrong way around. It's also on the wrong page and he is rubbing it frantically against a part of the machine that is not the passport scanner, as if the boarding pass genie is going to magically come out of it. It's a common sight in the airport game.

"Let me help you out, sir."

"Cheers, son," he says. "I'd end up getting on the plane to Auchtermuchty if they left me to do this myself."

When you get an instant rapport with a customer it can really make your day. I feel that way with this man. Maybe it's because he's calling me "son", maybe it's something else. Underneath the dry wit he's imparting at every part of this transaction, there's something about his eyes and his voice. A sadness. It makes me think maybe he's been through things like what I'm going through. Maybe he's a drifter too.

I feel a warmth on the back of my neck. There's a familiarity there, like a ghost just walked through me.

He confirms that the details on the screen are correct. He is flying economy class to Amsterdam, then onto somewhere in the Far East. I ask him if he packed his bags himself and if he is carrying any dangerous items. "Packed the bags myself, aye," he says. "And no—no dangerous items. Other than myself." He's got a lot of luggage, and it's all bulky and cumbersome looking, so I ask him if he needs any help with his bags. I'm hoping he says yes. I feel like I will become a wiser man with every minute spent in his company. "You're alright, son," he says. "I'll be just fine." We shake hands and he joins the back of the bag-drop queue.

My shift finishes. I started at 4am and could fall asleep standing up. As I'm weighing up whether I can treat myself to a steak bake and a jam donut from Gregg's on the way home and still be able to pay the rent, "Caledonia" starts swirling around my head.

This is nothing unusual—I'm Scottish. But this time, the voice seems closer, like a ghost. I get a flashback from the shift I've just done. It's the screen of the self-service check-in machine, with that man's details on it. The name on it was D. MacLean. A lonesome folk singer with his instruments and poems and the open road, no fanfare.

I'm hungry, but I bypass Gregg's on the walk home from the bus stop, humming "Caledonia" all the way, looking up and seeing plane trails in the sky.

The song warms the pit of my stomach, just like it has done many times before—in solitude or with friends and family, in good times or in hardship.

And it will warm my stomach many more times as I drift through the years to come.

Contributors

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Hannah Gordon is a writer and editor from Detroit. She's the managing editor of *CHEAP POP*. Her stories can be found or are forthcoming in *Hypertrophic Literary*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Synaesthesia Magazine*, *WhiskeyPaper*, and [more](#). When she's not writing, she's hanging out with her cat and watching cooking competitions. You can follow her on Twitter @_hannahnicole.

M. Stone is a bookworm, birdwatcher, and stargazer who writes poetry and fiction while living in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *San Pedro River Review*, *Star 82 Review*, *UCity Review*, and numerous other journals. Find her on Twitter @writermstone and at writermstone.wordpress.com.

Debby Wolfensohn has written for the *Austin American-Statesman*, *Spin*, and MTV.com. Her artwork has appeared in the *New York Times*. She has written television pilots (*Gigantic*) and screenplays (*Nowhere*) and edited films (*Friends Forever*, *High School Record*). Her 'zine, *Satan Wears A Bra*, is a permanent part of the Rock N Roll Hall of Fame Archives in Cleveland and the Fales Riot Grrrl Archives at NYU. Born in Detroit, she has lived in Madison, Oakland, and Brooklyn, currently residing in Austin, Texas, where she writes YA novels and raises her family. In her old life, she played guitar with her band, the Speed Queens, completing two US tours and recording two records (released on Sympathy for the Record Industry) before the whole thing exploded like a Chevy van on a remote Florida highway (true story). Find her at debbywolfensohn.com or on twitter @debbywolfensohn.

Adam Sear lives in Northamptonshire, England. When not busy earning a living teaching, he writes short stories and creative non-fiction. He is currently studying part-time for an MA in Creative Writing with the Open University and has contributed to *The Cabinet of Heed*. He also has a forthcoming piece in the *Riggwelter* journal. His many interests include: music, cosmology, sci-fi, history and the natural world. Strong tea, no sugar please. You can follow him on Twitter, if you like: @Q V B M.

Danny McLaren is a queer writer, poet, photographer, and musician from Toronto. They are currently an undergraduate student majoring in gender studies, with an interest in equity, inclusivity, and diversity-related work. They often explore themes associated with mental health, gender, and identity in their work. They are an editor and co-founder of an arts and culture magazine called *Alien Pub*, and has poems published in a number of online literature journals.

Gabrielle Gilbert has left Pratt Institute with a Bachelor's degree in writing as proof, as well as many ghosts and student loans. Her weird words have been published in multiple issues of *Selfish* magazine and multiple issues of *Alien Mouth*, as well as *Dum Dum Zine*, *Vanilla Sex Magazine*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Witch Craft Magazine* and *Literary Orphans*. She also has a book! A chapbook. Which can be found through Dancing Girl Press under the title *Change of Engagement*. She has found her saving grace in *Memoir Mixtapes* and has been featured in their first two issues, as well as a B-Side for issue 3. Her Instagram is sometimes @gabbigailbert and she is sometimes living in Portland, ME.

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Tom Stern is the author of the novels *My Vanishing Twin* (Rare Bird Books, 2017) and *Sutterfeld, You Are Not A Hero* (Rare Bird Books, 2015). His words have also appeared in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Monkeybicycle*, and *Hypertext Magazine*. Tom holds a BA in Philosophy from Eckerd College and an MFA in Film Production from Chapman University. He writes and lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Cheryl, and his daughter, Ramona.

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Mary Thompson lives in London, where she works as a freelance tutor and teacher. Her work has been long-listed, shortlisted, placed and published in journals and competitions including *Flash 500*, *Fish Short Memoir*, *Writing Magazine*, *Retreat West*, *Reflex Fiction*, *Ellipsis Zine* and *The Cabinet of Heed*, and is forthcoming at *Spillwords* and *Fictive Dream*. Follow her on Twitter @MaryRuth69.

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Stephanie Valente lives in Brooklyn, NY. She has published *Hotel Ghost* (Bottlecap Press, 2015) and *waiting for the end of the world* (Bottlecap Press, 2017), and has work included in *Susan, TL;DR*, and *Cosmonauts Avenue*. Sometimes, she feels human. <http://stephanievalente.com>

Anya Silver is a poet, and has published four books of poetry, most recently *Second Bloom* (Cascade, 2017). She is a professor of English at Mercer University, and lives in Macon, GA (birthplace of Otis Redding) with her husband and son.

Terrell Fox is a graduate of the MFA creative writing program at the University of Washington Bothell. He is a former Marine who can't draw, paint, sing, dance, play music, take pictures, sculpt, or throw pottery, so he writes as his way of artistic expression. His work has previously been published in *Proximity Magazine*, *Ricky's Backyard*, *Holy Shit Journal*, and *Clamor*. He has upcoming work in *Black Candies: The Eighties*, and *Incoming: Sex, Drugs, & Copenhagen*. He was recently selected to be a group leader for *Planting The Oar*, a literature-based veteran/civilian discussion group sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has also completed a novel-length experimental memoir about his experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Terrell can be reached on Twitter @FogButWithAnX.

A Pushcart Prize nominee and a two-time Best of the Net nominee, Amber D. Tran graduated from West Virginia University in 2012, where she specialized in lyrical non-fiction and contemporary poetry. She is the Editor-in-Chief for the *Cold Creek Review* literary journal. Her work has been featured in *Calliope*, *After the Pause*, *Spry*

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Matthew Woodman teaches writing at California State University, Bakersfield and is the founding editor of *Rabid Oak*. His nonfiction piece on Richard Buckner's *The Hill* appeared in *Memoir Mixtapes Vol. 2: Life in LP*.

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Joey Gould is a poet, tutor, & produce clerk from Hopedale, MA. He coedits two journals: *Drunk Monkeys* & *Golden Walkman*. The rest of his poetry life centers around Salem, where he leads workshops, attends a writer's group, & coordinates set-up for the Massachusetts Poetry Festival. Please search "Joey Gould poetry" on google or follow on Twitter [@toshines](#) or IG [@joey.toshines](#).

Sarah Skiles is a writer and storyteller living in Los Angeles. Her day jobs in the entertainment industry have included: food styling for blender infomercials, tumbleweed wrangling, red carpet interviews, and producing episodes of reality television. She once scored a student film with Fugazi's *The Argument*.

Jamie O'Connell lives in the Bay Area, where she received her MFA in Writing from California College of the Arts. Recent poems have appeared or will soon appear in *FIVE:2:ONE*, *Eunoia Review*, *Califragile*, *OCCULUM*, *bad pony*, *Cacti Fur*, and elsewhere. She spends most of her time with her majestic zebra-striped dog/direwolf, Daisy. Visit her site here: www.jamieoco.com.

KPT is the author of two books. She is the EIC of *Rag Queen Periodical*, a staff writer for *Luna Luna Magazine*, and a performer in the Poetry Brothel. Her work has been featured in *Electric Literature*, *Phoebe Journal*, *American Chordata*, *Sugar House Review*, and more.

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For the most part, Jon Johnson has no clue what is going on. Time not spent scratching his head is typically spent writing, eating, and trying to figure himself out. He enjoys creation and expression in all forms, and finds it best through whichever medium pops out at the moment. His work has been published in *Memoir Mixtapes* and the book *Reflections and Illuminations* by Braeburn Publishing. Check out [Jon's other adventures](#), or visit him in Mallorca.

Lisa L. Weber has very strange dreams, cries too easily, and feels too much. Her work has appeared in *The San Diego Mesa Visions Magazine*, and online at *Anti-Heroin Chic* and *The Ginger Collect*. You can follow her on Twitter @LisaLermaWeber.

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Michael Carter comes from an extended family of farmers in the Northern Rockies, and later apple orchardists in Washington State. Instead of following family agricultural tradition, or remaining trapped in the hometown he ended up in, he hit the road and put himself through college and law school. When he's not lawyering, he enjoys writing, fishing, and cast-iron cooking. He's online at [michaelcarter.ink](#) and @mcmichaelcarter.

Scout H. Bolton is a writer, editor and critic living in the North of England. They are the author of full length collections *Wild Heather* (Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2017) and *Softcore Cloudstep* (79Rat Press, 2013), and several ebooks and have been featured in various online and print media, mainstream and alternative, as a poet, sometimes artist, sometimes regrettable antagonist. They are now working on an immersive, interdisciplinary project about the role of personality disorders in cult leadership with several collaborators, and being the founding editor of *Softboy* magazine, an arts and lifestyle magazine celebrating queer, trans and under-privileged masculinity.

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