



# Memoir Mixtapes

Vol. 9: We Are Family

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Special thanks as always to our reader, Benjamin Selesnick

# Letters from the Editors



Dearest MM family,

I hope the launch of this volume finds you well. And if it doesn't find you well, then I hope it finds you surviving.

Real talk: life has been hard lately. Since we put out the call for this volume, the editors on our team have lost loved ones, made career and physical moves, and undergone some incredibly challenging life changes. Beyond our individual struggles, things have not been easy for the empaths of the world. If you're a part of the MM community, we suspect you've felt it, too. Every day it seems there is something new to despair over. It's exhausting.

While it has taken a bit longer than we'd like, it feels really good to get *Volume 9: We Are Family* out into the world, especially after the chaotic 2019 we've endured thus far. In the grand scheme of things, it's a relatively small victory, but we'll happily celebrate it.

This time around, we asked for stories and songs about family. Going into it, we knew that we'd be in for an emotionally-taxing ride. We can't promise that every piece will leave you feeling full of joy, or eager to hop on the phone to call your estranged loved ones. In fact, there are some pieces that are likely to leave you feeling absolutely gutted, and you might be dashing to hide your head under a pillow instead.

What we are confident in promising is this: these pieces will move you. They will make you feel. And, speaking for myself, in times like these, that's all you can ask for, and more than you could hope for, at the same time. And for that, I am so thankful.

I am grateful to our brilliant contributors for sharing these glimpses into their lives with us. I am grateful to you, our readers, whether returning or brand new, for giving them the audience they deserve. And I am especially grateful for my dedicated friends on the MM staff—Kevin Woodall, Emery Ross, and Benjamin Selesnick. Thank you for offering up your time, talents, and energy to make this volume possible, all of which are incredibly valuable resources, and especially in these trying times. It is so appreciated.

Love you all,

**Samantha Lamph/Len**  
CREATOR & CO-CURATOR



Hi MM fam,

I'm extremely honored to be welcoming you this time around, but for those of you who are all, *uh, where is Kev*—no worries. His shining face will be back next time.

I am also feeling lots of gratitude to everyone who submitted for *Volume 9: We Are Family*, as we had so many exceptional pieces to read through. Thanks so much to all of you for entrusting us with your words. Curating this volume was no easy task, but the end result is as pretty damn amazing, as you'll soon see.

"Family" is a sometimes-fraught, always-emotional term, and as you probably expected, we have plenty of moving poems and essays for you in this Volume (spoiler alert: some of them will make you cry). But we also have joyous, happy pieces as well, and (on the subject of gratitude) I'm eternally grateful for those pieces that helped me rethink what family can mean to each of us.

I had the good fortune of joining the *Memoir Mixtapes* family at the beginning of the year and it's been amazing working with Sam, Kevin, and Benj, and getting the chance to get to know so many of you faithful readers. Thanks for welcoming me and for continuing to send in such gorgeous work.

Many thanks to MM mom, Sam—thanks for bringing me on board and for showing endless kindness to all of us. You're not like a regular mom. You're *the coolest* mom. Thanks to brother Benj, our thoughtful and insightful reader (who also happened to graduate in the midst of things—congratulations!). And a big shout-out to MM dad, Kevin, who was busy doing very grown up things over the past few months—we missed you!!

And to you fabulous readers: Thanks for your patience as we dealt with life things—I think you'll find Vol.9 is worth the wait. So grab a blankie and a cat or dog, settle in, and enjoy!

**Emery Ross**  
ASSISTANT EDITOR

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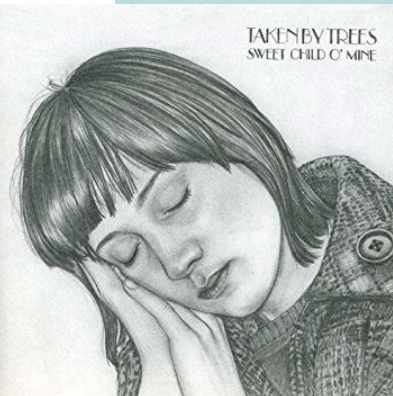
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# Sweet Child O' Mine (as sung by Taken by Trees)

Elizabeth Ditty

I think when the gods made us, cutting from the same cloth as they do, waste not, want not, they must have sliced too thin, because how else can you explain this soul-burn I feel whenever I watch you walk into a part of your life that's not mine too, or the peeled-rawness of seeing you smile and laugh and grab the hand of someone else who didn't carry you caged safe in their ribs, who doesn't keep your DNA safely entwined with their own, the way I do so I can never be without you, never not feel the loss of you, no matter how far away you or I go, no matter how close you are as you breathe sleep-heavy on my chest while I inhale your atoms and try to memorize the weight of you while I still have the privilege to bear it.



Taken by Trees

"Sweet Child O' Mine"

*Sweet Child O' Mine*

02/2008

Rough Trade



Simon & Garfunkel

"The Sound of Silence"

Wednesday Morning,  
3 A.M.

10/1964

Columbia

# Only a Motion Away, or Why I Flew Cross-Country to Paul Simon's Last Show in Memory of My Mom

Kate Washington

Here's the degree to which I grew up on Paul Simon: my mom once made her book club read a sheaf of Paul Simon lyrics she photocopied from the album liner notes.

She preferred the solo albums, particularly those that didn't sell as well—*Hearts and Bones* (1983), I'm looking at you—to Simon & Garfunkel. But, of course, she had all the old Simon & Garfunkel vinyl, too. I went through a phase when I was 13 or 14, just before *Graceland* (1986) came out, when I borrowed and obsessively played all the hippie-est vinyl in my parents' collection. They were never hippies—they were married and settling into conventional life by 1967—but they went to Berkeley in the 1960s and bought all the music of the day.

I can't remember when it was, exactly, that my mom gave those copies of liner notes to her book club. I wonder if it was just after the split with my dad, when she was raw and unhappy and several of her longtime friends were unsympathetic and continued to socialize with my dad and his new girlfriend (who was soon to be his new wife). I think it must have been earlier, though, before *Graceland*—that sharp dividing line in Paul Simon's career, his extraordinary phoenixlike rebirth—came out, and before the sharp dividing line in our own family, from married to divorced. My mom thought Simon (whom she mostly just called Paul) was a great poet, and she loved the wordplay of his earlier solo albums. It only occurred to me recently how far ahead of her time she was, like the Nobel Prize in Literature committee *avant la lettre*.

Her daughter to the end, I think she chose a better poet than the Nobel committee did in Bob Dylan. Direct comparisons to Bob Dylan marked Simon's entire career, and in recent years he has addressed them: "One of my deficiencies is my voice sounds sincere. I've tried to sound ironic. I don't. I can't. Dylan, everything he sings has two meanings. He's telling you the truth and making fun of you at the same time. I sound sincere every time."

No wonder my mom usually preferred Simon to Dylan, as my brother pointed out. Our mother was earnest and honest to a fault. Irony frustrated her, leaving her with the feeling of being mocked. That tendency mixed unfortunately with me, her GenX daughter who spoke in sarcasm and irony like a mother tongue—or rather, in my case, a father tongue.

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I can still hear, echoing, my mother's music: the Suzuki albums she played over and over for my brother to learn the violin, the ska beats of "Mother and Child Reunion," which opens Simon's eponymous first solo album. Actually, I can hear them any time I want, because we kept all her vinyl (including, even, those Suzuki albums) after she died, by suicide, at age 64.

When Paul Simon turned 64, his friend Paul McCartney, called to sing "When I'm 64," its upbeat strains turned bittersweet by loss and the passage of time. I sigh and think of my mother when I hear it now.

There's no real meaning in coincidences of numbers like this, but my mother was always a numbers person, mildly obsessed with interesting or resonant dates and the like. She would point it out whenever she saw a clock that read 10:06, my birthday being the sixth of October. That date appears, I realized recently, in a Simon lyric, one of the songs from his unloved Broadway venture "The Capeman."

She killed herself by overdose less than a month before she turned 65. Based on her journals, she was sure that nobody still loved her or needed her when she was 64. At the time she was deeply depressed after a long period of mania, unwilling to see the private-pay psychiatrist I found for her and stressed about choosing Medicare coverage when she turned 65 the following month.

When my mother was depressed, she didn't believe that I loved her. She was wrong about that, but she was right that by that time, at age 37, I didn't strictly speaking need a mother anymore. I don't think I had for a long time—something that irked her. "You're so independent," she would say to me with a frustrated sigh. *I had to be*, I never said back to her.

When I was weary and feeling small, I tried not to let my mother know. She would take it personally. She had many strengths as a mother, but offering comfort wasn't high on the list. Once, in the midst of a health emergency of my brother's, my mom wailed, "Why do these things always happen to me?" The problem was that it wasn't happening to her, and she was unable to see that.

Did my mother love me like a rock, as Simon's lyrics would have it? She did. Did she get down on her knees and hug me? She did not. I don't remember cuddles or closeness when I was a child, though maybe that is just the failure of child memory. I remember, though vaguely, the time of her first major depression. In my mind it just looms as the strange time Mom went to bed. For weeks? For months? I don't know. I was seven then.

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Paul Simon's first hit was "The Sound of Silence." It's also the last song he played live, at a farewell concert—the "Homeward Bound" tour, naturally—at Corona Park in Flushing Meadows in the fall of 2018. My brother and I flew across the country on something of a whim to see that show. California to New York for a weekend, 24 hours in the big city. Simon spoke from the stage of growing up in Queens. He tossed a baseball into his hometown crowd, name-checked his nearby alma mater when he played "Kodachrome," and got the crowd to roar when he sang about Rosie, the queen of Corona, in "Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard." As quixotic as flying 3,000 miles to see a show was, it felt like magic to be there.

I went, and talked my brother into going, because our mom would have bought a ticket and flown across the country to see Paul one last time. She would have loved to see that show. In her later years, she went to concerts almost obsessively. We saw Simon together just once, when he was playing an open-air show at South Lake Tahoe. I've seen him three times: the first with my mom, at Tahoe; the second with my brother, at Berkeley's Greek Theater (there was a minor earthquake during the show), a couple of years after our mom's death; the third and last time, also with my brother, in New York at that farewell show.

The echoing notes of "Sound of Silence" date back even earlier than the 1960s and his first hit. He invented the guitar line in the Simon family bathroom, in the dark, the sound of the plinking guitar echoing off tile. He retreated there to play and learn the guitar.



It's odd, considering how famous Paul Simon was and is, how often he was in the shadows. Critics long saw Art Garfunkel's voice, for instance, as the secret to Simon and Garfunkel's success, though honestly I prefer Simon's straightforward tenor to Garfunkel's dramatic sweet treble swoops. Simon was always cast, including by himself, as a straight man: against Chevy Chase's goofy bluster in the "You Can Call Me Al" video, in *Annie Hall*, with the late Carrie Fisher, even often on Saturday Night Live.

My mother, too, was cast in our family drama as the humorless one. That's a common trap for moms: we're no fun. Now that I have my own children and am in my busy, draining 40s—soft in the middle—I understand it better. The course of a lifetime runs over and over again. Moms point out it's bedtime, enforce the rules, tell everyone to stop roughhousing, don't have time for jokes. Our kids are the burden of our generation. But my mother's friends, who saw her outside the constrained hothouse of our family, recall of how fun and funny she was. All of us, when we think about our family dynamics, seem to lean on old familiar ways.

Darkness was my mother's old friend, too. After my mom's death, a friend of hers from way back in elementary school told me that she had always sensed a sad inner core, some deep darkness, in her friend. Of course, she said that after my mom's suicide, when it was easy to look back and see a long straight line of depression and decline to a natural endpoint. Lives are always more complicated than that. I could try trace the ups and downs of my mother's mood and functioning over the years, to find the reminders of every glove that laid her down and cut her. I could worry away at the question of when exactly she stopped taking the lithium that had helped her for decades and try to chart her trajectory. But what would be the point? All I would meet is the sound of the silence she ultimately chose.

At Corona Park that September night, the first notes and the last notes of Paul Simon's first and last song rang out in an endless circle. He was expansive, performative, a star: not at all the straight man of reputation or *Annie Hall*. After the last plinking notes of "Sound of Silence" died into the New York night, he stood arms wide, soaking up the energy and adoration of a crowd one last time.

Paul Simon chose his time to exit the stage. So, in her very different way, did my mom. Neither would be convicted by a jury of their peers for those choices. I was there to bear witness to both, one farewell sweet, the other I hope the bitterest of my life. It's no small thing to exit on your own terms. They may have left, but the fighter still remains.

# Up, up, up

Sarah Priscus

Sometimes I think of  
gold-light evenings on carpet  
with the TV on.

I was crooked-bangs,  
swallowed-teeth, stick-on earrings,  
five years old, laughing.

My brother, full-cheeked,  
eating doll shoes and crawling  
across kitchen tiles.

Light seeping inside  
from the suburban lampposts,  
brushing our thin skins.

Mom played the CD.  
I swirled worlds from the broad floor,  
airplane-observing.

(That day, at the park,  
I soared proudly above sand,  
calling to the moon.)

"Spin me one more time."  
Sweet bright-face mother obliged,  
scooping me right up.

Fifty feet above,  
dancing in the summer sky.  
We spun in circles,

and Shania said,  
lipsticked twang in her big voice,  
"there's no way but up."



Shania Twain

"Up!"

Up!

11/2002

Mercury Nashville

# I Used to Be Seventeen

Colleen Rothman

TUESDAY

At preschool pickup, my son's teacher pulls me aside. "Someone didn't use his listening ears today," she says. As I stoop to hug him, I can tell something's off. That night, after his bath, his forehead's warm. I check his temperature—low-grade fever, nothing serious. "A little Tylenol won't hurt," my husband says.

I log it in my Notes app. I used to have an excellent memory. Now, after three years of motherhood, if I don't write something down immediately, it's like it never happened.

*8 p.m.—100.5°, Tylenol*

After he's asleep, a headline catches my eye: Sharon Van Etten's new album comes out on Friday. As a fan of her earlier work, I can't wait. The article mentions her lower vocal range after labor and a C-section destroyed her abdominal muscles two years ago, which I hadn't heard. Then again, I'm out of the loop. I used to pay attention. I used to read Pitchfork every morning. I used to throw gossip rags in my cart while grocery shopping with a buzz on so I could see who wore it better while I microwaved my dinner for one. That was Then. My Now only allows me the time to track the minutiae of one person's life.

WEDNESDAY

During the night, my husband hears him talking on the monitor, and goes in without waking me. He checks his temp—102°—and gives him more Tylenol before coming back to bed. When he tells me in the morning, I feel guilty, but also grateful. The fever spike means no school; as the parent who earns less money, I'm always the one on-call.

*8:00 a.m.—100.7°, Tylenol*

*9:30 a.m.—100.3°, Motrin*

*3:30 p.m.—101.5°, Tylenol*

*9:15 p.m.—102.8°, Motrin*

The day disappears in alternating bursts of liquid fever reducers, and with it, the prospect of childcare the following day. There's always Friday, I tell myself. I'll drop him off and drive, windows down, blasting that new album on my way to a coffee shop, where I'll have time to write, finally. It'll be great.

THURSDAY

*5:00 a.m.—99.3°*

*7:00 a.m.—101.2°, Motrin*

I call his pediatrician at 8:01, trying not to berate myself for not calling sooner. They tell me to bring him in. Before we leave, I sit him on the potty, but he waits until we're in the doctor's exam room to empty his bladder. Urine drips from the paper-covered table onto the linoleum as I carry him down the hall and plunk him on the plastic seat I brought from home.



Sharon Van Etten

"Seventeen"

Remind Me Tomorrow

01/2019

Jagjaguwar

The strep test is positive.

1:15 p.m.—Amoxicillin

5:30 p.m.—102.3°, Tylenol

6:45 p.m.—Motrin

I'm not sure what that last temp was. I didn't write it down.

#### FRIDAY

8:00 a.m.—103°, Amoxicillin

We cuddle on the sofa and watch what feels like eighty-seven episodes of *Sesame Street*, me and my kid who usually won't sit still through a single one. Every time that new pink Muppet whose name I don't know asks, "Do you know what time it is?!", I have no idea.

4:00 p.m.—Motrin

8:00 p.m.—Tylenol

10:00 p.m.—Motrin

I've completely forgotten about the Sharon Van Etten album. After my son's bedtime, my husband and I watch an episode of *Crashing* and fall asleep.

#### SATURDAY

7:30 a.m.—104.4°, Motrin, Amoxicillin

Meds not working. Page doc. They call in a new scrip.

10:30—Augmentin

We've been down this road before; it's nasty shit. He spits out the first dose I squirt into his mouth with a plastic syringe. White goo dribbles onto his bulldozer shirt that says TIME TO WRECK STUFF. I don't disagree.

11:00 a.m.—Tylenol

2:00 p.m.—101.8°, Motrin

5:30 p.m.—Tylenol

As more *Sesame Street* plays, I lie on the couch and open Instagram, zooming past photos taken by people from Then: happy-hour friends, ex-boyfriends still in bands, people who can take exotic vacations. I stop on a Now friend's post of her infant daughter receiving a breathing treatment for RSV. It could be worse, I tell myself, but the thought fails to comfort me.

Instead, I think of which cocktail I'd order if my husband and I were at a dark bar that does not admit children. A Dark and Stormy, perhaps? Whatever I used to drink Then. It's so hard to remember.

8:00 p.m.—Motrin, Augmentin

I forget to listen to Sharon Van Etten.

## SUNDAY

7:15 a.m.—104°, Augmentin, Motrin

10:00 a.m.—Tylenol

1:00 p.m.—Motrin

I escape to the grocery store. We need everything.

In produce, I spot a hot dad, the Kryptonite of my Now. He's a sloppier version of a guy I might've gone for back Then: gray flecks in his beard scruff, shoes barely tied, pills in his striped sweater. His boys, probably six and eight, swat each other while he pushes the cart, but he doesn't intervene. How nice that must be, not to give a shit. I want him, and I want to be him. We lock eyes over a pile of Honeycrisps as I reach for a bag of lemons; at this store, no singles are available. When I see him again at checkout, he won't look at me. It's the closest I'll get to sex all week.

Behind me in line is a woman with a baby sporting an oversized headband, perched in one of those cloth shopping-cart covers, like the one I used twice before losing it in my car somewhere. I give the mom a withering look like, *Good luck, lady.*

4:30 p.m.—98.8°

7:40 p.m.—Motrin

I forget to listen to Sharon Van Etten.

## MONDAY

7:15 a.m.—101.1°, Motrin

This fucking fever. I call the doc; they summon us back in. "Any change in your address or insurance?" the woman behind the front desk chirps. Not since three days ago, I want to say.

The flu test is negative—it's a secondary virus, according to a pediatrician that's not his usual one. "Not much we can do," he shrugs. "Call us if he's not better by Wednesday."

"But he's had a fever for a week."

"It's so hard when they're sick, isn't it?" He fingers his digital watch. "I've got three myself: seven, five, and three. Right now, they've all got the flu. My wife's going nuts at home with them." I want to ask him for her number.

As I buckle up for the drive home, I finally remember. I open Spotify and retrieve the tangled auxiliary cable from a sticky cup holder filled with cough-drop wrappers from the last cold. The album's titled *Remind Me Tomorrow*, which makes me think of the MacBook software update alerts I continually decline. Everything in my Now—except for my son—tabbed for later. The cover art shows a disaster of a nursery: toys strewn everywhere, a girl playing naked in a bin on the floor, next to what looks like a vinyl record with Sharon's face on it. Or do my bleary eyes betray me?

When I tap the first song, something else appears—a full-screen image, which animates as the first track plays. It's a video baby monitor. Immediately, I know this album is one I'll devour.

My son's asleep in his car seat by the time "Seventeen" begins its slow progression into Springsteen-style synth. It's a good thing, too. I'm not wild about him seeing me cry.

-----

"Seventeen" takes that conversation between Then and Now, the one running constantly in my head, and blasts it through the speakers of my sensible SUV. On that initial listen, all I can hear is pure nostalgia:

*I used to be free  
I used to be seventeen*

These lines alone are enough to make me weep. My love for my son is boundless, but there are moments when I miss having what seems like freedom. When I was seventeen, I never had to drive anyone to the pediatrician, or clean up anyone's urine, or hold anyone through fever chills. I hardly ever got sick. Now I've arrived at an age that I would have thought of as officially *old* during those selfish years. I, too, am "halfway through this life," though I hate to admit I've lived long enough to gaze into the past and wonder whether that era was "just a dream."

The song unravels layer upon painful layer that surfaces when I look back on my Then, remembering a life of hanging at "downtown hot spots" that seem no longer relevant. I've become a version of myself that I would have previously hated: segments of *Sesame Street* memorized, lusting after strangers in grocery stores, not to mention that little belly flap above my C-section scar. I can no longer remember being someone who didn't know the difference between a co-pay and a deductible.

I repeat the track, then replay it. By the time we're home, its nuance starts to unfurl like a flower. I've only ever looked back on my younger self with a sense of jealousy, but in Sharon's voice I also hear pity, or at least empathy. Her close examination of Now and Then does not let either side win. Coming from a place where I'm "sure of what I've lived and have known," something I feel deeply in my Now, I can see my younger self, naïve and female, navigating an adult world that didn't give a shit about me: "half shy," "so uncomfortably alone," "think you're so carefree" but "constantly being led astray." I consider some of the painful lessons I had to learn the hard way, things like: *He doesn't deserve you* and *Just because someone can quote a philosopher doesn't make him smart* and *Never date someone who has the master key to your apartment*.

"I wish I could show you how much you've grown," she sings. It's hard to accept that perhaps, in learning how to think about someone other than myself, I might have actually become a better person. Through her words, I can start to see more than just loss—a process of growth, in fact, that would have begun in that moment that I've only ever seen as the one that divides Now from Then: the first time I held my son. In the recovery room just outside the OR, the world that had dimmed gray as I vomited bile during surgery came roaring back into shiny, pink, expertly swaddled focus.

Different parts of "Seventeen" move me with each subsequent listen. Now the moment that hits hardest is when she sings, "I know what you're gonna be," then wails, "*I know that you're gonna be,*" a clever slant repetition. It's like telling a character in a movie you've already seen that you know how it's going to end, even though they can't hear you. You know their fate—that they have one at all—because you've lived it. It doesn't work out how they think it will, you want to tell them, but it's going to be okay.

TUESDAY

8:00 a.m.—98.7°

11:30 a.m.—98.3°

7:00 p.m.—98.7°

Back to normal. The normal of Now, anyway. That's all there is. On this day, that feels like enough.

WEDNESDAY

At preschool pickup, I feel a tickle in the back of my throat.

THURSDAY

I take my temp, then open a new note.

5:00 p.m.—101.5°



Alanis Morissette

“Precious Illusions”

*Under Rug Swept*

02/2002

Maverick, Warner Bros.

# To Alanis Morissette, After Reading About Her Postpartum Depression in My Therapist’s Waiting Room

Julia C. Alter

*You’ll rescue me, right?*

I’ve replaced water  
with iced coffee. I only sweat  
when I sleep. Nothing happens  
in my dreams. I am dead  
weight in that specific sea,  
that shifty gray gnawing. Your hair  
is platinum now, Alanis, but I see  
your roots, the dark truth  
spreading over your story. I know  
how we become unrecognizable.  
I wore a black maxi dress  
with grotesque flowers all summer  
so I wouldn’t come looking for myself.

They put you on a beach in that blue  
and white muumuu, strategically  
positioned your kids in front  
of your belly, juxtaposed it  
with a picture of you ten years ago,  
maybe twenty, in a white tanktop, wild hair  
waving onstage. They want your confession  
but not your flesh. They would rather have you  
in a muumuu, only your forearms  
exposed. Hands and wrists taut from lifting  
the baby. They can’t see the carpal tunnel  
from nursing, the nerve damage  
from gripping the toilet seat  
in the heaviest waves of labor.

*You’ll complete me, right?*

Alanis, I know the panic  
of sensing the baby stirring



out of his nap, what it is to click him  
back into his car seat for the third time  
in one afternoon, to ride around  
the block again so he will just keep  
sleeping. I know the mornings  
of pretending I can't hear him  
crying so I can just keep scrolling  
through my phone. I know the velvet  
curtain of sleep, the one that drops  
and there's a darker curtain behind it.

Our thoughts swell  
with the commonest horrors:  
the tub            candles            the stairs  
inevitable and relentless as the night  
we collapse into. I know that in carrying  
our babies we carry the proximity  
to death. And there is no other way  
to say this. A mother is forever  
an alert and guarded animal,  
prowling a forest floor,  
one footstep away from a trip  
wire into annihilation.

*I'll be happy, right?*

They want even you to be palatable, you  
who showed us how to thrash, to throw  
our voices like litter out car windows,  
yelling *the cross-eyed bear that you gave to me*  
when the lyric you wrote was *the cross I bear*.  
Before I knew what it was to leave  
anything behind, to wind up with  
a misshapen, unwieldy inheritance. Now I sit  
in this body of the mother: part straitjacket,  
part hot air balloon. I climb into the off-white  
wall until it becomes a gaping maw of milk.

Alanis, why do they expect us to return  
so quickly? Didn't we almost vanish  
somewhere back there, sucked  
into the specific storms  
of our anatomy hammering us into the earth?  
A *surge*, we called it, turned inside out,  
shattered            shucked            shattered.  
They want us to find our old bodies again,  
like lost keys, like there are only so many

places they could possibly be.

*I'll be worthy, right?*

We go from  
raging  
another body  
into air

to biting            their nails  
slapping            their backs

Do you feel like you can never be  
the angry girl now that you are this  
kind of woman?

Did you also practice  
smiling in the mirror  
surreptitiously  
before inviting them in  
to *see the baby*?

When I meet the eyes  
of other mothers  
in the same mud  
I want to say  
*I love you. I'm sorry*  
There's a prayer from a balmy place  
that goes like that. I reach and reach  
for a familiar breeze  
to part the sea            to coax me  
out of my own front door  
sunshine            tomato vines  
my utter tundra of summer

another day I do not want  
to hold him  
only myself  
shame hangs around  
my neck  
like a rosary    voice shaky  
this bitter wilderness  
I forget the rest,  
the part about forgiveness.

# I am a Consequence of Bad Decisions

Jackie Haze

I have a friend who once told me I would make a fabulous dominatrix. I imagined what that would look like. Standing there in a hotel room in attire I would never otherwise wear, getting ready to degrade or hit someone. Sure, it is a form of therapeutic release for them. Sure, I could fake it until I make it. I had always wanted to act.

"Five foot ten and white," she said, "You'd make a killing."

I couldn't even defend myself growing up.

It was nearly daily that I would come back crying after another kid called me another name, slammed a desk into my stomach, threw rocks at me, punched me in the chest with a chain-wrapped fist, tripped me and taunted me with my puppy they briefly took from my hands—you get the idea.

My mother, fed up, told me to clock them. "Why don't you stick up for yourself?"

"I can't hurt their feelings," I'd say.

She should've known; even the bus driver had informed her he saved fire drills for days I was not on the bus because of how tender he saw I was.

But my mother seemed perplexed. After all, she had no problem barreling her fist into another human's face. It was far too often her default. Similarly, my biological father, who was likely sitting in a prison somewhere at the time, like any given time, had a penchant for wailing on someone and feeling okay about himself.

In fact, according to my mother, it is possible he killed someone.

I don't even know why I asked her. It's similar to how I found out there was no such thing as Santa Claus. I was seven at that time. The hunch was there, so I inquired. My mother confirmed my suspicion. I started crying. She tried to take it back. I responded through sniffles and that fuh-fuh effect a hard-crying session creates, "No, it's okay." But now, on the phone with her, I was thirty-four, and she didn't take this harrowing information on my potentially murderous sperm donor back. And it wasn't okay.

I had been pacing through my empty New Orleans apartment while my partner sat on the only piece of furniture we had, a bed, in the tiny back room of our shotgun-style apartment, browsing through her phone and peeking up at me during moments I popped in as she heard bits and pieces of the speakerphone conversation with my mother echoing between the hardwood floors and barren off-white walls. To my pleasant surprise, it was on a day my mother was not slurring from heavy doses of prescription medications, and I could make out all of what she was saying in her slightly raspy voice. For some reason, I decided to ask her if it's possible my biological father, Danny, ever took someone's life.

She said yes.



Pearl Jam

"Daughter"

Vs.

10/1993

Epic

Then she said she is pretty sure, but the only person who took the conclusive answer with her to her grave is the mother of one of the children he put out there. My mother didn't think he would trust her with such information. She told me it's highly likely. That, in fact, due to strange things uttered, which she did not go into, it is most likely.

I shuddered. I listened to her tell me with a kind of apathy, it seemed, along with her pleasure in telling such stories. I thought of all the years I've spent looking at the smallest hair on my body and being both disgusted and saddened by how it came to be, where it is from. What it is comprised of. I am a consequence of bad decisions.

She went on to remind me of the grisly triple homicide of Pavilion Township, Michigan, as I paced through the shotgun-style duplex, tracing my finger across the rough texture of the walls. "He was asked to do that, but he just couldn't," she said. I'm not sure how true this is. Five young people were convicted. "There was potentially a lot of money involved." It was rumored that they kept large sums of money in drawers rather than in banks. They thought it was a robbery, but not much was taken but a gun. Money was left in the drawers and the elderly victims' jewelry remained untouched. "The police never released this information to the public, but they were cut up and put into bags. He knew he could keep this information for a bargain if he ended up in prison again." The autopsy, however, revealed that they were beaten with a baseball bat and stabbed. They were found in their basement.

After I hung up, my partner, who had heard part of the conversation on speaker, looked up at me from under her perfect mess of black curls. Her face sunk. I'm assuming she saw how crushed I was. "I can't stand it. I can't stand where I come from," I said.

"You're not Danny, Jackie. You are not your parents. Just because he did shitty things doesn't make you that kind of person. You don't even eat meat because you see the animals' faces." I fixed my eyes on the only other object in that room beside the bed she was sitting on—the ukulele my partner had given me for my birthday. I had been determined to learn the song "Daughter" by Pearl Jam:

*Don't call me daughter, not fit to  
The picture kept will remind me...*

I told her it still lingers; it still has its effects.

I knew he helped sink a body. In a lake that I swam across. I picture the hollowed eyes of a skull who was once somebody's baby staring up from their final resting place that Danny helped choose. Staring up, from the seaweed and dirt so far below, at Danny's carelessly cast-off progeny gliding above, breathing in the world above the surface.

It's fucked up.

It was a rumor that was verified. About eight years before this conversation with my mother, I was sitting at a picnic table on the shore of that small lake one day with a friend when Danny, a stranger I had not seen in ages and who I always tried to avoid if the mere possibility of his presence arose, walked up, and invited himself to say "hi." Shaken, I said, "What are you doing here?" He told me, "Taking a bath. I got a bar of soap and was cleaning myself up." My stomach turned. "Danny," I said, "Is it true you sunk a body in this lake?" He stumbled. "Uh...maybe."

Aside from a time I had seen him briefly before that, I had not seen him perhaps since I was a child. I had not too long before revealed my attraction to women. Never once did he

ask about who I am as a person. Never once did he ask what my life was like. Instead, he said, "I heard my genes is strong. Both my boy *and* my girl luuuuuh da pussy."

And my mother must have thought this was a fine person to have children with. I try to make sense of it. I look at their faces from their younger times and I try. The photos are tinged with that orange cast that photos from the seventies carried, and they looked young. Both of his blue eyes are intact, his jaw is chiseled, he is fit, and he smiles brightly. He looks like the superman actors of the time. My mom's features are soft, her eyes dark and deep, her hair long and ironed straight, and she has the slight smile of Mona Lisa.

I try to remind myself that they loved each other in their own versions of what love is. They met because, after spotting each other, he knew her route on Burdick Street and pretended to hitchhike. She picked him up. She loved his waist-long hair. He used to hop trains across the city to see her. The news once claimed that all the flowers in Crane Park were missing and she went out to find them in her car. Love is blind. And somewhere in that, they believed children should come of it.

I have always fantasized about discovering my mother had an affair, only to find that my "real" father is, in all actuality, a decent, upstanding, loving man. Who could potentially love me, too, since I never had that. Maybe we'd talk hours over a coffee or beer, catching up on lost time. Maybe we'd take a trip. I'd finally discover where I got my longer fingers and nose, and why I'm taller than everyone I come from. He might tell me he was terribly scattered between numerous creative talents and could never settle on one but, helping to settle my worries, he finally made it. He finally got it together. He landed. He might tell me he feels it all, every energy and every emotion in any given place, but has worked it out. He'd actually ask about me. I'd ask about him. Maybe I'd find an alien sense of home. But I unfortunately have Danny's cheek bones and gummy smile.

I joke often that my energy source was floating through this world laughing and questioning why literally everything is done the way it's done in this world when Danny got out of prison for a bit and banged Sue and I got pulled in physically against my will. I can see my spirit feeling the tug, protesting with a foreboding "No." Each no became a crescendo until the final, long descending "noooooooooo..." as I got sucked into this world in a similar fashion of a dissipating tornado, the water swirl above a bath drain, smoke on rewind, or a genie being vacuumed back into its lamp.

I say I didn't want to come here. This can be loosely confirmed by my nearly month late arrival after minimal movement, cracking my mother's pelvic bone and inhaling meconium on the way out, volunteering myself to blue and gray skin and an extended stay in the hospital. My mother did walk in one day to find Danny had taken me out of the incubator. Cradling me, he looked up at her with tears streaming down his face. "She was so cold," he said.

I still can't make sense of it.

I had spent many days in the large back yard that my younger brother's dad homed us with as a child—the days when my hair either had to be like Mr. Rogers or Patty Duke, when I was riding my pink bike insisting I was a boy, when I wanted to marry Jesse from Full House but was dressing up like Eric Martin from Mr. Big serenading visitors—daydreaming that Samantha on Bewitched was my mother. I didn't know why, but I felt guilty about it.

Perhaps it was during a daydream session that I fell asleep at five in my sandbox under the swing set that sat near diamond shaped trees my brothers and I would use to play

baseball, when I was woken by my biological father, who I did not know very well due to his long stints in prison. I darted into the 175-year-old house that was assumed haunted by the neighbors, up the stairs, and into my little room, dove into my closet and shut the door, submerging myself in the pile of clothes and toys to hide from him. I was devastated when he unburied me.

It was also around that time when I was standing in the room of a prison looking up at him, who seeded my mother with the consequence of me, sitting behind the glass with a telephone up to his ear. My mother said into her receiver, "Oh, Danny, look!" Turning to me, she said, "Jackie, take your shoes off." I didn't want to. "Take your shoes off and let us see your feet," she insisted. Not wanting to, I slowly did. "She's got your sister's feet!" she told him. *No, I have my feet*, I thought.

In fourth grade, the teacher told the class it would be mandatory to sign our last names. Having vehemently avoided it, I refused. She told me I have to. I started crying. She brought me in the hallway to talk with me about it. To this day I have trouble signing it and being addressed by his name. His name. Not mine.

He has spent probably most of his life in prison. "Well, his mother was mean," my mother says, "The kind of woman who could put her son in a trash can like a piece of garbage or chase him with an axe." I try to remember we all deal with things differently. I teeter between not knowing what it's like to be them and the fact that we make choices. My mother beat the shit out of me and emotionally tore me down. She said she hates me. She's told me I am dead to her. I am not sinking bodies. I've put bugs outside.

I question myself all the time as to why I offer anyone but them a generous helping of understanding, compassion, empathy, and forgiveness.

His robberies have been in the newspaper with no suspect, Danny going undiscovered. He didn't spend his years in prison for said robberies or for sinking a body or for, potentially, taking a life. It was always for domestic abuse or drugs. Most recently, a meth lab, from what I heard.

At the time that Danny told me that his genes run strong, he was going to fix the brakes on my car as a result of an unknown invitation from my mother. As he looked at my car, I studied the swagger in his walk, the lines down his cheeks, the way they crease around the slightly upturned corners as if he is always on the brink of another lewd comment, the missing eye from his many fights. I considered his past. Dubiously, I asked, "Are you sure you can fix it?"

He looked at me, someone who had been considering joining the sex industry to try and leave my less than fortunate circumstances, and he replied, "I can fix anything but my own fucked up life."

*The shades go down*

*The shades go go*

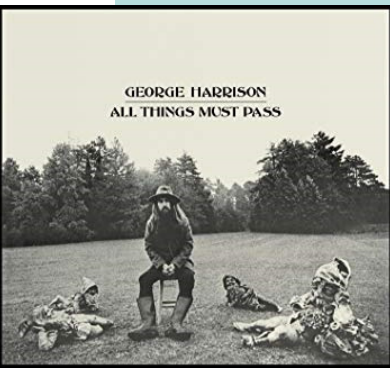
*Go*

# God Is Noise

Kelsi Long

“13. Alcoholism is a family disease...we became para-alcoholics and took on the characteristics of that disease even though we did not pick up the drink.”

—The Laundry List: 14 Traits of an Adult Child of an Alcoholic



George Harrison

“Awaiting on You All”

*All Things Must Pass*

11/1970

Apple

you are fifteen and your parents are divorcing. not on paper, because of the mortgage, but emotionally. your dad drinks more than ever. you become his emotional replacement for your mother. you spend weekends in his house. in the middle of the night, you send him to bed. by then, he has left his brain, his body crumpled in the la-z-boy: he cannot speak english right now, can only babble drowsily, baby-like, at his fifteen-year-old daughter. he howls manic laughter in his basement bedroom. you are on the second floor of a suburban home, in a room that your mother painted pink and you painted purple. afraid of your father's laughter. the cheap mp3 player and cheap headphones sit by the bed all weekend.

george harrison is on frequent rotation. *all things must pass*. 1970. phil spector built his walls of sound just for you. you play “awaiting on you all” on repeat. it is the loudest track. it is the cheeriest. the one you can fall into, trancelike. it drowns out all sounds. you barely hear anything outside of the foam covering your ears. the ears you have scratched at constantly since the eighth grade, peeling back scabs made by your own nervous, clawing fingers. it is a gross and unconscious habit and you wish you knew how to fix it. you are flirting with buddhism. hinduism. you have no guides. your mother's new age church drowns your fear and self-hatred with positive vibes only. if you focus on the bad parts, then that's what you're inviting in. which is to say, why are you mad about it? which is to say, if you just think your dad out of a life-threatening illness, he won't have it anymore. somebody's not pulling their karmic weight around here.

you do listen to the rest of the album. “art of dying” is better suited to the times your parents devolve into crying, fighting people. times when it really does seem more peaceful on the other side of a silvery veil. “let it down” sounds like nights you wanted to masturbate but didn't feel safe masturbating. felt too estranged from your body's capacity for joy to entertain the possibility. anything becomes erotic in times of quiet desperation: you straddle a throw pillow. you prod gracelessly at your g-spot with the rounded end of a marker you find at the bottom of your backpack. imagining a red, corrective circle of ink tightening around you: *see me after class*.

you never listen to the title track. too tearful. tears don't make room for the love and the light.

you devour linda goodman in one summer. you read thich nhat hanh like your life depends on him. vaguely sutra-like books by white western yogis become your life preservers on a sea of vodka. if you can just transcend nicely enough, none of this will affect you anymore. you read ram dass as if you understand. you read about the ouroboros as if you have never watched a living thing devour itself. you cling to “mindfulness.” to detachment. berate yourself when you don't eat the five almonds you have packed as a school lunch with absolute reverence for the present. you take a world religions class, buy a copy of the aquarian gospel, never read it. you wonder if you should be learning to read the akashic record instead of taking AP exams. if you can just get out of this body, this stupid ugly girl-body, you can leave its everything-about-it behind. it is

not as if this is embodied intergenerational trauma, asking to be released in the here and now. you lay on the dying grass outside the art school, prairie skirt pooling between your legs, shitty speakers stuck over your bleeding ears.

you don't know how to ask for help so once again you go running off to a vision of god that is not listening. that will never listen. you cannot meditate because you quiver with so much anxious energy. you don't call it anxious energy because a friend of yours has clinically diagnosed anxiety, and things are only real when doctors agree that they are. you chant *my sweet lord* under your breath because it is the only prayer you know. you still are not doing the law of attraction right, even though all you dream of is a confident heart. you dream about a boy who will come save you from all of this. his name would be something solid, like *mason*, and he would drive a yellow beetle, and his father would have sworn off alcohol years ago. he would understand everything. you think about him to the exclusion of everything else: you try to draw him out of every city crowd, every high school hallway. you try and try and try and you *hold the way open* and he never comes, so you keep listening to the same song on repeat and you keep muttering prayers you have no business muttering because you don't think you have anything else to say.

you only ring god's doorbell once. you don't know what it is about the chanting but it seems to draw more light into the room. the song is loud and that's all you want. if it works some spell to wrap a divine light around your shoulders like the paisley pashminas the white ladies at the new-age church of your childhood like to wear, so much the better. that's just gravy. you go through a kirtan phase, but only in your head, only in your room on summer afternoons when the house is empty. you attend one kirtan service at the new-age church that wants you to focus only on the love and light. you cannot let go and let god. you cannot raise your voice that loud. you don't know the words. your body isn't free like that. you sit at the back until it is over and later you tell everybody you enjoyed yourself, you like meditating, you believe in the science of mind, *and so it is, and so it is.*

your dad would find all of this funny: god is noise. he has always believed this.

you are fifteen and check out every book the library has on psychedelic drugs. you don't want to take any. you just want to see if it's true: if you can leave your body, just like that. this is the hallmark of addiction: it is better to be outside of the brain than inside of it. the alcohol, the weed, the whatever it is, takes the addict out of their brain, all of its anxious chattering, all of its cyclical, self-inflicted violences. your brain likes cyclical things, too. it churns counterclockwise. you give it chants from a religion you do not follow. you don't know what any of it means but the bass fills both of the channels, the tambourine-clatters drown out the bad thoughts, the minor key and the melody makes you feel as if you are spinning, sucked between dimensions, leaving your body behind on an itchy bus seat.

none of your friends know your father is an alcoholic. you haven't yet stopped believing in secrets. you do not know if other people's dads try to leave their brains, their bodies, their burdens. you used to believe everybody's dad did that. everybody's dad kept their bachelor-pad fridge next to the garage door. everybody's dad made a liquor store run every thursday night, bought two cases of beer a week. everybody's dad hugged them with one arm, koozie-swaddled keystone light in the other hand, aloft above your head. used to, until your friend's dad came home from work one afternoon, bypassed the fridge altogether, hugged his wife before setting the table for dinner.

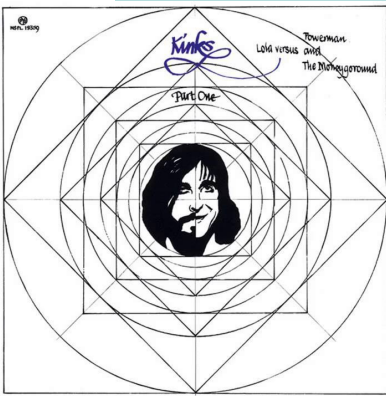
you have learned that life is better in an altered state. the music, most of the time, is enough. you spend your teenage years in complicated daydreams, maladapting, emerging for mealtimes and small exchanges with the unreal man in your father's skin.



you will put distance between this album and yourself. it's got your father's fingerprints all over it. someday, all you will hear is your own youngness withering on the top shelf of your childhood bedroom, between the stuffed animals gathering cobwebs from lack of play, in the empty spaces where the stuff now at mom's house used to be. the unreal man gifts you a first pressing of *all things must pass* for christmas, maybe a birthday. four black discs in a paperboard box. the girl who needed it doesn't exist anymore. you let her melt into the grass beneath the tree in the high-school lawn, the anemic bodhi-tree-that-wasn't. you unplugged her stereo, ripped her prairie skirts into dusting rags, bought her a bright pink dildo. you buried her in the backyard of your childhood home, just before your dad ripped out the weeds and tried planting a garden, before he let the southern exposure eat the wooden deck alive, before the wind huffed and puffed and blew all our fences down.

# Stranger Tomorrow

Rosa Boshier



The Kinks

"This Time Tomorrow"

*Lola Versus Powerman and the Moneygoround, Part One*

11/1970

Pye • Reprise

The Kinks' "This Time Tomorrow" drains out of the tin and plastic of my computer speakers, welling up from the depth of Spotify's terrifyingly accurate understanding of my musical tastes, and reminds me that I was once, first and foremost, a fan. I stood—or rather, leaned—front and center for a group of boys that, to my teenage self, epitomized love and art and intrigue. Those boys I knew came wandering out of sunsets, their feathered hair rippling in the hot Santa Ana wind. They were always on the verge of adventure, flicking their lighters, drumming their fingers on their knees or plucking at their guitars, dreaming of places we'd read about in books, from *On the Road* to *This Side of Paradise* to *The Martian Chronicles*. For me, these boys were the books. They were the films. Sexuality and creativity all rolled into one. An instinctive artistry that I admired, yet with cracked souls wide enough for me to nurse the gaps.

I was both mother and muse to these boys who were so anxious to be men. To move off to New York or to San Francisco. Reeds and Claptons and Pages waiting in the rough. 60s spirits trapped in a mountain town that felt like an island, worlds bigger than their bodies swirling around in their heads. They vowed to be anywhere but here. And I saw them there too, walking into the sunset from whence they came, sitars slung across their backs. In my wildest dreams I never thought they'd be the ones who stayed. The ones who never made it out—left behind to smoke weed in their mothers' basements. Their talent, their potential, floating away with their cigarette smoke. These were the boys that could jam for hours in the paradise of an open garage. And we, the fans, sat around in the abandoned lot opposite, laying in the wild grass, feeling like maybe this could be our lives. That life could only have more of this to offer us.

The summer of 2003 we watched live concerts on repeat. We popped in exclusive cut after exclusive cut, watching all of the access material the DVDs had to offer. Hendrix made crotch-sweaty O's around the body of his guitar, winking at girls in flower crowns, their young, supple breasts swinging just below eye level. Robert Plant stripped off his shirt and cat-walked across stage, shaking free his lion's mane. Nestled between my ascot-adorned boyfriend and my excessively bejeweled best friend, we daydreamed aloud of simpler times with good music and strong morals and a band of young artists just like us. But we avoided Woodstock. Though we were born 30 years later, we understood that Woodstock marked the death of The Sixties. After Woodstock, the rose-tinted glasses were lifted from the temples of an entire generation. "Woodstock was a spark of beauty," Joni Mitchell once said, one that was stamped out by the harsh realities of war and economic collapse and the contradictions and dangers of free love. Late at night, when the heat drained from the day, we'd pile into our friend's backyard and talk and play music and write until the early hours of the morning. On the way home I'd lay my head on a friend's shaggy-haired shoulder and imagine our *Almost Famous* future.

Perhaps another appeal of The Sixties was my father's nostalgia. A young painter in Swinging London's hay day, it was a time in his life in which he could stumble into a bar and end up on John Lennon's living room floor at 4 in the morning listening to Ravi Shankar. Or on a plane to Berlin with Bowie. In my father's Sixties, lifelong friendships were solidified within the course of an evening. Everyone from the daughters of duchesses to janitors' sons like my father were powered by ideas that could bend the course of history. In my father's anecdotes, it was an endless stream of attachments, creative collaborations, and ardent trysts. And I wanted it to be that for me.

*This time tomorrow, where will we be?  
On a spaceship somewhere,  
sailing across an empty sea*

In my mind no other song encompasses two generations of nostalgia more than The Kinks' "This Time Tomorrow"—at once possibility, naïveté, and futurity, ending in a startling cynicism. The lingering bite of WWII and the hint that there is more to the song's message than the Utopia of escape. *This time tomorrow, where will we be?* A line as hopeful as it is fearful. But as teenagers we only registered the positive. We didn't know where we'd be, but we were chomping at the bit to find out. And we were intent on discovery as a group—a tribal togetherness that felt necessary in the conservative enclave we grew up in.

Yet, the price of my stranger tomorrow was to suppress much of my strange. Though a self-proclaimed writer since I was eight, I was never seen as an artist in this circle. In order to keep in good standing with these guys I was required to be a porcelain doll—silent and smooth. Pleasant and affectless. Porcelain dolls did not write sci-fi stories or geek out over Latin American film. They didn't have opinions about current events. Much like our idolized onscreen counterparts, the "Band-Aids," porcelain dolls were there merely to accept rendition after rendition of "Wild Thing" dedicated to them by some wild-eyed pimply musician. To inspire but not partake in creative production.

The boys never asked me about the books I read. They only asked me to hold their hands as the mushrooms kicked in, to call their mothers when the drugs were too much for them to take. For me to be their mothers—cradling their heads, stroking their foreheads, and telling them stories as they stumbled through an acid-induced mental journey. The Velvet Underground or The Beatles or The Doors—all talismans of cultural production built on the backs or under the influence of women and people of color. Morrison had Pamela. Reed had Nico. John had Yoko. In keeping with this warped lineage, I kept my writing practice extracurricular to my social one.

Enter Jenny Lewis. In the wooden box of The Troubadour she seemed larger than life, the rest of Rilo Kiley decorative behind her. It was less the music and more Lewis that moved me. There was something so alluring about being the girl commanding the band instead of gazing up at it. I admired her for holding her own, for *being* the show. She had, has, a raw charisma—those heartbreaker bangs and cascading red hair and a searing sincerity. She let her voice crack. She made cheesy jokes on stage. She allowed herself to be vulnerable and friendly. And she allowed me to believe, that just maybe I too could dive into the depths of making without waiting for approval. I could fumble through my creative urges in the now, however imperfectly they might manifest. I no longer yearned for the past. I hungered for the present.

Slowly, I realized that every one of these boys had tried to take something from me, be it my body or my confidence or my intellectual property. My love for them whittled away as my own sense of self grew. I crept away from the boys and their stages, and the further I went the harder it became for them to accept me as my own creative force, with my own cultural heritage. My references to Magical Realism were either met with silence or jokes about my Colombian family and connections to cocaine. If they overheard me speaking Spanish I was implored to *Speak English*. For me to be a woman and creative and Latina seemed too particular for comprehension. Any attempt to stray from my former porcelain existence was met with ridicule. By the end of my junior year I made my final conversion from hippy to hipster, dropping The Yardbirds and The Stones for Le Tigre, Coco Rosie, and, of course, my beloved Rilo Kiley. Our friend group disbanded due to

drugs or love triangles or both. The once idealistic crew of creative misfits snapped back into bored kids in a suburban town. Our gatherings lost their magic.

But don't get me wrong, when I hear The Kinks I lean in. I think of boys in royal blue corduroy blazers, cigarettes hanging out of their lips, fingers sliding across their guitar frets, young cheeks covered in virgin fuzz. I think of endless summer nights, the smell of tall, dry grass, the sun liquefying above us as we talk about our future selves through the nightfall. But also, I think of myself at that age, in an ultramarine jacket and wild hair, a notebook glued to my hand. I think of everything I wanted to accomplish back then, and that, maybe, it's still within reach. I am reminded of the infinite availability of tomorrow, shiny and new, winking with possibility.

LEMON BOY  
LEMON BOY

cavetown

Cavetown

"I'll Make Cereal"

Lemon Boy

01/2018

Self-produced

# song log entry 19 from playlist-in-verse: "space girl accidentally spills soda into the milky way and makes a cream soda float"

Dynas Johnson

15. cavetown- "i'll make cereal"

the fruit loops sit hidden in my cabinet

they're not my favorite but momma brought them along with a few containers

of corn baked chicken and greens along with a bottle of milk all wrapped inside a bag

momma stopped on the way home and wasted train fare just so she could see my face and hand

the bag over the turnstop

i didn't want to tell momma that i don't have anything in the refrigerator

but my roommate came back from home earlier than i thought and i was

embarrassed

if i told daddy he'd pass out while driving in the middle

of his route

if he passes out again i'll lose my faith like i almost did

last time but i promised didn't i

i promised that i would look towards our stars and

make us enough constellations to go anywhere see anything eat whatever the kiddos want to eat

it's a little scarce now but even Christ went without food before so i'll eat my cereal and smile

i won't let it get soggy though that's for fruity pebbles

# Rain

Joaquin Fernandez

There were a thousand mornings just like this. Nudged awake, my tiny feet on the floor, blinking, hazy, driven to dress in the dark by some phantom force, then shuffling towards my father's beat up car in the forgiving chill of the Florida night air.

"Aqui, Papi!"

I remember he used a key to unlock his passenger side door. I remember my father's toothy grin, bright with apology under the weight of his ever-present mustache. I remember my sister was always there first, the sleep long gone from her eyes. I yawned past her, waiting for the backseat while my father held the passenger door open for me. Because boys sat in the front. Boys sat in the front and girls had to strain their eyes, squinting fiercely into books between fleeting streetlights while they jostled and bumped in the back. Ours wasn't the kind of father to check seatbelts.

I slept until Madonna woke me.

I always did this. I dozed in the front seat while my sister and father talked about things I would never remember. Mysteries from that occult encyclopedia he gave us for Christmas? Why that Robert Silverberg book she carried with her wasn't really literature? Why the music she liked wasn't really music? In 1992, they played that Madonna song "Rain" almost hourly, the way they used to when people still listened to the radio. When the DJ talked about it, you could hear them blush and smirk whenever they mentioned the album. The title felt foreign to my young mind: *Erotica*. The word itself felt like it could only be pronounced as a whisper, like it was only spelled properly in italics. When my father heard it, as we pushed into the night, he laughed. He knew my sister loved that song and he would always turn it up, picking apart the lyrics as she tried to sing along. In a different life, he had been a college professor and there he was, loud and happy defending his thesis against the critical mind of his nine-year old daughter. And laughing. There was something mean about that laugh, something that would never be joy in that pack-a-day growl he woke me up with.

Before dawn, the beach doesn't look like anything. The parking lot is empty when we get there, and in that hour between night and day it felt like we owned all the Florida nothingness, as far as our eyes could see. Our father always wore business trousers and polo shirts, even here on the sand, rigidly formal, eighteen months into this current bout of unemployment. My sister and I slipped socks into shoes and shoes into sand, wincing our way through shell and gravel, ankle deep in the chilly, ebbing tide. We would stand there, quietly waiting for an absent sun until the cold surf defeated one of us. It was a contest, sure, but one I always lost. Numb and shivering, I turned to the wall of endless sand and night, looking for the firefly of my father's cigarette.

"Aqui, Papi!"

He waved his free hand, a broad anxious flail that I never realized was nervousness. When I sat, I stifled a cough. When I sat, I could hear my mother's voice yelling at him about my asthma. When I sat, I could hear the rise in his voice when he told her it was nothing. And it was. I was his son and I was strong and a little smoke wasn't going to hurt me. Still, after a few stifled coughs, he flicked his smoke into the sand and I allowed myself a smile when he disappeared into the dark. He asked me about books and school and politics, just



Madonna

"Rain"

*Erotica*

10/1992

Maverick · Sire

like he always did, and I didn't have a lot to say, just like I always didn't. It wasn't disappointment in his voice, exactly, more like impatience. Those mornings with him, waiting for the sun to come up, I could feel him grow tired of waiting for me to become interesting enough to really talk to. When he talked to me, I missed my sister. How could he not see that she was the smart one?

*"Papi?"*

We could hear her. My sister's thin child's voice, shouting, brave and all but vanished against the wind and surf. She wandered, yelling for us in the wrong direction, lost without the light of my father's bad habits.

The rain in South Florida was always a welcome disaster. The sun peeked out just enough to let us know we weren't going to see it. An electric breeze, prickly with static, swept the humidity off me with a sudden, welcome rush. I could see my sister, a tiny searching silhouette, far away, but wandering towards us. We could see bright spots and pink smudges under a churning veil of thunderclouds and we smiled. As my sister got closer the sky behind her grew terrible with beauty. The clouds began to splinter with neon cracks. Distant explosions rumbled in the sky behind her as she quickened her pace, big steps for little legs on shifting sands. A single perfect lightning bolt carved the world in half silently behind her. Followed by another. She was close enough to see the shock on my face when the thunder finally struck, deafening and inevitable.

*"Aqui, Papi!"*

My father was already on his feet when the rain started. He was already pulling me up by the time I felt it, cool and urgent on my skin. I can still see the look on my sister's face when he put her book over my head, shielding me as he turned to run. Before I turned to join him, pulled by the vice of his hand on mine, propelled by the scramble of his panic, I saw her. There was no surprise when her father turned to leave her. There was nothing but determination. There was nothing but the scowl of her effort as she ran, small and beautiful as the thunder chased her, impervious to the rain.

# On “The Battle of Evermore” by Led Zeppelin

Douglas Menagh

“The whole idea of music, from the beginning of time, was for people to be happy.”  
—Robert Plant

The last time I was with my dad—before he was hospitalized and passed—was at his place in Peter Cooper Village in the spring of 2013. I stood there, waiting for him outside in a quad of buildings on a sunny afternoon. A cool breeze blew through the trees as adults accompanied children on paths. My father was always good around kids, especially to me and my sister Nancy when we were little. It made me happy to know that he was somewhere peaceful, where he could remember happy times with his own family. That distracted me from my own nervousness at reuniting with him after a period of estrangement.

It wasn't hard to tell from my father's walk that it was him passing through the entrance archway into his community. He always had a familiar gait, and I was happy to see it again. In our recent chats, he sounded like the good man that was my father, not the person he had been all those years.

He walked around with an oxygen tank, which I had heard about from my mom and sister, who were both on speaking terms with him by then. He didn't look all bad though. His hair still looked wavy and silvery. Mostly, I was glad to see him and break bread. I was ready to let lambs rest with lions.

We were both smiling as we hugged it out. His strength had not diminished, and his embrace was still as powerful as ever. I felt secure, like everything was going to be okay.

We made small talk and exchanged other pleasantries as we entered my father's apartment building to drop off his bag. He had just arrived from a doctor's appointment, a ritual I had become accustomed to since I was a kid. As a child, I remember my father taking a cocktail of drugs day after day without knowing why.

I brought *Led Zeppelin IV* with me to his place, because in my teenage and college years we had bonded over music and gone to shows together. My first rock n' roll concert was seeing Bob Dylan and Willie Nelson with him, and we went to many shows together after that. I also remember Dad telling me about a guy he knew in college who listened to Led Zeppelin on big headphones.

I started getting into Led Zeppelin in the summer of 2012, and I think what did it for me was their passion. Whenever Zeppelin played, on record or live, whether delivering loud and hard blues or elements of world music, they rocked hard with such bliss and ease. I felt it and was inspired to give into my creative and romantic passions. I grew my hair and beard out, started wearing colorful and floral cloths, listened to Zeppelin, talked about Zeppelin, and let their music be my master. My passion for them translated in their other influencers as well, including Norse Mythology, the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, poems of William Blake, and esoteric texts of Alistair Crowley. I also started going out more in New York City and connected with cool people in my personal life. All the while, I spread my love for Robert Plant, Jimmy Page, John Paul Jones, and John Bonham.

Led Zeppelin

“The Battle of Evermore”

Untitled / Runes / ZoSo / IV

11/1971

Atlantic



Dad showed me around his well-lit place overlooking the village. Early on in his tour, he directed me to a fabric tapestry on his wall. I forget the quote, but I know that it was something he picked up in AA. My father was not really a drinker, though he claimed to be an alcoholic in his decision-making process. He had joined AA after his marriage to his second wife (following my mom) collapsed, and by the time I saw him, he had sobered up, gotten a sponsor, and attended meetings.

They say to accept the apologies you never receive, but I didn't expect to receive the one I did get from my dad in the way that I did. He said, "I tell people I go to AA meetings because I'm a recovering asshole."

After everything he had put me and my family through, I should have wept, but instead of lashing out at him over his attempt to make a joke about all those years of pain, I laughed. It breaks my heart now, because his passing did affect me to the point of aridity in my creative, dating, and professional life, but back then, it felt good to remember laughter and leave the past behind.

It was around then that I took out *Led Zeppelin IV* and asked Dad if he wanted to "Let the Led Out." He said yes, and we went to his living room near his speakers.

I told him, "I remember your story about that guy you went to college with who listened to Led Zeppelin on big headphones."

Dad said, "I think he was on acid."

We laughed about that. It still cracks me up to think about that.

To the sound of Robert Plant belting and Jimmy Page laying down riff after riff of blow your mind jams, all to the rhythm of John Paul Jones and John Bonham, he leaned into his knees in a hunched over position. My father had light hair, large cheekbones, and a Roman nose, and in that moment, he reminded me of Robert Plant. Yes, it was because I was Zeppossessed, but he did look like Robert Plant. In his youth, he'd had very long blond hair. He was a good-looking guy, and after he passed, I dreamed of what he would have looked like if he had been healthy, fit, and unimpeded by the confines of his virus.

"I think you and Robert Plant might be cousins," I said.

"You think we might be related?" he asked, not entirely incredulous, as if he was entertaining the notion that he might be distant blood relatives with Robert Plant.

"You two look alike," I said, "with your long blonde hair."

"I heard your hair was long too," Dad said and seemed to smile. "Really long."

I still valued his approval. Before I shaved my beard and trimmed my hair, ridding myself of Samson strength, I did have really long hair, and it was then that I swore to bring it back.

*Bring it back...*

"Battle of Evermore" is the third track on *Led Zeppelin IV*. Inspired by *Lord of the Rings*, Zeppelin bring about a fully realized adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien through sound. Written by Jimmy Page, the song was composed at Headley Grange, a house in the country where Led Zeppelin wrote and recorded their songs. "Battle of Evermore" has elements of the country, with mandolins, acoustic guitars, and vocal harmonies. The song is a

collaborative effort with Sandy Denny, and Denny herself lays down haunting, frightening, and ethereal singing alongside Robert Plant.

*Queen of Light took her bow  
And then she turned to go,  
The Prince of Peace embraced the gloom  
And walked the night alone.*

I had seen *The Lord of the Rings* films with my dad, and there we were, listening to a song inspired by it. I don't recall us doing a lot of reminiscing. That day was about leaving the past behind and creating a new memory, because we were running out of time. I knew it, and so did he. I didn't realize then, and I wouldn't, not for a long time, that after his passing, it would feel like I walked a long night alone. I walked a lonely road. Processing his passing, for a long time, despite possessing the will otherwise, I wasn't effective at dating, writing, and being young and following my dreams. I was alive, and yet it felt like I watched the world move on from me.

*The pain of war cannot exceed  
The woe of aftermath,  
The drums will shake the castle wall,  
The ring wraiths ride in black.*

We listened to "Battle of Evermore" and the rest of *Led Zeppelin IV*, and while I don't remember everything we talked about, I do know that we chatted comfortably throughout the time we shared. I probably told him everything I knew about Zeppelin, how Robert Plant had a dog named Strider, and Jimmy Page dabbled in ritualist magic. I did tell him I was into Norse Mythology, and how these stories and characters led to my growth and transformation. I told him about Fólkvangr, the realm controlled by the goddess Freyja, where those who don't go to Valhalla go upon death.

*At last the sun is shining,  
the clouds of blue roll by.  
With flames from the dragon of darkness,  
The sunlight blinds his eyes.*

After Letting the Led Out, Dad asked me if I wanted to get lunch. Never one to turn down free food, I accepted, and we went to an Italian restaurant in the neighborhood. I gathered he was a regular at the place, because he was friendly with the people there. I forget what I ordered for myself, but he got pasta with lobster. I asked him if he would like to split calamari, and he chuckled as he said, "absolutely."

I enjoyed how delicious the calamari was, its crispy, fried exterior, its juicy meat, and savory marinara sauce. I ate several pieces, giving myself a generous helping of the sauce. At some point, I found myself staring at my father dipping the calamari in the sauce, bloody tomato gravy spilling on his fingers as if from an open wound. That's when my heart raced and my breathing became out of sorts. I had gone to the dentist recently, and my mouth still felt raw. I excused myself and went to the bathroom.

In the cramped bathroom in that Italian restaurant, I was afraid and overcome with panic. I thought then, like I do from time to time, about the day my mom first told me and my sister about my father's health. I was about twenty. We were sitting in the kitchen in our Manhattan apartment after my father had moved out during their divorce. I had been

estranged from him, and all of us were telling secrets that we knew. That was when my mom told my sister and me about our father's health, and I was shocked.

Our dad was HIV+, and he wanted it to be a secret. He felt like there was some taboo in being HIV+ in the 80s and 90s. He didn't tell my mom about his health until the 90s, when the doctors said my dad didn't have long to live. My mom was fine. My sister and I were fine. My dad beat the odds. But all the same, learning this, and reliving the memory there with my dad in the next room, was devastating. I felt an existential panic and crisis which terrified me to the depths of my being. It would take time before I realized how glad I was to be here at all, like my mom, and sister, and for a while, my dad.

I returned to my father, but didn't eat any more calamari. I felt shaken from the panic I had experienced. "I'm not going to get anything, will I?"

"No," he said quietly.

"Do you know what I mean?" I asked.

He nodded, and said no more.

It was a bit hyperbolic and dramatic to jump to the conclusion I had caught something from my dad by sharing food. But it gave me the chance to broach the subject of Dad's diagnosis with him.

We ate our meal, and I got over myself as I walked him back to his apartment. One of his friends was there, and I was ready to be on my way. I felt very tired from how the moment in the restaurant had affected me. I left the CD, because I wanted him to have the gift of Led Zeppelin. As we said goodbye, he took off his oxygen tank and breathed on his own as he walked out of the door.

"I don't need this after seeing you," he said. "It's easier to breathe."

I was too touched than I cared to admit to say anything other than "that's good," or "happy to hear." I also felt intimidated, after everything that had happened, to trust him again, but I was trying. He insisted on getting together again, and I probably said something casual like, "Yeah, sure, we'll hang." We wouldn't see each other again at his place, but we spent time together again when he was hospitalized.

Robert Plant said, "The whole idea of music, from the beginning of time, was for people to be happy." Hearing the early Zeppelin records now that I'm no longer Zeppossessed, but especially after going through my own loss, it's hard to divorce the feeling of hope and optimism throughout their early music from the inevitable outcome of pain and loss. Led Zeppelin endured their own tragedies, with Robert Plant losing his child, and the eventual death of John Bonham. I do not blame myself for feeling pathological optimism as a result of their music, even if it overlooked the reality of loss so close to me, because Led Zeppelin showed me a better way to live life. It was not easy for me to put aside my differences with my father, but Led Zeppelin helped show me the way by giving me hope. I am forever changed because of Led Zeppelin, and I will never forget how much I cared about them and what they meant to me.

I went to visit my dad in the hospital not that long after we had listened to *Led Zeppelin IV*. I went with my mom, and it had to have been the first time that the three of us were all together since they'd separated. My parents seemed happy to see each other. Without divorce hanging over them, they found common ground to be friends.

I'm not sure how they got into the subject of Led Zeppelin, but my mom asked my dad, "Do you remember Led Zeppelin back in the day?"

He nodded his head and said, "Yes."

I couldn't believe it, but someone else was talking about Zeppelin besides me. Hearing my mom and dad bond over music, I remember feeling touched, witnessing music connect adults with history, and fill within them a desire to still see and know one another like it was the first time. That is how I remember Led Zeppelin, and my parents, best.

# Take What Comes

Sara Lippmann

The Kinks are playing *everyone's a dreamer* when the blanket behind us starts to slide. Friday night on the hill smells like weed; the lawn a patchwork of mandala and plaid. Chairs block the view, prime seats for ticket holders but we are 12, we have no tickets, we'd been dropped off by someone's older brother's girlfriend, we got wrecked in the parking lot on cans stamped in ribbon and now we've scaled the gate.

Now the blanket is closer, now we touch. They are boys with good shit; kind, they boast like we don't know quality, which we don't.

*It doesn't matter who you are*

We are stoners tonight. Cleared our first dime bag in the playground that afternoon, sifted through seeds atop an asphalt turtle, then wondered what was wrong with us, we were fine, more than fine, we felt nothing at all, how were we supposed to feel?

Somewhere, truth meets lies: I should've been home singing *hineh matov*—"how good it is to be sitting around together"—praying not trespassing, tearing apart a braided egg loaf instead of pulling on a pipe, welcoming the weekly Sabbath queen.

The boys pick their skin and spit. Stop eating yourself, dude. They are older, but not by much, they attend a private school that ends presumptively in Friends. Do we want to get friendly? *Kinky*? We don't even roll our eyes. Instead we take what comes. Grass, sweat, resin. I singe my bangs on a zealous flame so now I am burning, twisting to ash.

It is easy to conflate wings with stars: fireflies, Cassiopeia. A second ago I was literally on fire. I tip a sad Camel to the light.

In his empty family room my father screens slides of damaged lungs, coal lungs, charred as bone, porous as coral, spongy lungs, lungs splashed purple and pink, gobstopper lungs in pretty, pretty pastel but let this be a warning: if you go on like this *celluloid heroes never really die*. His projector clicks and hums.

We pair off, disappear. Boys throw loose arms of greased flannel, as if it were cold. We are hot. Our knees prick with the dog-itch of boiled wool. The song becomes another song. I grope the muzzy dark, and it's a scary/funny feeling, like making your way through a haunted house, where you don't know what's around the stairs, who might jump out at you. I could laugh or cry. My chest pushes against its cage. I am alone but not. There's breath on my neck. *Suck hard*. All of us are after something. When the smoke comes for me, I take it, hold the entire world in, as if I'll never let go.



The Kinks

"Celluloid Heroes"

*Everybody's in Show-Biz*

08/1972

RCA

# The Girls / Boys and The Band

Emily Harrison

There might've been a dead wasp on the window that day, its body squished to a flat sort of circle, guts in its face. There were always dead wasps in summer. Had it been alive, it would've been the single member of our audience. But as it stood, we were playing to an empty, sticky, dust swirled shed in a village 30 miles from Bristol in 2003.

I was seven, nearly eight, and sweating through my un-brushed thick, frizzy hair, rivulets of it settling damp at my lower back—my white round neck t-shirt clinging a little tighter, ovals of salty saturation between my shoulder blades. It was probably the wrong move to wear the khaki combat trousers too—sticky behind the knees. But I was in a band, and when you're in a band, you've got to make those sorts of sacrifices—you've got to look the part. That was my rule of thumb.

Behind me my cousin, the other member of the band, in a similar sort of outfit, would be pressing buttons on the stacked CD player that doubled as a tape deck and radio. We never played tapes, and we had no idea how to tune in the radio. We'd spin the silver tuner round and round, listening to the white noise fizzle in and out, catching only the smallest section of scant voices before losing them again. The antenna was broken on it. We didn't know that then.

I'd watch her intently, eyes on her fingers, trying to see what buttons she was pressing, if I could remember for next time. She was older than me by two years [she still is]. At the age of seven, it felt like she knew it all. If I knew about a country she'd know about the world. If I knew about a planet, she'd be able to recall the whole solar system—the big dipper to Uranus, the latter always said with a childish giggle.

Another button was pressed, then, without facing me, she'd ask, "You ready?"

"Yeah", I'd say it confident, "I'm ready."

She'd nod, then I'd remember the important question.

"What we playing?"

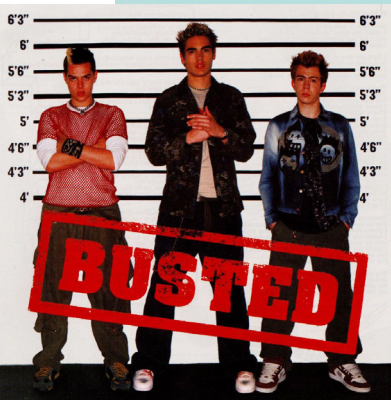
Next to the CD player was a wooden four drawer narrow chest. About the height of three adult sized hands stacked on top of one another—about a hand wide. Enough to keep CDs in. She'd flick through it whilst I set up the room, moving the tatty rug on the floor so I wouldn't trip over it once the manic dancing starting. I'd make sure the mic stand was propped in just the right spot. We had a mic, but it never really worked—the wires would fall out from over-stretching them across the shed or we just wouldn't bother to plug it in at all—my voice could carry without it.

"Busted?"

I loved Busted. Unapologetically. I'd keep my response nonchalant for now.

"Okay, cool."

Busted was nearly always the band of choice. Sometimes we went for The Corrs. Other times Bon Jovi. Even a little Bryan Adams. Or, when couldn't decide, a compilation CD that had everything from Westlife to Weezer; I'd sing their track "Beverly Hills" without



**Busted**

"What I Go to School For"

*Busted*

09/2002

Universal Island Records

having any idea that Beverly Hills was a real place you could visit—or live. To me, it just existed in a song.

Before pressing play she'd settle herself behind her drum kit. A red wine thing, Pearl or Yamaha, her drumsticks kept in a holder screwed onto one of the cymbal stands. She could [can] play the drums properly, thanks to lessons from a young age. She'd pick up whichever sticks took her fancy and run them along the toms, snare, cymbals—feet at the high hat and bass drum—warming herself up as though we were in sound check. I'd reach for my instrument. The snooker cue was propped in the dusty nook between the door and the right-side wall. It wasn't full size—a miniature one instead, perfect for me. I'd set the heavy end in my right hand, the tip out towards my left, held about half-way down. I couldn't play the guitar for real, so the snooker cue it was, rigged up as though it was a Stratocaster, or something like the guitar Avril Lavigne played in the "Complicated" video. If I wasn't in khakis and a white t-shirt I'd be in baggy trousers and a tank top with my dad's tie floating around my neck, just like her—the image of righteous adolescence.

I'd set myself steady up to the mic once her warmup was over, snooker cue gripped tight. She'd ask, "You ready now?"

"Yeah...we're playing 'What I Go to School For,' right?"

She'd pop out a "Yep" and then lean over and press play before quickly settling back into her seat, the leather creaking slightly. She'd sing along with me, but I was always up front. Count to three and the track started.

*Her voice is echoed in my mind,  
I count the days till she is mine.*

We'd both start softly, quiet—voices tinged with an American lilt, the same as the boys of Busted. You couldn't sing stuff in a Yorkshire accent like mine, or a semi-sort of Somerset accent like hers, it'd sound all wrong.

*And I'd fight my way in front of class,  
To get the best view of her ass.*

I didn't realize quite what I was singing, drawling out the "s" on "ass," myself innocent with youth. Maybe she understood a bit more, being a little older.

*I drop a pencil on the floor,  
She bends down and shows me more.*

We'd sung this song to both sets of our parents. They didn't seem to mind. I suppose if they had minded, then they would've had to tell us why. And then there'd be no more Busted and a syrupy spoonful of embarrassment.

The chorus was our big moment. We'd watched plenty of music videos and live performances on MTV and VH1 to know you go big in the chorus and keep it steady on the verse. My lips would brush the mic, my hands pretending to strum all sorts of chords and riffs and notes of things I didn't understand. She'd be on-beat with the drums though.

*That's what I go to school for,  
Even though it is a real bore,*

*You can call me crazy,  
But I know that she craves me.*

I'd never change the pronouns. I didn't know what a pronoun was. I didn't know what "craves" meant either.

*Girlfriends I've had plenty,  
None like Miss Mackenzie.*

I didn't care for girlfriends or boyfriends. None of that stuff mattered. By this point we'd be screaming the song. Or I would. Spinning around, knocking the mic stand over after twirling around it and into it manically, doing hair flips into head bangs, shaking my seven-year-old brains loose—the snooker cue slipping out of my grip. My cousin would be on par too, hands flying with the drumsticks, head knocking back and forth, her curly hair getting more and more knotted as she went. I'd turn and sing, no, yell the song in her face, my chin coming to a near bloody miss with the crash cymbal.

We'd repeat in all in the next verse, into the chorus again, reaching the bridge, or hook, breathlessly.

*I can see those tell-tale signs,  
Telling me that I was on your mind,  
I could see that you wanted more when you told that  
I'm what you go to school for.*

Then we'd fall into the final round of the chorus. I'd jump high in time to the music, knees bent, feet ready to slam back onto the tatty rug on the wooden floor, knocking the mic stand over again with the weight of my wild landing.

I'd imagine I was one of the members of Busted whilst singing "What I Go to School For." Matt, the bass player, most likely—spiky tipped hair and a snarling face—snarling in a teen way, all bravado without the bite, eyes roaming everywhere. We'd often pretend to be different people if we decided not to be ourselves. Different boys and girls in the band, whoever we felt like being. Gender didn't matter. It never registered as something to care about when I was seven. I had bigger things to think about, like remembering lyrics.

The song would fizzle out then, and my cousin would move quick to press the pause button before the next track started. She'd take a heavy breath and I'd wipe my sweaty hands down the front of my even stickier t-shirt, beads of sweat sliding from the back of my wispy hair and onto my hot neck. We'd often forget to take drinks up to the shed and instead we'd end up chasing each other back to the house for a glass of juice or, if we were lucky, a can of cold Coke. But that was after a few songs. We'd only performed "What I Go to School For" once. It wasn't time for a break yet.

"We sounded good, right?"

My cousin would nod enthusiastically. "Yeah, really good."

"Wanna play it again?" I'd ask. I always asked her before deciding. I asked her a lot for her opinion on things. Opinions or permission. Both.

"Same song?"

"Uh huh."



"Yeah, okay, cool."

And we'd go again, singing until our voices were hoarse. Or until the sun filtered past the high trees directly opposite us and we were told to come back inside and eat our dinner by my uncle.

Propped up on the high kitchen table we'd rabbit on over our turkey dinosaurs and chips about our band. All sorts of dreamy ideas about how we could make it big time whilst dipping every item of food on our plates into blobs of watery tomato ketchup.

"You'd probably have to start playing guitar for real though," she'd say.

I'd agree. She was right.

"But you'd do it easy. And then we'd get gigs."

"You think so?"

"Definitely. We'd be way more famous than Busted. And anyway, we already play 'What I Go to School For' better than them. We'll make it. I know it."

And I believed her too. I even taught myself how to play the bass guitar.

# On “ocean eyes” by Billie Eilish

Kim Witbeck

The sighs of the song begin, a longing resurgence that trembles across the air. Sitting in the waiting room of the ballet studio, I listen to my daughter leaping, twirling, and tiptoeing across the polished floor to the keening, swirling music. At 14 she is still too young for pointe. I know she is self-conscious of her taller, more womanly body amid the bonier girls, so pale and paper-thin. Like every ballet afternoon I close my eyes and wish she remembers how beautiful she is, made to be her best self.

*I've been watching you for some time  
Can't stop staring at those ocean eyes*

The haunting echoes of the song advance and recede as the girls dance, bending, arching, falling, backing away with gentle fists angled at the ends of their supple arms. The hollow beats tap constantly like an anxious heart, overpowered by the thunderous pounds of the girls leaping, twisting, and landing on the polished floor with all the force they have (a sound we will never hear on the recital stage).

*Burning cities and napalm skies  
Fifteen flares inside those ocean eyes  
Your ocean eyes*

For now, the girls churn their bodies behind a wall, and I hear the work of stomping feet, the teacher's hard claps, the girls' nervous giggles and breaths of delight when that loud descent lands the right way.

Her class is almost over. The younger dancers trip in for the next class, and get the honor of peeking around the corner to view the dance. My daughter was once one of these girls, looking with large eyes at the taller, more easily bendable ballerinas, longing to take up space in the dressing room with the star on the door, marked only for the older dancers. Now she is one of the envied, but too preoccupied with her own insecurities to realize the honor she now owns.

*No fair  
You really know how to make me cry  
When you gimme those ocean eyes*

The vocals rise higher and higher, almost to a childish squeak as the girls spin faster, from corner to corner. I peer at the convex mirror poised in a high corner to help the parents spy, blurred with mysterious handprints. I barely recognize my ballerina, so graceful in her black and bun, dipping and diving, learning a safe abandon.

*I'm scared  
I've never fallen from quite this high  
Falling into your ocean eyes  
Those ocean eyes*

I'm glad I could give her an adolescence that wasn't my own, where I think she knows she's loved, beautiful, and talented. No mornings where a mother looks at her clean,



Billie Eilish

“ocean eyes”

*don't smile at me*

08/2017

Darkroom · Interscope

newly awake face and questions, "You look so innocent. Why can't you always look that way? I can almost forget you're evil."

Looking at her among the swirling girls, listening to the synths and sighs, I marvel at a songscape that actually echoes a yearning, intelligent girl's feelings, with sad breaths, long trills, confessions of fear and a sweet, high-pitched tenderness. Songs that belong to a real choreography, of heartbeats, a sweet adrenaline, and thoughtful asides.

*I've been walking through a world gone blind  
Can't stop thinking of your diamond mind*

I think of the songs on my school bus, with the incessant drumbeats, coupled on video with robotically perfect dance moves I could never achieve. Lyrics about sex and combat and perfection instead of mind, fear, hope and reluctance. I could never dance to that. I'm so glad my child can bloom and step in tune with a more sympathetic, understanding melody.

*Careful creature made friends with time  
He left her lonely with a diamond mind  
And those ocean eyes*

On the drive home, she takes videos of the sunset flaring against the slim silhouettes of telephone wires and bare branches. Her fingers flutter in a particular way, waving from the screen. Over 4,000 fans on her Tik Tok and hundreds of likes on every video she makes. Her stately, ever maturing dance will never be a part of them. A couple of her videos show ballet slippers falling gracefully to the ground, but her body is her own and will never be shown. She is more than that—intelligence, art, longing, hopes and dreams set to the soft adolescent wails of today's forgiving, embracing music and her own unseen steps.

Whatever she feels about her body, her mind, and her talents as perceived by her teachers, friends, and doting mom, her creations are her own and strangely loved, the soundtrack as haunting and unique.

# Timeline of a Car Crash

## Carly Madison Taylor

### Six Months before Car Crash

"I still see you as the person I want to have kids with," he said before he said it wasn't that he didn't love me.

"You're my best friend in the whole world," he said before he said he needed to know he had the chance to get me back someday.

"I'm leaving you," he said before he did.

### Five and a Half Months before Car Crash

On a playground at almost ten o'clock at night toward the end of a very long, very cold January. He had given me socks for my twenty-first birthday and asked whether my parents hated him. I stood in the middle of the merry-go-round as he turned it, then when he sat, stood between his legs with my arms around his neck. His hair was wet. His jacket that he loved so much, the new one he bought in Warsaw, damp around the collar despite his woven scarf. He started crying when I did.

"I'm afraid I'm ruining my life," he said, burying his face in my chest. My fingers in his hair without my meaning them to be, and his hair was wet, his jacket that he loved so much, the new one he bought in Warsaw, it wasn't cold anymore, it wasn't January or Illinois and I wasn't twenty-one and we weren't on the merry-go-round where he kissed me on our first date.

And it wouldn't stop spinning, even without him to make it move.

### Four and a Half Months before Car Crash

His fraternity brother had his mouth on my vagina.

I had too much to drink and too much weed.

It was the middle of the night.

I did not know the word "no;" I said nothing until I said "yes, there, that's good" and after I said it enough times, he stopped.

### Four Months before Car Crash

It wasn't a wake-up-and-see-it kind of realizing. It was an over-months realizing that left a bitter taste when I'd scratch off lipstick after a party. Lipstick I was allowed to wear without him. In the dress I was allowed to wear without him. I was scrambling, making up for the almost-two-years of drinking I was finally allowed to do. I was drowning myself.

I told one friend the story over lunch, about the way he'd gripped my wrists so tightly they bruised on a night he got angry that I wasn't happy.

I told my roommate the story in our room, about the times he reminded me of insecurities I'd never felt, that I was weak and unfit to keep my jobs, unfit to write my



Fall Out Boy

"Hum Hallelujah"

Infinity on High

02/2007

Island

essays and poems, unfit to earn my good grades because, “that professor just likes the way you look.”

I told another friend the story on a walk, about his insistence that I was remembering falsely, that I was trying to hurt him by claiming not to know about our agreement to take someone along with us on a trip to the store. The agreement we never made.

It wasn't a wake-up-and-see-it kind of realizing. It was an over-months realizing that the reality I had lived in had never existed. An insidious understanding that crying every day you are with the person you love is not normal, that missing classes and work, terrified to be left, is not normal. Curling up on the concrete basement floor and fantasizing that you could just lie down and wait on the railroad tracks is not normal.

My body echoed everywhere I went. I saw him from across the street and stopped breathing. My psychiatrist prescribed Xanax. I spent more and more time indoors.

### Three Months before Car Crash

Drunk on tequila I'd begged her for, I lay on Katie's floor at four in the morning and ruined my makeup.

### One and a Half Months before Car Crash

Stephen propped the little instrument higher on his knee and sang “The Real Slim Shady” while he strummed. From my vantage on the brick railing of the porch in the dark, he looked maybe perfect. We were all gathered, giggling, for an impromptu celebration of his twenty-second birthday—Emma on the floor against a pillar, Forrest propped on the window ledge with a cigarette dangling between her fingers, McKenzie beside me with my guitar in their lap, Sithara in a chair with her eyes closed, Jess, silent and still. Beer had been brought out, pizza was on the way.

There is probably not a word that means “the first time in a long time that you feel whole” but I felt that. Felt family.

Walking home at midnight I saw them, streetlight-lit, his arm around her shoulder, her dress the same color and length as the one I'd worn a year before. Chest shrinking I stumbled back to the porch.

I told them, Stephen, Forrest, McKenzie, and Jake, who'd arrived after I left. I chain-smoked on the porch and I cried and I told them and they were angry because they loved me.

### One Month before Car Crash

On Forrest and Stephen's couch in the middle of the night I cried until I could no longer move. He had come out publicly against the boy who assaulted me after months saying I'd made it up. He had decided to tell everyone he was angry with this boy when he had said he was angry with me.

I could not explain to Forrest, as she held my hand and offered sips of water, why finding this out felt like being beaten. Felt like spinning so fast I was sick. Felt like every time he'd fucked me on our bed in the room we painted, every starlit car ride, every smile turned into the night he hit me with his belt during sex and then said he was sorry—like a whole life condensed into the *déjà vu*, the glitch in the system, the break.

Forrest said the word aloud. She said it before I did. Before I could.

Said, “abuse.”

#### Two Weeks before Car Crash

In my bathtub with candles lit, at home, the day before he graduated. 900 miles away and still waking up in the middle of the night afraid.

#### Three Hours before Car Crash

“Have you ever dried dope?” my dad asked over lunch in Denver.

“You mean pot, right?”

“Yeah.”

“A couple times, yeah,” I said.

“I used to do that back in college.”

“You were a pizza delivery guy at UC Santa Barbara, Dad. I kinda figured.”

This was the most honest we had ever been with each other. There was so much not to say.

We traipsed 16<sup>th</sup> Street, watching families and couples, maybe the only diverse place in the whole state. A group of mimes in front of the Aveda School. The Green Peace guy with his pamphlets trying to shame us for not being better people.

We got in the car after I bought a blue dress from H&M that he thought was too short.

#### Less Than Thirty Seconds before Car Crash

I got a text from someone: “How’s your summer?”

My dad’s hands at ten and two, he glanced into the rearview.

I decided not to respond until we got home.

“Wow, that guy is going fast. Oh my god. Oh my god *oh my god we’re about to get hit!*”

#### Car Crash

Hanging by the seatbelt of the passenger seat in my father’s blue Honda Civic, direction has become relative. I reach up—or possibly down—into the shattered and muddy windshield, to switch off my iPod. This feels crucial. Fall Out Boy is not an appropriate soundtrack to a car crash.

“Can you get out?” my dad says. He is panicked, his voice sharp.

This has not occurred to me. The radio is between us on the ceiling—the floor— with wires like veins tethering it to the cracked dashboard. I unclip my seatbelt. It has not occurred to me that I might fall on my head, but I find that suspended-from-the-seat-of-a-flipped-car is a surprisingly simple position to remove myself from. On my hands and knees it does not occur to me to worry about putting weight on the filthy, wet, broken windshield, but I find that it’s not sharp. I pull at the handle of my door, press against its window with my boot.

There is a stranger pulling the door from the other side. Together we force it open. He takes my hand. He may have brown hair. He pulls me up and out.

My father scrambles behind me.

"Who else is in the car?" the stranger says. He says it as though it is urgent. It has not occurred to me how this must have looked.

"Nobody," one of us says. "Just us."

It is sunny. Near-sunset. Broomfield, Colorado, near the county line into Superior. Less than five minutes from my father's apartment. Still June, still summer. The mountains have not moved. Highway 36 blurs by, louder from outside a vehicle, louder standing in the irrigation trench off the right-hand shoulder just before the exit, louder from beside the Honda whose bumper is several feet from its body.

There is a cop. There are six or seven other cars, all pulled over, most with passengers outside. The cop finds my dad. The stranger puts his hands on my face.

"Look at me," he says. "Your eyes are a little dilated. Your face is bleeding."

I reach up to my right eyebrow, which stings. My fingers come away rusty red.

"And your legs," he says.

I look just below the hem of my skirt, just below my kneecaps. There are long, dripping blood tracks down each shin. My left shoulder might hurt. My shins do not.

My dad makes a *Big Lebowski* joke and the cop looks at us like we're crazy when we laugh. "Dude's car got a little dinged up."

A recollection of spinning. Of impact. Of thud. Of invert. Of my father: "Oh my god, oh my god we're about to get hit!"

The iPod is somehow in my hand. So too my cell phone. Medics and firefighters have arrived. All I can think to say: "Can you get my purse" and "Thank you."

Spinning.

#### Two and a Half Hours after Car Crash

I will stand, shaking, from the gurney on which I have been wheeled into the x-ray room. I will press my swelling face against a board so that the nurse can get a good picture. Everything will ache. The last time I was in an emergency room he drove me, Valentine's Day the year before.

I will be in the ER because, an hour after the accident, I will feel dizzy and we will decide to play it safe on the concussion front.

I will be wheeled back into my little room, my father and his best friend in the chairs beside it, and the doctor will be cleaning my dad's hand, the only injury he has sustained in the crash. I will check my iPod, which has migrated back into my purse, and find that it is paused two-thirds of the way through "Hum Hallelujah" by Fall Out Boy, not the song that was playing when we were hanging upside down in the wreckage of the Honda, but the song that features a choir, features "hallelujah" repeated over a crunching guitar riff, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah.

### Three Days after Car Crash

I will lie on the massage table as Allison holds my feet. My eyes will be closed. Cranial-sacral work is strange; very Boulder, very hippie, very good timing, she will say before starting, because it can help the body to process a trauma. We have instinctual intelligence deeper than our consciousness and sometimes this can wake it up and let it do what it needs to without the brain getting in the way.

She will ask how the energy in my body feels. I will tell her “circular” and she will know what I’m talking about.

When her hands reach my face I will begin to float up out of my body. I will begin to spin. And spin. And spin. Faster and more urgently and always to the left, to the left, my right shoulder pulling up and over my chest, my neck tilting, my head lolling. It will not stop.

She will tell me my body is trying to protect the part that is hurt, the left shoulder that was x-rayed and discovered to be sprained. She will tell me my body is processing the accident. The car rolled over to the left. My left. I think. It might have. The left. Spinning.

The spinning will stop ten minutes before the session does.

### Two and a Half Weeks after Car Crash

I will sit down to write about it. It will be newly July, or perhaps not, the time on my laptop still not changed to reflect Mountain Standard over Central. I will sit down to write about it and it will become a story about him.

But the spinning will have stopped, without him to move it.

My shoulder will ache in its bearing after an hour of Allison manipulating and pushing it—she will have recommended ice and I will not yet have heeded her, but will long to as I sit at the kitchen table in my mother’s house where I never, ever write, writing at what is either one in the morning or midnight and maybe July. The mountains will not have moved. I will watch my cell phone battery drain down beside me on the table as I type, music churning from the speakers, the record to which I fell in love with him two summers ago, two years before the car crash. It will not hurt.

But I will change the record. I will change it and I will re-read and not cry.

Hallelujah, hallelujah, *hallelujah*.



# The Heart of the Blue Whale

Nica Bengzon

*for N*

My sister dreams of seeing a blue whale in the wild one day. She says she loves them for how big they are, blood vessels like tunnels hearts heavy as cars. She's driving right now as she tells me to imagine the crawl through the arteries to reach this heart. Imagine listening to the whale's bloodstream and hearing the roll of the ocean, one journey within and one without. Imagine all the singing they must do on the sea's roads, a tune for every current reverberating up from depths so crushing only machines can follow. I plug the aux cord in and say I hear the whales anytime we sing together in her car at dusk, leaving the university behind us for home. When I play "Love on the Weekend" on Fridays, because sometimes that's enough to feel you've made it somewhere. When John says I'll be the DJ, she'll be the driver, like he can see me and this tiny person and the fearless way she brings her seat right up to the wheel. He strums. I say there's no ocean in this song, and we live now in the smack middle of a dehydrated city, but maybe these drives we take are the same—some kind of migratory pattern, one way of knowing the world that happens in the blood. Who can say, really how anything knows where to go? All we know is when we're on the highway we hear the tide that will take us where we belong, and what carries us is no less than a heart made of steel and gasoline and the thrum of a stranger's guitar and her little voice, and mine.



**John Mayer**

"Love on the Weekend"

*The Search for Everything*

04/2017

Columbia

# More Lies About Sisters

Allie Marini

“All over the city there are sisters. Any one of them could be mine.”

—Karin Gotshall, *More Lies*

I live sisterless in a city full of sisters & in another city, fully halved by the stretch of continent between them (& every bit as insurmountable, as untraversable by foot) lives my sister, except most of the time, I think, she wishes she was sisterless in her own city full of sisters, none of them hers. We go weeks, months, even years without talking and when we finally do, she interrupts me. I can't perform my part when I'm depressed, which is always. Everything that makes me happy is as fleeting & fickle as the price of tulips in April. My job sucks. I tell too many secrets in my writing. I'm a messy person. I won't quit smoking. I wear too much eyeliner & my shoes are ugly. I change the subject. Cooking is always safe, except when it isn't. I tell her about my Instant Pot. She interrupts. I light a cigarette. I can hear her sigh at how poorly I'm performing my part as her sister, even from a continent away. How it felt to be a good sister is as fickle as the April price of tulips, so I rewind to a time when it didn't: *Once upon a time, I was 17 & you were 13 & we went everywhere together. I told you secrets & you kept them, I borrowed your ugly shoes & I kept them, I had all this potential & so did we. I took you to see Tears for Fears on a school night & our parents let us go because they were secretly happy their daughters chose to be friends instead of just sisters...*

*You're not even listening to me*

...& just like that I'm back & I know there was an *Uh huh, right*, I missed in the patter of a conversation where we're both talking sideways out of our mouths like a flounder. So to try & straighten out my speech I hold the lit tip of the cigarette over my wrist, just millimeters away from the skin. I can feel the burn of it without the singe—because I don't do that anymore—but just because you're not doing something doesn't mean that it doesn't occupy your thoughts all the time, that it doesn't take up all that empty space that's in the shape of a sister who was supposed to be there, but cut herself out like she was made of paper & curled up into ash like someone holding the hot tip of a cigarette next to her surface. Or maybe I'm the one who cut myself out of paper & words & called it a choice, who burnt in scars just to feel something. Maybe it's my fault we can only speak sideways out of a crooked mouth & why when we see each other it's one-eyed, fish-eyed, skewed. It's hard to know & anyway, *Yes I am, I was just thinking, sorry* & isn't that the upshot of all this? *I'm sorry*. When I finally hang up the phone I feel more alone than when I dialed because the only sister I know & miss is the one I don't have anymore, a perpetually pissed-off 15 year-old punk rock kid who thinks my messy room is the best place to be & who doesn't really know much about Tears for Fears but knows that music guides me towards True North when I'm lost, which is all the time. There's an untraversable continent between us & we're living sisterless in cities full of sisters, none of them ours. I need someone to call True North & it was supposed to be my sister, but it's not. Because it's true: My job *does* suck, & I *do* tell too many secrets in my writing—(like I'm doing right now)—but it's only because there's a sister-shaped hole in my heart & I'm pouring words into it to see if anything will ever fill it up, if maybe she sank like an ugly shoe & if I put enough words into the hole she'll eventually swallow a few of them & float to the surface on the back of a flat fish & see me dead-on through its one-eyed field of vision. Maybe I'll be able to pull her out by her long-gone mohawk & she'll say, *Wow those shoes are kind of ugly but you're rocking them & maybe she'll ask me for a cigarette*

the JULIANA HATFIELD Three  
386 004 1VHM 3W0338

The Juliana Hatfield  
Three

“My Sister”

*Become What You Are*

08/1993

Mammoth

*Just this once, because I'm with you, you know? & I'll show her my room & she'll say It's really not that messy after all, I guess I misjudged you & she'll ask what I'm writing these days & I'll put these words in the Instant Pot & even if there are too many secrets in it (like there are in this story) she'll turn her humongous green eyes in my direction & say, It must have felt really lonely to keep all those secrets to yourself for so long, I bet you feel better now.*

# Looking Out My Back Door

Erin L. Cork

There is a famous quote from Czeslaw Milosz: *"When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished."* But is it? Maybe it is saved. Preserved.

When I write about my family there are thousands of pages in various states of telling. Well, maybe not telling but trying. Trying to show. Show both the sunlit and shadowed halls of our home. It is the story I repeatedly run from and return to. It calls to me, thrusts me into open seas and wrecks me against piles of stone.

The one constant in our home was music. Both of my parents loved it. We were surrounded by it and heavily influenced by it. My two younger sisters and baby brother, all of us are addicted to it. There is still nothing like the needle drop and that first scratch of song.

My father favored old country, R&B and Gospel: Hank and Patsy, the Staple Singers, Aretha, Mahalia Jackson, and the Reverend Al. My mother leaned towards folk: Joni Mitchell, Janis Ian, James Taylor, and the Clancy Brothers. Stacks of records and eight-track tapes lined shelves and spun on the giant console stereo.

They were educators. They both held Master's Degrees. They were brilliant thinkers, staunch Democrats, and drinkers. They were deadly in Password, Jeopardy, and Trivial Pursuit. They marched the streets, protest signs in one hand, one of their children in the other. They attended lectures and pontificated. They told us what to believe but forgot to tell us why. It was expected that we would read books, the local newspaper, and *Time*. We had to watch the news, Cronkite, or Brinkley. It was assumed that we would have a basic understanding.

They both sang in the St. Anthony's church choir and the spin off folk group, which was led by a vest-wearing John Denver doppelganger. There was a lot of Godspell and a few popular songs with religious imagery. Once in a while there was a song that made no sense in the context of Sunday service other than it became a joyful sing along.

This group nourished them. Their social life revolved around it. Veering off here too much leads me right into the destruction. It's probably not where the demise began but it is where it manifested. At least that is how I remember it when I try to reconstruct the history. It is also where I pull scraps of the happiest moments from the rubble.

Elizabeth Tallent wrote: *"Every unhappy family is periodically ransacked by joy. It is the way the family haunts itself..."* This resonates as true as a tuning fork struck against the solid coffer of memory, the constant pitch vibrating along the edge of time.

The late-night practice sessions surrounded by the smell of chili on the stove, beer, and the bitter juniper of gin. There'd be a match strike, flame held to the end of a True or Salem Menthol, the smoke would swirl and hover. Someone would pull a cigarette from their lips, side blow and throw their head back in a burst of laughter.

It was a gathering of comrades, bell bottomed, shaggy haired, wild colored attire and big hoop earrings. They were talented and raucously opinionated, circled in the lamplight of our living room.



Creedence Clearwater  
Revival

"Lookin' Out My Back Door"

Cosmo's Factory

07/1970

Fantasy

There was tension between the guitar player—a Jim Croce look alike—and my mother. I'd identify it later as attraction. Back then it was just an uncomfortable awareness that dissipated with the shake of tambourines, thump of a bass, snap of the snare drum, strum of strings, and voices as they spread across the room, bounced off of the windows and walls casting color and eddies of light into impending darkness. It was glorious.

My mother was classic-movie-star-pretty. She was the soloist. Lord, that woman could sing. I dare to wonder sometimes how different her life would have been if she had followed her passions. I can't hear "Ave Maria," "O' Holy Night," or Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne" without my skin rising in recollection. It's an instant recognition of her in the song. I'm right back in a wooden pew below the choir loft as she breathes out her secrets, "...And you know that she's half-crazy but that's why you want to be there, And she feeds you tea and oranges that come all the way from China..." I am stunned, awed, and fiercely proud to be her daughter. Understanding slips out of reach like a shadow.

My father was a force of nature. He was funny, a performer who loved a crowd. He was a successful teacher whom I thought of as the Pied Piper. I'd watch other people's children parade behind him. Envy would gag and choke me. I wanted to poke and scratch them, "He's mine." He would stand at the old upright piano that sat in the corner of that living room and play any song that he'd heard once by ear. I knew when he was feeling irritated or impatient, usually waiting for my mother to finish applying her makeup. He'd pound out one popular song after another, pressing the pedal for emphasis the longer it went on.

She would take her time, fully aware of the mood changing. She would ease down the bark-carpeted staircase as if it was made of marble. The wooden railing, rickety and missing dowels along the way could have been gold plated in her regal descent. She'd step onto the torn linoleum at the bottom of the stairs, singing along to the Bill Withers song and wait for him to finish with a finger flourish. She'd ask, "Are you ready?"

Before they cracked and the monsters of rage emerged. Before I rounded up my terrified younger siblings, turned their tear-streaked faces from between the gaps in the railing at the top of those stairs. Before I pulled them away and shut them behind a bedroom door. Before the wail of sirens, howling dogs, and the neighbors parted their blinds to watch the flashing lights on our street. Before my mother wore dark glasses and neck scarves incongruously. Before the blood flowed from her head where she had landed against that piano or from her wrists when she gave into enough. Before he washed his hands of it. Before the breaches and betrayals. Before the beginning of the end. Before then, our Sundays consisted of Mass and social functions afterward in a circle of friends.

One Easter morning the service was held in Greenough Park along the rushing runoff of Rattlesnake Creek. The crocuses and tulips boasted in bloom and the lilacs scented the air. My sisters and I raced around in our frilly dresses and black patent shoes. Baby brother waddled between us in his tiny suit and tie. The promise of the egg hunt dangled ahead.

After communion, before the priest dismissed us with "Go in peace," the Folk Group broke into a rousing rendition of the Creedence Clearwater Revival classic "Lookin' Out My Back Door." Children grinned and shouted, the image of a "Giant doing cartwheels, statue wearing high heels... all the happy creatures dancin' on the lawn." The entire congregation joined in drowning out the sound of birds and roiling water, "doo, doo, doo looking out my back door".

This scene is locked away in the bank, among the stash of good ones. The nuggets I grip to remind me that there was something golden. Claudia Rankine whispers to me, *"Memory is a tough place. You were there."*

There are people who shouldn't bring children into the world. My parents may be an example of this. But then, where would I be? The earth would spin without my words as it mostly does anyway. Those I've loved and wronged would have lived differently, found their sources of throb and pain elsewhere.

Parents, birth orders, patterns behind familial doors influence who we become, how we behave. We learn from this and the outsiders who exemplify a different way. When I imagine all the people I could have been in an alternate life, the one thing I know, the one thing I am most thankful for, is the music.

I love how I love it and my want and willingness to share it with everyone I meet. It asks and answers, addresses the mystery. Ultimately, I am willing to forgive all the rest for this one thing.

Looking "out my back door" I think of Miloz one more time:

*"Forget all the suffering you caused others.*

*Forget the suffering others caused you.*

*The waters run and run,*

*Springs sparkle and are done.*

*You walk the earth you are forgetting."*

# songs my parents listened to when they were still in love.

Wanda Deglane

i.  
with every passing day, I find myself listening more and more to songs my parents danced to in our kitchen, the ones they'd play on our road trips. on the way to school one morning, my mother points out the gin blossoms song she first heard in the airport when she had just landed in phoenix. how she still remembers her sweaty hands, fingers laced in between my father's, terrified she'd be sent back to peru. but she'd heard the song many times before in lima. she had never understood the words, but in the moment they seemed to be saying, *you're right where you need to be. you'll be so happy here.*

ii.  
when my parents fell out of love, my father played the same guarana song over and over, everywhere he went. I hadn't heard it in years, but the soft guitar startup had been threaded through my brain all this time. *I hope you find glory. I hope a cloud of your memory erases me.* I never noticed how hopeless and aching the lyrics were, in spite of the playful tune. just like I hadn't noticed when my mother started sleeping in my brother's empty bed until I found the balled up tissues left on his bedspread like tiny white flags. my father stares out the windshield. so typical of him, he refuses to acknowledge the grief settling heavy in the air. he just sits in it, alone.



Guarana

“Echame a Mí la Culpa”

El Efecto Guaraná

01/2000

Sony Music

iii.

I carry the song around my neck now.  
somedays I think it might be the only  
thing tying my head to the rest of my  
body. maybe if I listen to it enough times  
I might piece together my father's  
wordless apologies, my mother's bruised  
bitterness. I might come upon the place  
my parents inhabited when they first  
decided marrying would be a good idea.  
the two singers plead, again and again  
in my ear, *lay the blame on me for whatever  
happens. cover your back with my pain.*

iv.

my mother finds a new kitchen to dance  
in, and paints its walls periwinkle. she  
wears makeup every day, cuts her bangs,  
carries her head higher than I've ever seen  
it. she refuses to make eye contact with  
mirrors. at night, the song drifts into her  
new bedroom through the air vents,  
through the windows. it asks her to save  
herself any way she knows how.  
*tell anyone who asks, I never loved you.*  
she howls until morning.



# Freedumb, or something like it

Jon Johnson

Like many before me, I had parents.

Like *everyone* before me, my parents had no idea what the hell they were doing.

Yet after our flickering senses, parents are our first teachers.

My first parent (oddly the one who I came out of second) was everything you'd expect a teacher to be.

–Don't touch that.

–Why?

–Because I said so.

–Don't eat that.

–Why

–Because it'll fucking kill you.

–Don't say that.

–Why?

–Because *I'll* fucking kill you.

The other teacher, may the impotent lord have mercy on his effervescent soul, was a bit more...unorthodox.

Oh sure, he made sure I didn't fall of a bridge or set fire to a bottle of gasoline, but had I done so? Bit of natural selection, now, isn't it?

–You break that?

–...It fell.

–Hm. Go get the broom.

–You wanna try this?

–What is it?

–Wasabi. It's good, eat it.

–Hey, if you are going to jump off the slide with those cardboard "wings" you've got there, better get a running start.

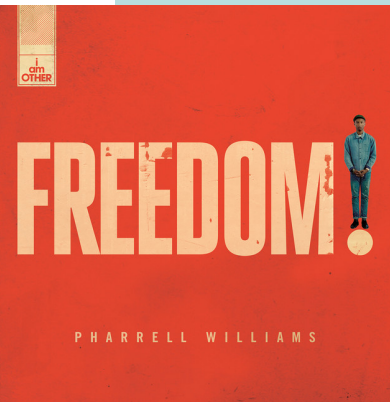
–Why?

–More air, you'll go farther. It's called lift.

He wasn't wrong.

Naturally, the first teacher trained me from a very early age to place faith in a higher source, separate and apart from myself. Everything you'd expect. Adults, teachers, managers, heads of companies, the government, police officers, doctors, but most importantly god, a big man with a happy gray beard who gave us these hierarchies to keep us safe and sorted on our trip to the gilded kingdom in the sky.

Thumbs up.



Pharrell Williams

"Freedom"

Freedom

06/2015

Columbia

The second teacher trained me from an early age to do stupid shit. Not because he hated me more than he hated himself, but because he wanted me to learn. To trust myself first, and to figure out my own limitations.

Okay.

Both very apt teachers in their respective fields. And I'm grateful for both now.

But.

My father was semi-uninvolved for much of my early childhood. Not intensely uninvolved. He just didn't know what the fuck it was (a child), so he tended to let someone else deal with it. So I was brought up by my mother. And stepmother. And sister. And two stepsisters. And female cat.

Estrogen ocean, you get it.

Coddled boy aside, my den mothers raised me to be a stand-up gentleman. Honorable. God-fearing. Faithful. Unquestioning. Yes ma'am, No, sir. Strong as an ox. Gentle as a doe. Swift as a coursing river. All the force of a great typhoon. A man.

Specifically, the man they never had (because he doesn't exist).

So at the ripe old age of ten I was barreling towards that unattainable man, using cut-outs from *Just Seventeen* magazines and lines from *You've Got Mail* to create a roadmap. I kept the toy from the box of Cap'n Crunch in my back pocket, though, just in case someone wanted to play.

Naturally, I'm grasping. I'm that baby fuckin' bird in the story book, looking like an idiot as it squawks at a big dog.

—Are you what it means to be a man?

—....woof.

I learned that if you grasp enough on the way down to the abyss, you'll probably catch something. A sign post. A vine. Anything.

Help me identify, help me belong, tell me I'm not alone and I'm yours.

School. Bands. Sports teams. T.V. Religion. Society. Country. Link me to it all and let me find identity through that so I don't have to look at this teetering edge or hear the woosh of the void or count the seconds until this vine snaps.

So I spent a chunk of years thinking in Technicolor and dreaming in red, white, and blue.

"These colors don't run!"

Ah, but they sure do fade.

One day I woke from a sweaty dream. The paths were all laid out. The college path, the Jesus Cristo path, the path to a family and dog and white picket fence and me at the head of the table thinking in 401ks and taking pills to counteract the side effects of my other pills.

And every single path led back to the same cliff, left me gripping the same vine as my shoes struggled against gravity to stay on my feet.

But if I can be honest, my arm was getting tired, and the hum of that void was rather loud. A lesser man would have let go of the vine.

So I let go of the vine.

In my mother's eyes, I had every opportunity in the world. And one by one I fucked them all up. Seduced by the devil of Eastern thought, good weed, and better sex.

But she had taught me all she could, and now her job was to release me into the loving, wafer-flavored arms of Jesus.

Naturally, I started roaming the void alone on my days off.

—Roomy isn't it?

—Come again?

—Oh, sorry. 40 on pump 4.

Whether because the drugs or the Tao, the lines started blurring. And shit got *REAL* confusing. The more I let go, the more I gained, but this made me feel emptier, and yet more complete. Feel me?

Now, I'll add a "yada yada yada" here for brevity and to not be one of those white guys with dreads telling you about their acid trip while you are dramatically sober. So, yada yada yada, who pops up but fuckin' teacher number two!

Hey pop! Oh yea let's go to iHop nice to see you you aloof cunt where have you been I coulda used your help back there it's cool I'm figuring it out by myself—oh by the way I'm pretty lost and hooked on Norco if you care you ball of—

—Wait you're hooked on Norco?

—Yea

—Son, no. That's the shit that had me looking off the edge of a cliff.

—Well...yea?

He paused long enough for me to wipe the red from my eyes. I spilled milk on the table and my pants.

—Son, have you tried weed?

Wait, the fuck he say?

The lady next to us was pouring far too much syrup on her pancakes, waiting for my response.

I let out a nervous laugh and told him about the 75 plants in our backyard—a humble operation, at best.

—Wow, that's...I mean, think you have enough, or what?

—I wanna get off the Norco...I figure 75 plants ought to do it.

We exchanged a glance.

—You smartass.

Pancake lady was explaining to the waiter how the syrup lid must have come off and she'd like some new pancakes please.

So now we're in the back of an iHop, rolling a joint. As you do.

Now don't get me wrong, my father has always protected, loved, and otherwise cherished me as one can only love something that has leapt from one's own balls.

But in a way I never saw before, I saw this man care.

It was hard to explain then, but I was watching my father die in front of me. More, I was watching the expectations both he and I had built up over the last 19ish years shatter.

He wasn't father, infallible ruler of the universe, vast and almighty! That dude was gone.

Here was Bob, a man.

There was no pretense to it. He stood in front of me as broken and alone as I stood in front of him. And it was refreshing as all hell.

He admitted his insecurities in that cloudy car between the ringing in his ears.

–I never knew how to be a father, I never had one.

–If it helps, I had never been a son.

–I'm serious, smartass. I was just so afraid I would fuck you up permanently that I kinda...sat there and let life go by. I made sure you didn't die, I knew that much, but I wanted you to be your own man. I wanted you to think for yourself. I knew there was nothing I could do to stop you from fucking up, and that you would be the only one that could pick yourself back up when you did.

–I mean you could have told me that pop.

–...yea I know.

He fiddled with the radio, clicked it on and back off.

–I guess just...knowing your mother and the kind of kid she would want to raise, I was afraid you'd come out brainwashed, and I didn't want that to be partly my fault.

–...

–I was so afraid of fucking up that I fucked up by doing nothing. I'm sorry, boy.

Whether from the weight of the words or the weed, the car sat silently as I fiddled with a spot of spilt milk on my pants.

We spent the rest of the evening comparing notes on life, and admiring the conclusions we had separately reached together. We talked about aliens and the Matrix, compared Alan Watts and George Carlin, and shared a hushed giggle at the notion that people thought Democrat and Republican meant anything.

By the time the heavy wore off and the high came on, I had a new friend.

I remember a phone call years later.

–Hey boy you see the new one from Pharrell?

–Nah, is it good?

–Goosebumps buddy. Power. I'm telling you, he's got it. Him and who's the other guy? Bruno Mars. He's got it.

–Yea Bruno is good.

–It’s starting to feel like it did back then. People are realizing. Finding themselves. All we need is some mud and some acid and we’re gonna have Woodstock 2015.

–Ha. Well It would probably be a small mud pit now, the way everyone walks around trying to hate everyone else.

–Oh shut up. You worry about yourself, and let the world spin around you. Gotta go, break’s over. Love you boy.

Every time I hear this song I remember that sentence. It was a serious yet tossaway line, and yet shit sticks to me like oatmeal to yesterday’s bowl.

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Last time I checked the definition, I was a Millennial. I was brought up on the lie that I could be, do, or accomplish anything and everything I wanted to. That all I had to do was reach out, and the world was mine for the taking. That If I knocked, that door would surely open. That I was from a special place so that I, too, was special.

I’m not special.

If you are anything like me, you read that last line and the gears kicked in “No, Jon, you are special, see you have these fingerprints and you were born at this special time with this special combination of talents and you will do such good in the world.”

It’s okay. I’m not special. I’m average at *best*, and mediocre most days. And by your standards I’m probably a monster.

But I spent my entire life expecting to be Jim Carrey. Richard Pryor. Chris Tucker. George Carlin.

I knocked, and the door knocked back, expecting me to open it.

I reached out, and the world swirled just out of reach. An ornament on a Christmas tree I never wanted to decorate in the first place cuz *Monday Night Raw* is on and I just want the tree to be ready and tinsel and full of presents every single day of my life thanks.

And as disappointed as I was at first to find out that the world was not waiting for me to burst from my chrysalis and flip it on its poles, it’s a great relief.

There is so much freedom here.

# Beside the Green, Green Grass

Jennifer Walter

On Sundays I am convinced my mom is an angel. She stands at the lectern behind the polished oakwood banister, just feet from the altar—the holiest of holies—hands raised like palm branches oblivious to the Ash Wednesday ritual. With her voice, she can command a crowd. She can make things move.

When I was just old enough to sit alone at Mass in the crowd with everybody else, I watched her stand above the sea of somber heads, sleepy and nodding obediently through the prayers. But when the organ started and Mom began to sing, the rosy stained-glass sunlight seemed to pour through the windows. Voices rose with her, casting nets into the depths of their own spirits, hauling feasts of fishes and gracious prayers translated into song. I thought, when my time comes and I reach the gates of heaven, she will be there, singing.

*Kiss me, out of the bearded barley / Nightly, beside the green, green grass*

Whenever my dad has a few too many beers, he starts to sing while playing his guitar. He doesn't reach deep into his belly and project his voice like he should—all his singing rises through the chest and throat; a recipe for damaged vocal cords and, not to mention, weak singing. He sometimes sings while slouched over, reclining into the couch. And he can't harmonize for shit.

Normally it goes like this: his friend George, a salt-and-pepper ponytailed rocker who plays in a cover band, comes to visit. They set up the equipment: amps, microphones, and the huge binder of guitar tabs with their favorite songs to play. Plus a case of Angry Orchard or Corona in the fridge. It starts out tame, but as the night goes on, empty bottles line up on the coffee table and the hours pass and pass. The amps become louder, the strumming more furious, and the singing more garbled.

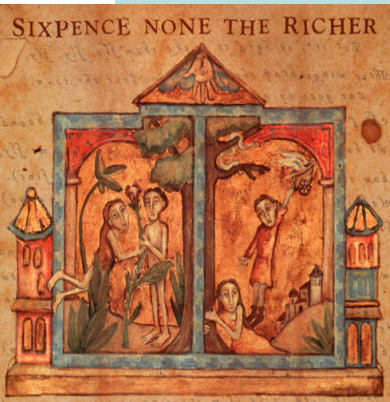
The duet usually begins as a shy thing. Dad will begin by strumming the first few chords. Mom will be in the kitchen, sending emails or washing dishes. She recognizes the intro immediately—"Kiss Me" by Sixpence None the Richer. Sometimes she tries to ignore it because she has work to do. "C'mon honey," Dad insists. Sometimes my sisters and I are there and try to convince her as well. In the end, she always sings.

Dad, tall and heavysset, swaying in his white New Balances and Life is Good t-shirt, wears a black Ovation electric-acoustic swung around his body, baptized with the smell of stale cigarettes and sweat. Soft eyes and protective presence, watching her gently from underneath a beige baseball cap as he strums along. Mom is small but electric, just five-foot-three, but moves mountains with her voice. No matter how many times they perform, I cannot look away. It is the holiest altar I know.

There is something about the song that has always made me feel like crying. It is not sadness, but perhaps tenderness. Maybe it's the key the song is written in or the fact that seeing my parents still in love after all these years is nothing short of a miracle.

*Swing swing, swing the spinnin' step / You'll wear those shoes and I will wear that dress*

They met in Boston 18 years old, both in their first year of engineering school and hundreds of miles away from home. This was back when The Modern Lovers sang about California desert parties and late-night dancing from a tape player in Dad's dorm room.



Sixpence None the Richer

"Kiss Me"

Sixpence None the Richer

11/1997

Squint, Elektra

Dad makes mixtapes for her. Cassettes with the tracks and artists written on them in mechanical pencil. Yaz, Depeche Mode, The The—songs she has never heard from bands that very well could be made up. Music Dad heard via his older brother, John, and found cool enough to keep in his repertoire.

I don't know when they first heard the song "Kiss Me." I like to think it was sometime in the beginning, when they kept making eye contact on the staircase on the way to class.

In a photo from that same year, they are standing in the front yard of my grandma's house, arms draped over each other, hair wild and warm in the summer sun. She wears a baby-pink dress with a white collar. He wears a striped t-shirt and the brightest, whitest smile I have ever seen cross his face. It is the first summer that she comes to visit him in Michigan, just months after they meet. I like to think they both knew the song then. He couldn't play guitar yet, but she could always sing.

*Beneath the milky twilight ...*

I can't remember which day I got the phone call. It was either the 6th or 7th of May.

In a hostel in the heart of Hamburg, Germany, it is around 10 p.m. when I am holding my friend's hair back as he violently pukes into the toilet. Too much beer. I help him find pajamas so he can crawl into one of the beds. I am completely sober.

Dad left for a business trip to Las Vegas in the morning a few days ago, Michigan time. My sisters are waking up like normal and going to school, as they always do. Mom is running errands, taking the dog for walks and testing new parts that came in from China. The next day I will get back on a bus and return to the small town in the middle of Hessen I have called home for the past three months.

And then they get the news. By the time my sisters call me, Mom is already on a plane to Las Vegas. I am in the hallway outside the hostel room around 11 p.m. screaming into the phone, but my sisters reassure me. He's got the best doctor in the area, a specialist in cardiac surgeries. His college friend, Barry, is there with him, along with one of Grandma's nursing friends. He is not alone. He will be okay.

The next morning they book me a ticket to Vegas on the first flight I can catch. Just one more night in my dorm and I will be on the way.

That evening I walk around the neighborhood clutching a rosary and praying frantically in English and German, English and German, trying to escape into the rhythm of prayer, the repetitive words dictating my breathing patterns. I am alone on the side of a hill watching the sun set over an elementary school and all the houses with families inside of them.

Just 20 minutes later when the phone rings I am sitting at my desk, playing music softly. The memories aren't all that clear. Everything fades except the dim light from my desk lamp and the phone buzzing ominously. I don't have to pick it up to know who it is or what she will say.

I tell her I can handle this, I know I can. Tell me what flight to book for the funeral. I can take care of it. This is normal, everyone goes through this. I will make a list—things to pack, trains to catch, people to tell so that I don't fail my classes.

Then somewhere an unearthly panic wells up in my chest and I scream. I throw the phone to the floor, my body going limp, collapsing against my shadow on the wall. I can't

breathe, how can anyone breathe? How am I allowed to still be alive? It is not an angel or a demon or an incredible spirit, just the feeling of 20 years of life being swept out from underneath me, the gates shuttering, keyless locks clamping into place.

That night I do not sleep. I pass out for a single hour around dawn and wake to call the airline to cancel my flight to Vegas. Please don't charge me, I beg. I know this is last minute, the plane is leaving in an hour. But really, it was an emergency, and I am sorry. My dad just died. Please, please don't make us pay that extra money. We need it for the funeral.

And then sleep pulls me back under, a hopeless, dark canon of noiseless shock. I have never known what grief is, or if I am feeling it. I cannot feel a thing, only absence and the sense that I am the only person left in the world.

*Kiss me, down by the broken tree house / Swing me, upon its hanging tire*

I am afraid to see the body. The surgery was hard on him, they said. There is so much fluid in his chest, plus they had to fly him back across the country. I am afraid it won't be my dad, that the image of his distorted remains will be the final memory I have.

The car ride to the funeral home... the walk into the doors... blankly greeting my cousins and Grandma... soft piano music in the background... am I crying? Should I be?

They lead me to where he is laying embalmed in the casket, hands, lips, face swollen to at least three times the size... the toll of trauma. The tips of his fingers are turning black, but somehow the wedding band is still on his finger.

And I feel it—the glaring, poignant absence. He isn't there. I am looking at a home that has been abandoned. All the music has stopped. There isn't even a ringing in my ears. A complete, utter void.

Later I listen to the priest preach about how Dad was a man of God. His body lays with a rosary threaded through his swollen fingers. This was the first time he had been to a church in years.

*Strike up the band and make those fireflies dance / Silver moon's sparkling*

Mom cannot sing that song anymore. She cannot sing at all. It is like the angels took their voice back, if there are any angels on this godforsaken planet.

When I return to Germany, I head right for the hills. My favorite spot in the whole country is along the dirt path by the wind turbines, overlooking the valley. Sarnau and Gossfelden are nested among the rainbow-colored, bordered patches of farmland leading to Wetter, in the distance. Gentle hills roll around the towns, nestling them safely as stitches in a quilt. I told myself one day I would hike to Wetter, but now all I can do is sit. I am in a Monet painting and I can feel the scenery melting before me, wind scarcely touching my face. If it is touching my face I cannot tell. The sun shines and yet it is still so dark.

I think about how easy I have it. I didn't have to wait in the hospital like Mom, heart in her throat, anticipating the doctor's updates. I wasn't on that plane to Vegas with my sisters and Grandma.

When Mom called that night, I was the first of her children to know. It was only a matter of minutes before the rest of the family landed in Vegas. When they boarded the plane, he



was still alive, hanging in limbo. He let go while they were in the air. "How am I going to tell your sisters that their father is dead?" she asked me.

I have played the same tape over and over again in my head: their hopeful smiles, soft hearts breaking to pieces when she tells them in plain English that he is gone. It would have to happen at the airport, so removed from everything else. It is the only image I remember from our conversation.

I think they call that survivor's guilt. My sister is graduating high school and will only have one parent to watch her walk the stage, whereas I had the luxury of both. Grandma is going to a celebration with the constant, nagging reminder of her son's permanent absence. I am sitting on a hill in the most beautiful part of Germany, pulling blades of grass out of the earth and twirling them through my fingers, while Dad's body is an ocean away, six feet underground.

*Bring, bring, bring your flowered hat / We'll take the trail marked on your father's map*

On burial day, Mom notes why the plot diggers are making the hole so big. She will be buried right next to him, she says. The land is already paid for.

Earlier that day, we close the casket for the final time. When we approach the body, she runs her fingers through his hair, brushing it back and kissing his forehead. See you on the other side, she whispers. Every tear is silent. I am watching a woman stronger than Joan of Arc commanding herself to let go.

I think, when her time comes and she reaches the gates of heaven, he will be there, playing the opening chords and waiting for her to sing. In the end, she always sings.

*Nightly, beside the green, green grass*

A year has passed and I still have not visited Dad's grave. It sits unmarked on a hill with the grass slowly growing over it.

Today, we are picking out headstones over text message. They don't make stones like great-grandpa's anymore, Mom says. We can choose from these preset colors, textures, fonts and icons. If we were going to do one like great-grandpa's, we would have to have it custom made. That just costs more money.

Father, son, husband, brother, friend. We are trying to squeeze all these titles on to the small grave marker that will one day sink completely into the ground. We are trying to agree on an icon—angels, crosses, or a floral arrangement? So many earthly decisions.

I haven't seen Mom cry once since the funeral. She soldiers on, through every holiday and decision about the gravesite. She started singing at church again, less than a year later. But my sisters told me she tried to sing "Kiss Me" at a party once and couldn't do it.

Dad, I promise I will return, but I don't know when. Maybe when the headstone is finally put down I will make a pilgrimage to where your body rests. I don't always believe in angels, but I believe in omnipresence—I never lost the part of you that lives in me. Your music and the green, green grass, growing all around.

# OLLY OLLY

Alexa Smith

*I am the only one  
searching for you—and if I get caught,  
then the search is through.*

– “Frontwards,” *Quarantine the Past*

Here's what I remember:

We kind of galloped? Fast fast

badump badump down the long silver living room

rug. *Heigh-ho.* Hey, what

did you think  
of my dinosaur  
collection?

I had a whole big mixing bowl of them  
to show you: tiny plastic personalities  
like a mass grave in a crater.

I think we played hide and seek, too.

Did you find me? Or

give up?

Hey Josh,

What was your street like?

Who was your favorite band?

(Was it a shitty band?) Would I think

your jokes were funny? Did you

have a girlfriend? Did you

think nice things about her?

Did she know it? (He?) Hey, what

was your ferret's name? Did  
you love it? What happened

to it when you died? Did it die  
first? Were you a good dad to

your ferret? Was it named  
Rufus, or did I make that up?

(Why would I make that up?)



Pavement

“Frontwards”

*Slanted and Enchanted*

04/1992

Matador

I remember finding  
 your spray cans in the trash, no  
 or maybe I remember hearing my parents  
 (half your parents) talking about finding  
 your spray cans in the trash, no, or:

the gold-white glare of you  
 and your friend on my building's  
 lip of driveway in the sun, unknowable  
 teens. Did you like to draw too? Did you  
 ever use the cans to draw before you  
 huffed them? Paint, or cream? What's it  
 smell like? After the car, were you broken

into air? Into  
 fuel exhaust? Into

a 90s grunge firmament,

ozone and oil spill and Pavement  
 on the radio? Are you a lyric

on the highway now? A crackle  
 on Grandma's landline? Are you

*the weather on the night news?*

Hey Josh, where are you? I mean  
 where are you buried? Where are  
 the people who knew you in school and  
 do they still visit you now? Did anyone  
 know you at school? Who knew you  
 cutting class fucking around by some  
 creek full of trash? Why do I assume

there was a creek full of trash, a *crick*  
*in the neck of a wood* and a splintered  
 pole, *antique homes, plastic cones,*  
 twist of bones and whiplashed

metal, *heigh-ho, silver,*  
*alloy or chrome?*

What's it like being dead in Virginia?

Hey what color was your favorite? Hey what color  
 was the shirt your body wore the day they hid it  
 underground? What color was the tie

our father wore, the only tie  
 he ever wore in his silver  
 apple-cheeked mythology?

Hey Josh I'm looking for you on Dad's YouTube

He wrote about you once  
 but only once and I remember  
 the line I found it once but I can't find it  
 again, I think it was a video, he said  
 about the car he said

"There is some reason to believe  
 he was trying to miss a deer"

so you died for a deer kind of, hey, did you ever  
 hunt? Did you ever kill an animal? Did you ever touch  
 the warmth of someone else's blood? Were you scared  
 or proud? Did you cry when you watched  
*Bambi*, when the mom died at the start?  
 Did you remember your mom before  
 she left? Was she high? Was she  
 nice to you? What color  
 was her hair?

Hey Josh,  
 were you ever  
 mad at Dad? I hope  
 not. Did you hate that  
 he was my neighbor and  
 never yours? You were just  
 two boys, but he was older.  
 Did you brood as much as  
 we do? Did you have  
 the same gap in  
 your teeth?  
 I hope so.

I only remember one  
 photo of you—murky gray  
 class portrait background, baby *quasar*  
*in the mist* and a velvet-backed frame.  
 You look a lot like him but weasely  
 (or ferrety), I guess you haven't grown  
 into your ears yet. Same color  
 eyes. You're so small,  
 a little myth in my  
 mom's closet.

(Why hers?)

Hey, did you read about myths  
in grade school? Did you read?

Did you have a favorite god?  
Mine were the demis, sons

of mortal lovers who got  
fucked by big Olympus

and turned into gold,  
into birds, into echoes,

into *heigh-ho, silver, ride*  
into trees, olly olly into

oxen roaming free but  
fettered by a cloud of flies,

thighs split  
by lightning,

by fathers,  
by sons.

Did you believe in one,

Josh, in a god or a father?

Did you find them, hey, what

are you hiding down there?

Were you ready?

Are you ready?

Or not?

Here I come.

# Westminster Quarters

Sean Hogan

Midnight. Downstairs, the grandfather clock wakes up: Westminster Quarters followed by twelve sonorous chimes. Upstairs, I'm watching Cartoon Network and eating a bowl of Goldfish® crackers in my aunt's old bedroom. The grandfather clock's twelfth chime dies, and my grandparents' house is silent again, but my grandfather is awake somewhere in the silent house, and he's waiting for me to find him. I always know that he's awake and waiting for me. I open the bedroom door. The hallway is dark, and my family is sleeping behind locked doors: my parents, sisters, grandmother, aunts, cousins, and uncle. I should know that I'm dreaming: my uncle died when I was four. But I have no memories of him, so my subconscious has no way to recreate him; as I walk by his door, I'm only aware of *Uncle*: an eye-floater identity, an echo of an echo, a shadow of a memory. If I remembered my uncle, I'd realize that I'm dreaming, but his nebulous presence is a slack tripwire, and I walk down the hallway. I stop at the top of the stairs. I can sense the totality of my grandparents' house: the thrumming refrigerator, the dripping showerheads, the hearth still warm from the nightly fire. I descend the stairs and knock on the door of my grandfather's study. "Come in", he says, and the door opens. He's sitting at his oaken roll-top desk. He looks up from his book and smiles, and the dream cracks.

My grandfather is dead. He died while we were driving to his deathbed. I remember the funeral, and I remember the construction worker who solemnly removed his helmet as the hearse drove by, and I remember how our family splintered after his death—

"Grandpa? I thought you died", I say. *This can't be real. I remember—*

"I'm not dead. I'm right here."

"But how could I be wrong about something like that?" *Am I wrong?*

"It's okay to be wrong."

"But you've been gone for so long." *It's okay to be wrong.*

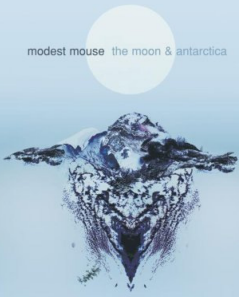
"I'm here now," he says, and I believe him. I always believe him.

I fall into the dream, and my grandparents' house splits time like a prism splits light. I'm in the backyard with my sisters and cousins catching fireflies, and I'm in the basement with my grandfather making a birdhouse in his carpentry workshop. I'm eating rice pudding in the kitchen with my grandmother, and I'm eating Sunday-morning pancakes in the dining room with my family. I'm showering upstairs, and I'm reading *Calvin and Hobbes* downstairs.

But now the dream is dissipating, and my memories are fading. Darkness surrounds my grandparents' house. I'm still with my grandfather in his study, but I'm also outside with my cousin climbing the crabapple tree. I look up at the Moon through the leaves, and then the Moon disappears. I disappear with my cousin and the crabapple tree. I disappear, and I disappear, and I disappear as my memories fade. I disappear until I'm only with my grandfather in his study. My grandfather says something, but I can't understand him. "I can't understand—"

I wake up, and my grandfather is dead again. I try to remember my grandfather's voice before the dream dissipates completely, but I always fail. I'll try harder next time. I open

modest mouse the moon & antarctica



Modest Mouse

"Life Like Weeds"

*The Moon & Antarctica*

06/2000

Epic

my dream journal and write about climbing the crabapple tree, adding it to the memories I've retrieved from this dream. I turn to the last entry about this dream: *September 20, 2018—i cut a piece of carpet from the corner of my grandpa's study. i woke up clutching nothing.* I'm having this dream less frequently. I'm terrified. I hate this dream—waking up hurts so much—but I don't want to lose my grandfather forever. I need this dream. I need him.

# Contributors

Elizabeth Ditty lives in Kansas City, where she is attempting to raise two children with good hearts and strong minds with the help of their father and Daniel Tiger. Her work can be found in *Memoir Mixtapes*, *L'Éphémère Review*, and *Moonchild Magazine*. Additionally, her set of children's stories, "My Sister the Werewolf," is available in the *Bedtime Stories* app.

Kate Washington is a California-based writer and the dining critic for the *Sacramento Bee*. Her work has appeared in *Eater*, *Avidly*, *Catapult*, *Dame*, *Southwest the Magazine*, *Sunset*, *The Bellingham Review*, and many other venues. She is currently at work on her first book, a feminist cultural critique and memoir of family caregiving, forthcoming from Beacon Press. Follow her work on Twitter @washingtonkate, at [kawashington.com](http://kawashington.com), or via her monthly newsletter, [tinyletter.com/alreadytoast](http://tinyletter.com/alreadytoast).

Sarah Priscus writes in Ottawa, Canada, where she attends the University of Ottawa for English and Theatre. She has been published most recently in *Likely Red*, *Luna Luna Magazine*, *Rookie Mag*, and *Atlas and Alice*. She can be found on Twitter at @sarahpriscus.

Colleen Rothman's writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *matchbook*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Mutha Magazine*, and elsewhere. She lives in New Orleans, where she is currently at work on a novel. Find her on Twitter @colleenrothman.

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Jackie Haze is an MFA candidate whose ultimate dream is to live on the road with her little chihuahuas—Bacchus and Lola—making art. She is a spoken word poet, authored *Borderless*, and has had work published on *Curve* and *Happy Cow*.

Kelsi Long is an MFA candidate in Writing & Publishing at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She serves as the associate poetry editor for *Mud Season Review*, the online literary magazine of the Burlington Writers Workshop. Her work has appeared in *Crab Fat Magazine*. Born and raised in Denver, Colorado, she now lives in Montpelier, Vermont. Find her on Twitter: @tweetsbykelsi.

Rosa Boshier is a Pushcart Prize nominated writer whose work can be found or forthcoming in *The Washington Post*, *VICE*, *The Rumpus*, *Joyland Magazine*, *LitHub*, *The Offing*, *Necessary Fiction*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books*, among others. She teaches at Otis College of Art and Design and is finishing a novel on *latinidad* and London punk. Find her retweeting @RosaBoshier.

Dynas Johnson is an English major at Temple University, and has poems in *Sooth Swarm Journal*, *Ghost Proposal*, *Rogue Agent*, and others. When she is not writing, she is probably listening to lo-fi playlists, reading *My Hero Academia*, or wandering Philadelphia. You can find her on Instagram: @dynasaurO, on tumblr: <https://shuidinosaur.tumblr.com>, and at <https://dynasjohnson.wixsite.com/dynasaurO>.



Joaquin Fernandez is a recovering filmmaker and Miami native perpetually drifting west like an errant rain cloud and tinkering with his first novel. His fiction has appeared in *Okay Donkey*, *Cotton Xenomorph*, and *Rhythm and Bones*, among others. His first chapbook, *A Beginners Guide*, comes out this spring and he can be found on Twitter @Joaqertxranger.

Douglas Menagh is a writer based in New York City. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University. He writes reviews for *New Noise Magazine* and song recommendations for *Memoir Mixtapes*. His writing has also appeared in *Lunch Ticket*, *Meow Meow Pow Pow*, *HOOT Review*, and *Annotation Nation*.

Sara Lippmann's collection *Doll Palace* (Dock Street Press) was long-listed for the 2015 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. She was the recipient of an artist's fellowship in fiction from New York Foundation for the Arts, and her work has appeared widely in print and online, notably *Slice Magazine*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Diagram*, *Midnight Breakfast*, Vol. 1 *Brooklyn*, and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing at St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn. Find her at [saralippmann.com](http://saralippmann.com).

Emily Harrison uses writing as an escape from reality and doesn't drink enough water. She can be found on Twitter @emily\_\_harrison, and has had work published with *Ellipsis Zine*, *Storgy*, *Soft Cartel*, *Retreat West*, and *Riggwelter Press* to name a few.

Kim Witbeck is a communications analyst who lives in Oregon and practices fictionalizing various annoyances, life questions, and media obsessions in her spare time. She is currently working on her first historical fiction novel. You can find Kim on [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#).

Carly Madison Taylor is a poet, songwriter, and essayist living in Buffalo, NY. She earned her BA in Creative Writing and Dance Studies from Knox College in 2016. More of her work can be found at *Vamp Cat Magazine*, *Rag Queen Periodical* and forthcoming at *Blanket Sea Magazine*. She's on Twitter @carma\_t and Instagram @car\_ma\_t.

Nica Bengzon is a Filipino writer who is currently working towards her MA in Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines, and (mis)educating the youth at the Ateneo de Manila University. Her work has been published in *Rambutan Literary* and the *Philippines Graphic*, among others. Tweet her pictures of large bodies of water at @mgaocean.

Allie Marini is a cross-genre writer holding degrees from both Antioch University of Los Angeles & New College of Florida. She has been a finalist for Best of the Net and nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her masthead credits include *Lucky Bastard Press*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Spry Literary Journal*, *The Weekenders Magazine*, *Mojave River Press*, & *The Bookshelf Bombshells*. She has published a number of chapbooks, including *Pictures from the Center of The Universe* (Paper Nautilus, winner of the Vella Prize) and *Southern Cryptozoology: A Field Guide to Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Hyacinth Girl Press, finalist for the SFPA's Elgin Award for 2 consecutive years.) In addition to her work on the page, Allie was a member of Oakland's 2017 National Slam Team. A native Floridian now freezing to death in the Bay Area, Allie writes poetry, fiction, and essays. She can be found online @kiddeternity or to book, contact Sugar Booking Entertainment, [sugarbookingentertainment@gmail.com](mailto:sugarbookingentertainment@gmail.com).

**Erin L. Cork** lives in Missoula, Montana where she can be found writing and hiking in the mornings. She works the swing shift as a train dispatcher. She is addicted to music, coffee and trucker hats. She is currently editing her first novel. Her work can be found in *X-R-A-Y Lit*, *Hypnopomp*, *Image OutWrite*, and forthcoming in others. She is a contributing writer for *Memoir Mixtapes'* song recommendations, recently received honorable mention for her short fiction in *Glimmer Train*, and was a finalist in the Tennessee Williams / New Orleans Literary Festival.

**Wanda Deglane** is a Capricorn from Arizona. She is the daughter of Peruvian immigrants and attends Arizona State University. Her poetry has been published or forthcoming from *Rust + Moth*, *Glass Poetry*, *L'Ephemere Review*, and *Yes Poetry*, among other lovely places. Wanda is the author of *Rainlily* (2018), *Lady Saturn* (Rhythm & Bones, 2019), *Venus in Bloom* (Porkbelly Press, 2019), and *Bittersweet* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press, 2019).

For the most part, **Jon Johnson** has no clue what is going on. He enjoys creation and expression in many forms, and finds it best through whichever medium pops out at the moment. Follow Jon on social @jonneeringo, or visit him in Mallorca.

**Jennifer Walter** is currently an editorial assistant and staff writer for the national science magazine, *Discover*. In 2018, she founded *Dad Rock Radio*, an award-winning show that blends tales of family, grief, and loss with 80s alternative rock, alongside her sisters. She tweets as @therealjwalter and posts on Instagram as @rainbowwwwsocks.

**Alexa Smith** grew up in D.C., studied theater in Pittsburgh, and now lives in Philadelphia, where she edits *Apiary Magazine*. You can find her poems in *Entropy*, *Peach Mag*, and *Darkwood*.

**Sean Hogan** lives in the Midwest, and the Midwest lives in him; it's mostly symbiotic.

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