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JACKIE  
MANTEY

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Published by lo-class  
Chicago, Illinois  
lo-class.com



September 2018

Writing & embroidery // Jackie Mantey  
Book layout & design // Gatekeeper Press

Library of Congress Number // 2018953674  
ISBN // 9781642372915  
eISBN // 9781642372922

Printed in the United States of America

To those still searching. Hearts folded in half, torn  
down the middle, and fashioned into sails.

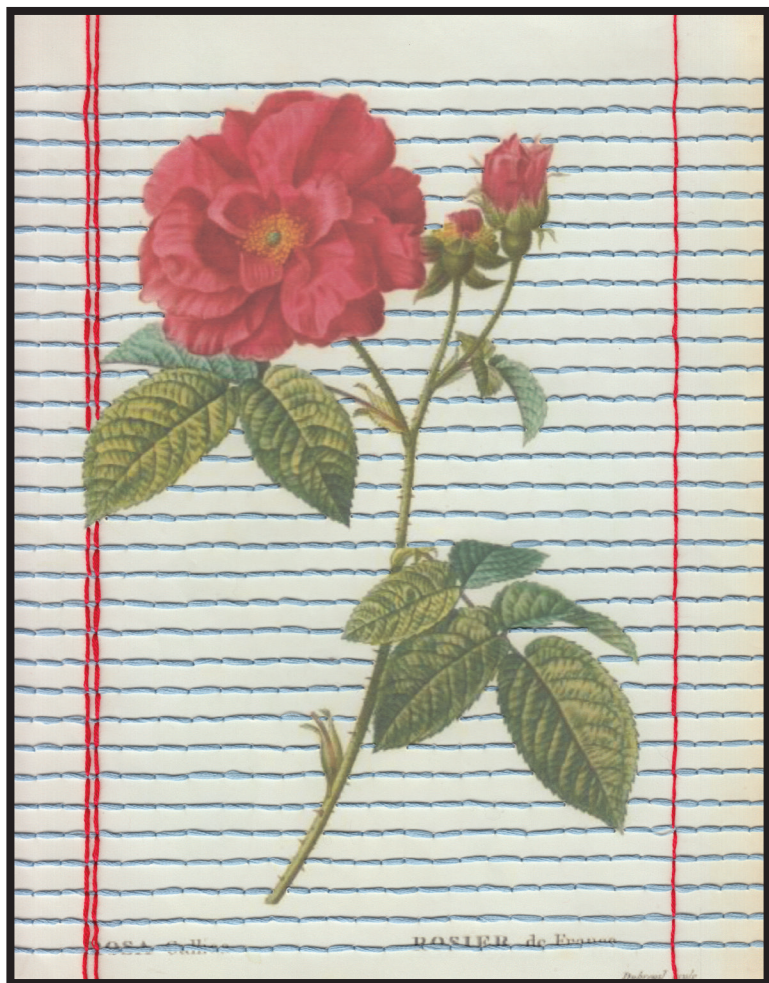


“I am the sea, and nobody owns me.”

—*Pippi Longstocking*

“Don’t you worry about me. I’ll always come out on top.”

—*Pippi, too*



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# PREFACE

## Yes; However



**B**efore I began working as a full-time freelance writer, I held many jobs in more traditional office settings, one of which was being a copywriter for marketing and ad agencies.

As part of this gig, I often joined teams of designers, developers, and account managers to meet with clients and learn about their businesses. This was always the best part of the job. During these “discovery” sessions I got to see behind the scenes of other work environments, ask people about their jobs and what they liked about their life within them, see human drama unfold over spreadsheets and office politics, and then go home and come up with ways that words might help them find solutions.

Very rarely would these sessions reveal anything to me about myself. Until one did in a very profound way.

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My team was visiting a client in a major coastal city, and as part of our visit, we were to conduct a workshop with key stakeholders (that is, VIPs of the business who could provide the best insight for finding a creative direction for whatever deliverable we were working on... and also who would have a say in whether our final product was good enough, meaning we wanted to know what they were looking for so we could find an effective answer on which they all could be convinced to agree/ be happy about).

These workshops were the second best part of the job of a copywriter. You basically got to talk in-depth about creative things and why they worked or didn't.

For these sessions, I would devise and present exercises to lead off discussions about tone of voice and messaging. When it came to copy, how did they want their business to sound? Friendly and warm, or brass-ballsy and confident? Poetic or pragmatic?

What, exactly, those characteristics mean or ultimately sound like are, of course, open to interpretation, so I would find real-world examples of each tone of voice that I thought might work for their company's communications. Those examples would set a mood, and we could then discuss what they did or didn't like about the feelings the mood evoked.

The point wasn't to nitpick the visuals or the messaging of these examples. It was to drill into why the feeling a string of words conjured might work for them—or why it wouldn't.

One of my favorite examples to use in this kind of exercise was the Ram Trucks TV commercial that first aired during the Super Bowl in 2013. Called "So God Made A Farmer," the commercial got its name from its copy's origin, a powerful speech that radio broadcaster Paul Harvey gave at a 1970s Future Farmers of America convention about the work, drive, danger, and sacrifice farmers face on a daily basis.

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Dramatically lit still-life scenes of life on the farm comprise the commercial's imagery. A single steer looks on from a hardened, snow-covered field. A dilapidated one-room church stabs a threatening sky. A man with a pitchfork walks with his loyal canine. An American flag hangs behind a window covered in dust. A family bows their heads over a kitchen table. A young boy hauls bales of straw half his size, holds his hat over his heart in salute. A man's worn and calloused hands clasp themselves in a tender moment of prayer. A farmhouse alights the early morning darkness, its inhabitants getting dressed for chores before the rest of the country even hits snooze.

It's beautiful, moving, and a highlight reel of life as a modern farmer. The words, though written decades ago, reverberate through any spirit formed by these environments of land, liberty, and familial dedication. You wake up early. You work to the bone. You depend on ancient knowledge to tame forces beyond your control, you depend on luck, and you depend on backbreakingly hard work to feed your family. Most of all, you depend on each other.

That day in that workshop I watched the short commercial alongside everyone else. I probably wiped tears from my eyes with the sleeve of my smartly pressed lady blazer by the time it was done.

I flipped on the lights and looked around the board room table, awaiting the amazed exhale of breath we were all most assuredly holding, deeply inspired by the combination of imagery and humble storytelling and life of America's hard-working class and the loss and growth and the heart and the courage and the thank God I'm a country boy! Yeeeeehaw!

A gentleman toward the front of the table spoke first.

Here we go, I thought, beaming. Now, let's talk about why this commercial is so great! Hurry, so we have enough

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time to geek out our praise before the sushi and filtered water lunch is delivered!

“What?” he asked sarcastically, a little scoff somersaulting off the back of his throat for effect.

“Are there no farmers of color?”

omg.

omgomgomg.

dslkfjlasd;fj hahaha.

This comment caught me completely off guard. I wanted to smack him and hug him at the same time.

I mean, I wanted to smack him because he was *sooo* self-congratulatory in his observation, and this was *NOT* the point of my exercise! We were here to talk language and feeling, not imagery! Also, did he not just watch what I did? Why was his skin not similarly covered in goosebumps?!

And I wanted to hug him because he was right.

The commercial fails if we're trying to have a conversation of diversity and representation. The commercial has just one photo of a farmer who isn't white. I think. It's kind of hard to tell. Mostly it's just old Caucasian men in cowboy hats.

Where are the migrant farmers? The American farmers of color? Where's the story of the farming industry that is fucked up? Must we really go on propping up this single profession as the only one whose workers know sacrifice or is composed of people who care about being a patriot (see also: coal miners)? Must we keep caring about jobs that disintegrate as technology evolves only if they belong to white people? Must we really continue to pretend that all farmers love the land and animals and that there isn't a serious problem

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with how its systems can negatively change the environment? Must we really continue high-fiving a community that's trying desperately to achieve the same thing the rest of us are also trying desperately to achieve: Work hard, be a good person, help our community, get enough sleep to try it all again tomorrow?

But hot damn, did this ad know its audience. Because let's not lose sight of the fact that it was made with the sole purpose of selling something. Old Caucasian men in cowboy hats and their kindly wives and loyal children are just the kind of people who would have both the means and desire to buy these motoring monstrosities. (I'm a Chevy girl, myself. Wink.)

I know because I come from them. I am the flesh and bone product of two very long white lines of Catholic, Conservative, America-aggrandizing farmers.

I'm now none of those things except white. I'm not Catholic. I'm not Conservative. I love America but I'm also very angry at it and what it's done to get to the top of the pack. Aaaaand, I spent the better part of my young adult life seeking out a good time and a different kind of white line, ifyaknowwhatimean.

That commercial romanticizes a life I love and also love to hate. It stirs up two very deeply rooted identities held within myself, beliefs that when poked, irritate and seemingly cancel out the other, leaving me feeling bereft of meaning. I belong to this tribe of glorified countrymen and I don't; I want to shout at this commercial that farming is not all it's cracked up to be, while I also want to cry tears of thanks for being seen, because at the heart of it, when just feelings are involved, that commercial speaks to anyone who loves, is, or once was a farmer.

At the end of the commercial, when Paul Harvey says a farmer smiles because "his son says he wants to spend his life

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doing what Dad does” some animalistic part of me flinches. As much as I wish I could have turned out like the commercial’s little girl—wearing a plaid shirt and a look of humble, determined pride in front of her pappy’s cornfield—I 100% did not.

My surprised reaction to a VIP’s statement in a client workshop represents something it’s taken me a painfully long time to accept: Two seemingly oppositional things can be correct or true at once.

As humans trying to make it to our individual ends without fucking things up too badly, we all walk on ice. Some of ours is made more slippery than others because of racism, abuse of power, homophobia, sexism, place of birth—you name it, the world’s got it. My ice isn’t even one quarter as dangerous as some people’s ice, but it is split between my feet and the sides are shifting in different directions.

I’ve spent my life trying to carve a space for myself that balances these two identities: A starry eyed farmer’s daughter, and a hardened intelligent woman who calls bullshit on so much of it. I seek a space inside myself that allows for that client’s one-sentence critique of country life glorification, while simultaneously respecting the humans who do this kind of blue-collar work for a living—humans who have same the blood and mud running through them as I do through me.

Instead, I mostly find myself somewhere in the middle, running up against the two highly protective and righteous sides.



That night, when the workshop was completed, I headed back to my hotel room for the evening. At about the time my dad, two time zones away, was waking up to milk a herd of Ohio Holsteins, there was a shooting on the street right outside my hotel window.

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Having lived in a city with sirens going all hours of the day for the past seven years, I wasn't too fazed. I stayed in bed, shot up (ha) a prayer asking that no one die, and went back to sleep bathed in pulsing blue and red light. The next morning the street looked like nothing had happened.

Today, when my husband and I travel the States together for his job, we regularly stop in small towns for food or gas or photos at fun tourist traps. Only in small towns do we get tongue-tsks to be safe when we say we live in Chicago. "Ah, the most dangerous city in the country!" "Don't get shot!"

These small towns are also the only places I see people subtly balk at my husband's ambiguously brown complexion (he's Guatemalan-Polish). Maybe it's just because I'm looking for that kind of red-flag-raising body language there because of my experiences. Maybe it's my own stereotypes of small town citizens that make me overzealous in switching some flip inside me and leading with my friendly farm girl charm to signal that he's with me, and I'm safe for them.

Isn't that fucked up? Don't answer. It is. Of me and them.

I'm lucky to feel relatively safe wherever I go. I'm lucky to travel through my day without doubting that the police are there to protect me. I'm lucky (and truly lousy) with privileges. I had a one in four trillion chance of being born into this birth lottery and that win, what with all its safety trophies and whole-person allowances, are not lost on me. I recognize that I am lucky to have had a choice, as well as the upward momentum and resulting means, to pick where I live as an adult.

However.

That doesn't discount the fact that there is a grief inherent in knowing that no matter how many times you visit the home you grew up in, you'll always be in the process of leaving again because your heart and soul don't belong there, even if your body was formed in its fold.


Going.

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Being gone.

Far away.

The difference I see in me, as I am today, and the me that would have loved living in a small town forever, is as slight and subtle as a comma—a comma that's big enough to crack a chasm and tear an icy heart wide open.



What's interesting, is that I actually feel safer in places like Chicago because the realities of America are on the surface of everything here. I'd rather know the truth of what our country needs to fix. I'd rather face those fears head on and realize that the most dangerous thing we'll ever face is ignorance and the cruel, predictable domino effect it engenders.

I'd just rather live in a place where the majority of people hold the same values and convictions I do. Don't we all? Things are just easier that way.

I also feel safer in Chicago than I ever have anywhere else because I made a huge life change when I moved here. I quit drinking, which is what mostly put me in situations of danger beforehand. To help me quit, I started making embroideries on historical images as a way to productively spend all this extra time on my hands (hangovers and/or blackouts used to take up entire weekends of my existence). They also became a way to do something physical for hours in order to be present in my body, which is an important skill when you need to fend off cravings.

Shortly after my arrival in Chicago from Columbus, Ohio, the 2016 presidential election happened. My train ride to work the next day was one of the most unusual experiences of my life. It was painfully quiet, and the envelope

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of grief and dismay that seemed to settle around this town hasn't let up almost two years later.

Soon the narrative of the rural-urban divide blew up on the national level and took over my Facebook feed. Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule—hello, nuance, my old friend—but I could generally tell where people stood on the issue of the election based on where they lived or where I had met them. Their exaltations of glee at Trump winning or expressions of rage/grief/what-the-hell-just-happened-disbelief at Hillary's defeat (and, remember, her decent general pop win that didn't matter when all was said and done because who really has power in this country anyway?) almost always aligned with where they lived—Main Street or metropolis. (My third-party buds were harder to generalize.)

That was a really raw moment for everyone in this country. I had my own share of arguments and reactions on social media. I unfriended one supposedly Christian woman I grew up around after she posted, “Ding dong the witch is dead!” I was unfriended by a family member who was important to me. It was no Civil War brother-against-brother kind of extreme, but it was destructive to relationships nonetheless and sent us on the downward spiral we're still trying to slow.

In this state of things, the embroideries I was playing around with became more to me than a way to heal from addiction. They became a healthy, productive escape from the overwhelming, verbally violent conversations happening in my social media spheres and in a news cycle collapsing on itself.



This book is a result of that work and those moments alone to come to terms with a divided country that strangely mirrored my own divided self. Though these stories and my gallery show's

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artwork represent a personal dialogue, I think it's a familiar one for all of us as America struggles to reckon with its past and redefine itself for a fairer, more representative future.

"Gone, Country" the gallery exhibition presented work on black and white images selected from the public domain of the New York Public Library's digital collection. The photographs used as source material for the exhibition were all search results for the words "Home," "Ohio," "Chicago," "Local," or "Native."

The work was inspired by America's contemporary rural/urban divide, a division highlighted and exacerbated by the corrosive dialogue of the 2016 presidential election, and created visual cues meant to warp the story of the original image. The work is playful but witnessed through the plastic, surreal lens of modern America, as well as our individual experiences of isolation as we culturally struggle with a national identity crisis—a national identity crisis that has been a long time coming. As progress continues to polarize traditionally privileged communities, a look back at American history tells a more layered and tragic story. Representation matters more than ever and can be the pen that rewrites our entire history.

Presented alongside each image title of the gallery show was the original name of the historical photograph. The language and terminology used in these original titles is important. Whose portraits have names deemed worthy enough to record? What locations and homes have been recorded for posterity? How did Americans think of and name or describe other Americans in their captions? I lean into this when rewriting the imagery's story with needle and thread.

For example, the stitched embroidery in the show's piece "America is typing..." (not shown in this book) referenced the time Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 16-year-old *child*, was murdered and declared dead on February 26, 2012; the embroidery referenced the pervasive visual culture

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of today, specifically Facebook messenger, and how we now communicate urgent issues across state lines.

Throughout the exhibition were evocations of both rural and city life; their traditions, aesthetic, and people; their similarities and power-sanctioned differences; and the things our country has taken, given, or brutally left behind/extinguished. Each image was framed in repurposed barn wood that was torn down as America's landscape changes, a simultaneous celebration and mourning of one kind of world, the kind that surrounded me for a long time. The frames were painted pink on their outside edges, a nod to the bright world I found outside the farm.

This book was written as a companion piece to the exhibition described above and represents just one individual's experience living on the divide. Its sections represent values of all contemporary American life, as viewed from my multi-influenced perspective.

Several pieces from the exhibition are featured in this book, but much of the artwork found on these pages are additional embroideries I've made in my two years since arriving in Chicago. I think they represent a woman coming to terms with a new way of life, one outside Ohio, one without addiction, and searching for a new home inside herself amid those profound changes.



My practice is powered by the search. I find these images by searching a word or phrase and use the public domain images that result. The act of searching for answers in our lives has experienced massive change since the birth of the Google search bar, and I enjoy seeing what diverse images appear in my search results based on one or two words that

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tie them together. It reminds me of the way words can connect us or keep us apart.

These images often surprise me, for various reasons, including my own reactions or nonreactions to imagery. A Dorothea Lange photograph described as “Young girl, cotton picker, she migrates with her family from crop to crop, and lives under conditions of deprivation” looks like something straight from the Colonies in “The Handmaid’s Tale”; my heart fell a little when I saw the year this image was taken: 1941, which wasn’t long ago at all. I’m struck by how my reaction of sadness and my interest in the photo is based on the fact that the girl looks like me, young and white. Do I react with the same sadness or longing to give a subject a better life when I see a photo of a migrant farmer and his or her family today? Why am I more numb to those modern day images? Because they are of people who don’t look like me? Because it’s harder to face something happening today versus something that already resolved itself?

Over her image I stitched a pink circle. It looks like she’s blowing a piece of bubblegum. I wanted to give her a better life.

Photographs like the one of the girl in the field show up a lot in my work. I try to only embroider on images that I think should be reimaged because they can have a new meaning amid today’s cultural conversations (and sometimes just because I have an emotional reaction to an image and think it’d look cool with thread on it... sometimes it’s purely a visual motivation).

I don’t select images whose stories haven’t been fully told in the first place, and I don’t select images that I think are not ethically mine to corrupt. More specifically, some searches have led me to truly sickening images of American slavery or minorities being demeaned and even murdered, from the Jim Crow era through the early half of the last century.

I won’t use such images for two reasons:

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1) They speak loud enough of atrocity on their own and deserve to be shared, looked at, included, and studied, without my voice being added to them. The after-effects of those times in American history should remind us of how the legacy of white supremacy has given certain advantages to all of us who are white in 2018, whether we think we are racist as individuals or not. Because of that, I think it's my responsibility to take a seat, keep my eyes open, and just listen to the story that original image can tell me instead of trying to exploit it for my own benefit.

2) So many of those images are representative of a human being's most humiliating or terrifying moment, as witnessed by, typically, a non-minority. These images have historical relevance. I champion the power of imagery, social realism, and photojournalism that tells the truth, no matter how violent or upsetting. And I think it's important that we look at such images to remember what happened. That way we can fix the baggage it caused and that we still carry in our own time, and we can be motivated to prevent it from happening again. Those images can change the world and influence minds and move us toward fixing a terrible problem. However, my work isn't capable of or even trying to do

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such things. Using those images, even if I had good intentions of trying to elevate historical horrors to the light in order to make people look, would be self-serving and gratuitous. Like images of poverty porn. Liberal virtue signaling. Instead, I try to pick images that reflect a human who is defiant in the face of oppression. We too often don't look back at all, *or* we lionize imagery that merely evokes pity for a person instead of respect for or interest in what came before whatever awful moment is depicted in the frame. Deciding to use images of minorities only if they make me curious about the layered humanity of the person shown and make me feel inspired by a fighting spirit holding on to its self-worth—whatever the circumstances—seems to me the best thing to do.

There's a lot to learn from each image I come across in my searches. Much insight can be mined from what images or artworks were made before we all had a camera in our pockets and a drawing program on our desktops—back when the economy of film or cost of production was top of mind for a photographer or printer. What was deemed worth photographing and how were those images organized? What kind of theater was being made, what kind of songs were being written? Whose stories did they tell? Or, sometimes more importantly, not tell?

History—our own, everyone else's, the world's, our country's—holds every answer we need if we're willing to look for it.

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And why needle and thread? Because it's traditionally considered women's work, and sweet fuck I love women. I love the magic that can happen when we commune, and that's what textile work represented to many women of American history. I like feeling part of that history. I like using materials that women have long employed to clothe, protect, and celebrate their families. In its early stages, needlepoint and embroidery were luxuries of the upper crust, but eventually it became a creative outlet for lower social circles. Although we think of hand embroidery and needlepoint today as the territory of our elders, a new wave of women artists is reimagining its potential as an art form for social activism. Also, as previously mentioned, I think thread just looks cool on printed image. It feels like a connection to my past and the women who raised me. My linework is crude, low brow, and folk art-ish, the working-class mojo of which I eat right up.



The stories, opinions, and experiences throughout “Gone, Country” are difficult to share. Not because I’m ashamed of them or don’t know them to be true. It’s difficult for anyone to put themselves out there with a piece of art or writing. I fear being misunderstood or plopped into one pre-determined bucket that’s increasingly harder to climb out of.

It seems as if this bucket-labeling is becoming easier and easier to do as we talk to each other strictly via phone and tweet or get too busy-busy-busy to devote an extended period of mental time toward understanding something as profound as another human being. Making assumptions about a person’s entire character based on this is a dangerous game we’ve all been forced to play.

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What's lost in our assumptions about one another is the understanding that a person can evolve or grow. They can say something one year that they would never say the next. They can say something you hear without the context it needs. Or they can mean something totally different than how you interpreted it.

Take "Born in the USA," the mammoth hit by Bruce Springsteen (I'll come back to him later). "Born in the USA" is a protest song, but he knew its legacy as such was in trouble when little boys showed up trick or treating with red bandanas on their heads and his song on their lips. Springsteen wrote this about the hit in his 2016 autobiography:

"It was a GI blues, the verses an accounting, the choruses a declaration of the one sure thing that could not be denied... birthplace. Birthplace, and the right to all of the blood, confusion, blessings, and grace that come with it. Having paid body and soul, you have earned, many times over the right to claim and shape your piece of home ground. 'Born in the USA' remains one of my greatest and most misunderstood pieces of music. The combination of its 'down' blues verses and its 'up' declarative choruses, its demand for the right of a 'critical' patriotic voice along with pride of birth, was too seemingly conflicting (or just a bother!) for some of its more carefree, less discerning listeners. (This, my friend, is the way the pop political ball can often bounce.) Records are often

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auditory Rorschach tests; we hear what we want to hear.”

I guess it’s not unlike (on a much, much smaller stage) asking clients what they think a word means or a commercial represents. I hope you read this book and take what you need from it. I hope you stay open to the stories and experiences of others. I hope it helps you approach the world thoughtfully, and I hope you tell your own stories, experiences, and truths in as many ways as possible until you start to understand them as things that can grow your appreciation for yourself—and all the other selves who walk this world with you.

Bruce, per usual, says it better and more succinctly than I ever could (as he does in-concert before launching into my favorite song, “Born to Run,” in a YouTube video I watch pretty much all the time):

“Nobody wins unless everybody wins.”

Enjoy.

—*Jackie Mantey, July 2018*



# HOME

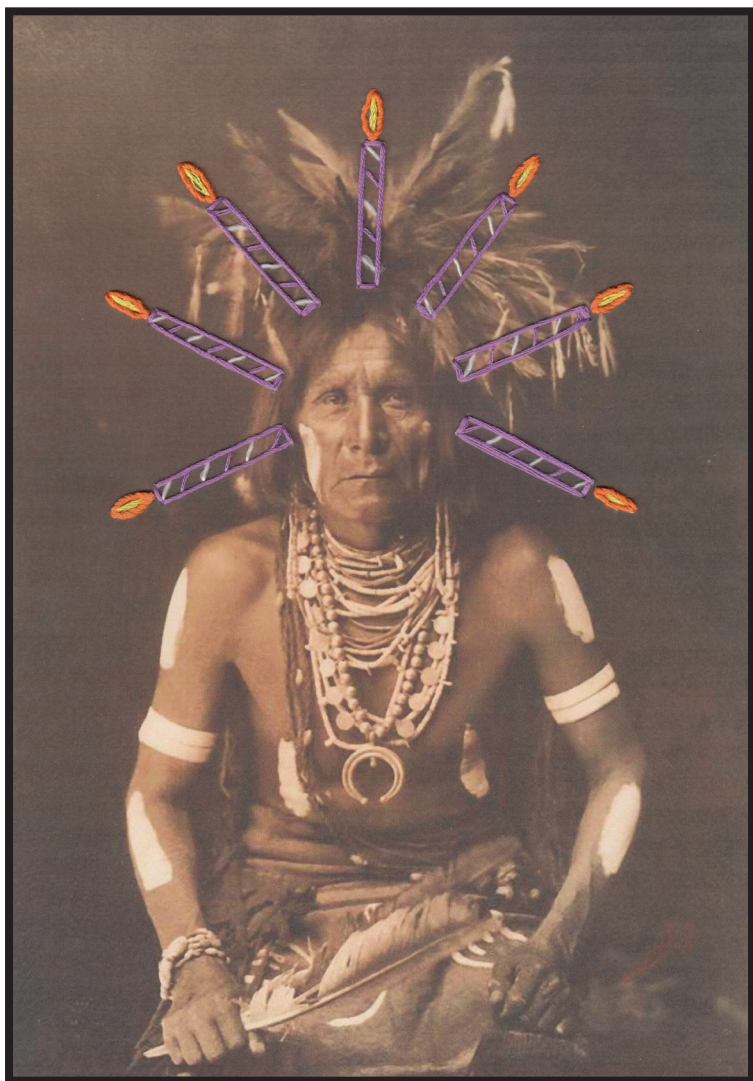


Home is where the ding of a spoon hitting the cereal bowl is in tune with the beating rhythm of your chest.

Home is where you know three extra ways to get in the back if you lose your key or if the garage door opener battery is busted.

Home is where you know exactly who just pulled up the driveway based on the way their headlights dance across your bedroom wall.

Home is where it's safe to be naïve.



# PORTAGE PARK

**I**n 2013, Kanye West debuted his music video for “New Slaves” by screening it onto 66 buildings around the world.

One of those buildings was a Walgreen’s in Chicago’s Wicker Park. Excited fans on Twitter started describing the projection, calling out its location on the “Six Corners” of Wicker Park.

That was a problem.

See, a Six Corners already existed in Chicago, and not in the sparkling Wicker area. With alarm, residents of sleepier, admittedly less hip Portage Park on the northwest side took to the internet to set things straight.

“Hey,” they practically shouted in unison. “Name’s taken.”

One visit to Portage Park’s Six Corners and you can’t really blame newcomers for not knowing about it.

The shopping district is so named because it’s a six-point intersection of Milwaukee, Cicero, and Irving Park roads. Headlining from this Six Corners today are the following: an abandoned-looking Six Corners Plaza, a Sprint, a Vitamin Shoppe, a Mattress Firm, a shuttered Sears, and a pit of mud that’s a development project that’s sputtered and stalled, sputtered and stalled again.

The same year as the music video brouhaha, a team developed a master plan to help breathe life back into the place. It included recommendations for improving the mixed-use

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shopping available, making more public spaces where people would want to hang out, building on the nearby historic Portage Theater as a mainstay for entertainment, and making it a more pedestrian- and bike-friendly environment.

Several years after the fact and it's difficult to spot any of that. In short, there's nothing seemingly worth the ride out here.



I do, though, ride out to Portage Park a lot.

It started when I had to head westward from our new apartment in neighboring Irving Park to get to the nearest Chicago Public Library branch. On one of my visits, a fellow book lover told me about City Newsstand and Café, located on Cicero Avenue's forearm of Six Corners.

City Newsstand and Café is a cozy shop, original neon sign beckoning, with a coffee counter, homemade chocolate truffles for sale, small tables for typing out the next great American novel, a smaller space near the street-facing windows where visiting musicians often play, and—drumroll please—the largest selection of print magazines in Chicago.

Owner Joe Angelastri bought the place in 1978, when he was 18 years old and when City Newsstand was just a traditional outdoor newsstand on the now-Sprint tip of Six Corners.

Calling it “just a newsstand” is a bit misleading. It was a destination for many, including some of Angelastri's high school friends who, he says, “would come to the newsstand to hang out to see the girls who were coming to shop.”

That's because Portage Park's Six Corners was once a hot destination itself. Though this storied intersection's neighborhood struggles with defining itself today among Chicago's 76

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others (beyond being where the Smashing Pumpkins played their first show), it was once \*the\* place to go shopping outside of the Loop. People would come from all over to visit Portage Park, shop its Sears, and watch a movie at the theater.

Angelastrì's newsstand on the corner was a popular place for area residents, too. A beat cop could often be found there, as well as a Slim Jim tool, which saw a lot of action in those days jimmying open car doors when keys were accidentally locked behind them.

"I liked the people and the excitement of the newsstand," Angelastrì says. "Back in those days, there were papers coming in all day long. Even then people were talking about the decline of newspapers."

As we all know too well, decline they did, but City Newsstand found ways to survive. In 2000, it moved into its current indoors Six Corners location and Angelastrì's growing team took over another legacy newsstand in Evanston.

Some of the regulars from Angelastrì's days at the corner stand still get their news here. With 200 feet of magazine racks hosting 5,200 titles, newbies are bound to make their way to this hidden gem on Cicero Avenue, too. The store has visitors come from as far away as Iowa and Wisconsin to shop its selection.

"We kept the newsstand open until 2000 but trends kept going away from newspapers, so we went really big into magazines," he says. "Then smartphones came out. Now the magazines are under a lot of pressure."

So, the store kept reinventing itself, adding more books, the café entertainment, and a menu that includes the aforementioned fan-fave truffles (proceeds of which are donated to community law enforcement). The shop is a stop for local musicians to play, including blues legend Lurrie Bell, who lives nearby and became a regular after coming to the store to get a music magazine that had written about his work.

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The clientele of steady regulars is indicative of Portage Park's strong bonds and community closeness, Angelastris says.

"We were really optimistic at one point, where we thought the neighborhood was going to explode. It's a little bit sad to see it didn't turn out as we first expected, but there's a lot of new energy and ideas," Angelastris says, adding that though the neighborhood could be overlooked as a place to launch a business, it shouldn't be. "It's a good neighborhood, and you're going to get very dedicated people. That's going to get you through the rough times."

More rough times could be ahead.

"There's a lot of anxiety at Sears closing, and the Bank of America site is still vacant," Angelastris says. "There's a lot of general anxiety about what's going to happen."

Indeed, it was announced, shortly after he said this, that the sprawling Sears at Six Corners was throwing in its fairly priced linen towel and closing up shop.

I don't care.

I'm not looking for a home near Sears, I'm looking for a home near places like City Newsstand and Café. The fact that City News exists and has found ways to stay true to itself and its community—even as its industry and location underwent overwhelming changes while battling some heavy hitters for their reps—makes it easier, exciting even, to picture living in Portage Park. I forever dig a scrappy spirit.

That, and the fact that the neighborhood has been noted for its accessible real estate in a city where finding affordable, safe, and spacious housing is kind of a nightmare. Portage Park was one of four West Side neighborhoods in *Chicago Magazine's* recent roundup of best places to live in the city and was particularly applauded for its "terrific housing deals for first-time homebuyers."

<Raises hand and waves relentlessly.>

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It gets better: Later the magazine also noted Portage Park as a sales star, with the most single-family home sales in the city (tied with Ashburn); the median home sale price in Portage Park was \$279,950.

I've lived in Chicago for a little over two years now, and most of the residents I meet weren't born here and didn't grow up here. That's always been a common story for this city. Many of Portage Park's settlers were immigrants from Poland. By 1920, Chicago's population had grown by 2,450% (!) since 1860, and many immigrant Poles headed to Portage Park.

Then, as it is now, Portage Park represented a place where working-class homeownership might be possible. (This bodes well for my Chicago homeownership pipe dream.) Sixty percent of all families in the Portage Park area owned their own home in 1920, compared to only 25% throughout the rest of Chicago. The immigrants headed here for the churches, to be near neighbors and family from the old country, and to leave the suffocating, densely populated downtown for more rural living.

Rural no more, Portage Park has recently experienced a Polish population plummet. Between 2000 and 2016, around 41 percent had left the neighborhood, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Many moved to more suburban areas for varied reasons, schools being one of the more prominent.

New people like me are moving in and taking their place. I grew up on a dairy farm in a small town in Marion, Ohio, a place that leaned one particular way in the 2016 presidential election.

"Hey," they practically voted in unison (well, 64%). "Country's taken."

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Since the election, when the differences between rural and urban communities have been held under a microscope, I've noticed more similarities between the two than I ever had during my time living in cities beforehand. Probably because it was on my radar more thanks to the news narrative of the rural urban divide. But part of it can also be attributed to the fact that I'm a little homesick and ready to settle in, the easiest remedy to which seems like buying a home of my own.

Though having a rural address once represented "making it" to many Americans (who were born the "right" color to extend out there), the opposite is true for me today. I want to own a home in Chicago proper.

I talk to a friend who did grow up in Chicago, the talented musician Rich Jones. His parents still live in his childhood home in Old Irving Park, neighbor to Portage Park. His grandmother convinced them to buy the house because it had a raspberry bush.

I ask him to describe Portage Park. What was it like as a kid? What's it known for now? His answer is about what I expected: It's where families live. It's residential. It just is.

That is, not cool, exactly, but possibly affordable for a family like mine. And, small-town child that I am, I think, "Yes, but it's still CHICAGO!!!!" pickle-juice-drenched-hot-dog cartoon eyes practically popping out of my head.

I'm not alone. Granted, the reason I'm in Chicago is bound to build in some bias of whom I meet here. We moved to Chicago from Columbus, Ohio, so my husband could further pursue his career in comedy, so I'm mostly hanging out with writer, designer, artist, comedian types from the city's growing creative class. My buddy Rich is the exception in these circles. Most people I meet here who are Millennial-aged like me are Midwestern kids, Rust Belt babies, rural escapees similar to myself. Growing up in small towns before cell phones or the internet or TED Talks or a local TJ Maxx,

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without high-tech amenities and binge TV shows and self-expression on demand, was, well, challenging for many of us.

We came to big cities like Columbus and bigger-big Chicago looking for job opportunity, higher salaries, culture, each other, and, dear god, anything else to do on a fall Friday night than the high school football game and Applebee's half-price happy hour.

But mostly we're willing to live in the red here because we want to be part of Chicago's blue. Its progressive lean is Chicago's number one selling point to me. The desire to be around "people like me" has always been a natural tendency for country and city mice alike when deciding where to live. When I see this desire in myself—though arrived at via decidedly different considerations than my country or historical counterparts—I can't fault my rural friends from having it, too.

I also have a romantic notion that all of us small town ex-pats in cities like Chicago are emotional pioneers; people willing to move away for the chance at a better life (or more accurately put, lifestyle) that's spiritually aligned to our own philosophies.

We are, for the most part, soft-hearted, strong-minded spiritual nomads in search of a protest and Pride parade.

We could, technically and legally, practice our religion of gentrification/ higher education/ yoga in the park in our small hometowns, but why do that if we're advantaged enough to take our lonely little souls somewhere else—like, say, the metropolises idolized in pre-wifi pop culture as weirdo promised lands, with little mention of, say, political corruption or racist division of resources or rampant segregation or jaw-droppingly high rent?

No matter. This kind of lonely little soul is often also relentlessly hopeful. That's why so many of us are artists (or

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as an aunt once described me, “artsy fartsy”), even if just by way of a side hustle.

In the evolving taxonomy of pioneering, emotional pioneers are the only kind of pioneer left in contemporary American society. And being a pioneer is still something to be proud of. It’s the one type of historical figure not completely, rightfully, downgraded in the re-evaluation of our country’s shamefully brutal past.



It’s cute to think about Rich’s grandma being smitten by the raspberry bush in a home’s yard. My own grandma in Ohio is deteriorating quickly. She has Alzheimer’s, which means she’s suffering, confused about where she is and where she’s been on a near minute-to-minute basis.

In a cruel twist of fate, everything in our world seems to be moving forward at rapid speed—everything except a cure for Alzheimer’s. The most recent memory loss prevention drug was approved by the FDA a long 15 years ago.

To watch a loved one regress to a state of child-like dependency and cognition is awful, especially for the people who counted on this adult to guide them through their own childhood. I think it’s a similarly surreal (though less personally painful) experience to watch a beloved place decline.

In 1938, two years after my grandma was born, the Sears at Portage Park’s Six Corners opened with great fanfare. Nearly 100,000 people came to see this exciting new spin on shopping. It was the five-floor future of American retail! Aw heck, the future of America! It even had air conditioning! And sprinklers! Escalators! Parking!

The location’s life stories soon paralleled what was happening in the country’s larger landscape. The \$1 million

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building featured an art moderne edifice to showcase the merchandise and was made out of not brick or limestone, but monolithic concrete. The *Tribune* wrote about an “invasion” of tens of thousands of shoppers clamoring for the Sears’ shipment of war-scare supplies during World War II. Later, as suburban malls grew in size and offering, and as downtown newcomers made it unnecessary to travel up to Portage Park to shop, Sears at Six Corners started to lose its all-star-attraction traction.

So, what does it mean when something like that metaphorically crumbles? It’s a tangible marker that we’ve moved on, I guess. A reminder that nothing—not a landmark or a reputation or a culture or a business or a mind—can thrive forever. For better or worse.

In between my visits to Portage Park to pick up holds from the library, walk the sidewalks, shop City News’ literary selections (and, I’m telling you, these chocolate truffles), imagine a life in the quiet neighborhood’s brick bungalows, and wryly admire the neighborhood Polish dance club’s old-timey sign of a couple dancing (which hilariously contrasts the company’s flashy Facebook photos), I visit my childhood home in Ohio.

The impetus for this visit is disheartening: The dairy farm that has been in my family for more generations than I can count is closing. My father and uncle, the farm’s owners who have been milking cows there since the 1960s (imagine, decades at the same gig!), are retiring at the end of the year.

In an economic climate where, as one family farmer recently described it to *NBC News*, “we could buy all the gallons of milk out of the grocery store, bring them home to our bulk tank, pour it in there, and sell it back to them and make more money” than producing one’s own milk to sell, running a family dairy is now in danger of being a great American money pit.

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It's hard to imagine a quaint, fully functioning dairy farm operating out of a Chicago neighborhood today (I can only imagine complaints about the smell), but there was once one on North Kostner Avenue just outside Portage Park; Bowman Dairy provided milk for the neighborhood's residents until 1966, when it was bought out by Dean Foods.

Our farm held out longer, thanks in part to its rural location, but it was decided that this would be the year it stopped functioning for good, lest future generations be subjected to this unique kind of heartbreak.

Our Holsteins were long gone and sold off to bigger, more-corporate pastures by the time my Chicago plane landed two states over. The lineage of each cow (which my dad has admirably memorized because he gave each newborn heifer a name that started with the same letter as her mother's) is most certainly lost, too. They're just numbers now.

While I'm home, my grandpa, who is the husband, and now caregiver, to my sick grandma, lets me read a letter that was recently delivered to the tractor museum he volunteers for, a museum dedicated to the Gilded Age inventions of Edward Huber (a Marion man who also happens to be my great-great-great grandfather).

The letter was from a self-described "son of a Crawford County farmer" and looked like it had been written on a typewriter. The sender thanked the museum for its work in memorializing the industrialization of agriculture and lamented the loss of an independent farmer's self-dependent lifestyle.

Toward the end of the heartfelt letter, the penman also wrote this: "We need men like Edward Huber who began making whatever the farmer needed to be more productive than we do the Harvard trained economists who have never got DIRTY at work." [Emphasis his.]

Ouch.

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It's difficult not to take his rhetoric personally. I turned out to be more collegiate-type than cowgirl, so statements like that are salt licks in wounds caused by my leaving home for the "big city." It reminds me that I, if you want to look at it this way (and sometimes I do), abandoned the community that raised me and a hurting industry I don't love, really, but that is steeped in my familial success, obligation, legacy, and identity.

Also, it makes me angry. That kind of rhetoric patronizes a very important kind of work. And even if you don't think it's important, intellectual work is still work, even if it isn't physical or DIRTY.

More importantly, I would trade 500 farmers for one latte-sipping Harvard professor who could find a cure for Alzheimer's.



Have you ever witnessed a department store closing?

It's a lot like letting go of a memory. It starts so slowly that you don't feel like it's really ever going to slip away. But then the barking, increasingly desperate warning signs crop up: "Store Closing Sale!" "NOTHING HELD BACK!" "Was it Betty or Alice who fancied Fred in primary school?" Until suddenly the whole thing is just a husk of what once meant a great deal to a great many people. The process of retreat feels like a lucid dream. Did that really even happen at all?

In the case of the last Sears in Chicago, the Sears in Portage Park, the announcement of its closing and its final sale would be months apart. During that time, I visited often, amused at the emptying racks and strewn clothes (no need to fix it all at this point). I watched the frantic customers and the price cuts that plunged deeper and deeper as the

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door-closing deadline approached. They still couldn't seem to sell all that \*stuff\*, no matter how much prices got the axe.

On my last trip to the store, I tried on some clothes in the changing room, which looked like the scene of a fresh looting, and thought about my grandma. One of my last memories of her was at a Sears or a JCPenney's. I can't remember which, but these were two of her favorite places to go when we visited her Florida vacay trailer. She bought me a sweater I liked on that trip.

This memory sends me careening into another one—one of my last of her in her full state. It was years ago, and I was in the process of moving apartments in Columbus. I made time for dinner with her and my grandpa. My little blue Honda Civic's backseat was littered with loose hangers, the last little bit of my old apartment's guts that I still needed to transport to my new place.

My grandma was so appalled by seeing these hangers in such a state of disorganization that she ran inside and came back out with plastic grocery bags. She opened the door to my car and started bundling the hangers and tying them together with the plastic bags, which she squashed the air out of and laid flat to use the ends to tie a knot.

It was a super smart idea, in hindsight, indicative of her Depression-era childhood, post-war womanhood, when she learned how to make do and live with dignity using whatever was on-hand. But I was so annoyed. Why couldn't she just let me be? Didn't she respect how capable I had become? Didn't she know I had bigger things to worry about than making sure I moved my hangers efficiently? Didn't she realize I was doing all of this on my own? Didn't she know that instead of someone telling me how I could do it all better if I just took more time, it would mean the world to me if she just said she admired me for getting so much done in the little time I had left between two, sometimes three, jobs?

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There we stood. Two generations of American women at odds with understanding the other's motivations. Two generations of American women with very different definitions of what it means to be strong, to have self-respect. I didn't hide my frustration the whole time she bag-tied my hangers, and, when she was done, I gave an empty thanks and sped off, eager to get back to my one-bedroom shelter.



Heat blossoms in my chest. Red puddles appear on my cheeks in the Sears changing room mirror. I'm so ashamed that this, of all things, is the memory that my brain, like a lazy couldn't-care-less librarian, pulls when asked to retrieve something about my grandma from the dusty backlog.

It seems such a selfish feeling to remember, not how she helped me but how misunderstood I used to feel ALL THE TIME. As her memories slip away, I'm sad that I can't hold on to more of them for her. Because at a certain point that's all we can really give back to those who came before us.

The people of Portage Park expected this store's closing for some time. Things hadn't looked good for a while; the Chicago-based company was \$1 billion in debt and the Six Corners land that Sears sat on was part of a sale-lease-back transaction three years before it closed. That deal gave a growth properties company, according to a Sears spokesman's statement at the time, the right to "recapture" the land if they wanted to do something else with it. (Interesting choice of words considering the silver aluminum sculpture that stands near the Sears' west entrance; crafted by artist Ted Sitting Crow Garner, "Portage" depicts a figure carrying a canoe on his back, a tribute to the Native Americans who traveled

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through Portage Park long before ‘Merica America was even a twinkle in Johnny Appleseed’s hungry eyes.)

What will happen to the building that once represented so much to so many—ex-pats and immigrants, locals and tourists alike? Will Six Corners recover its history as a hot neighborhood destination or redefine what a successful residential Chicago neighborhood looks like?

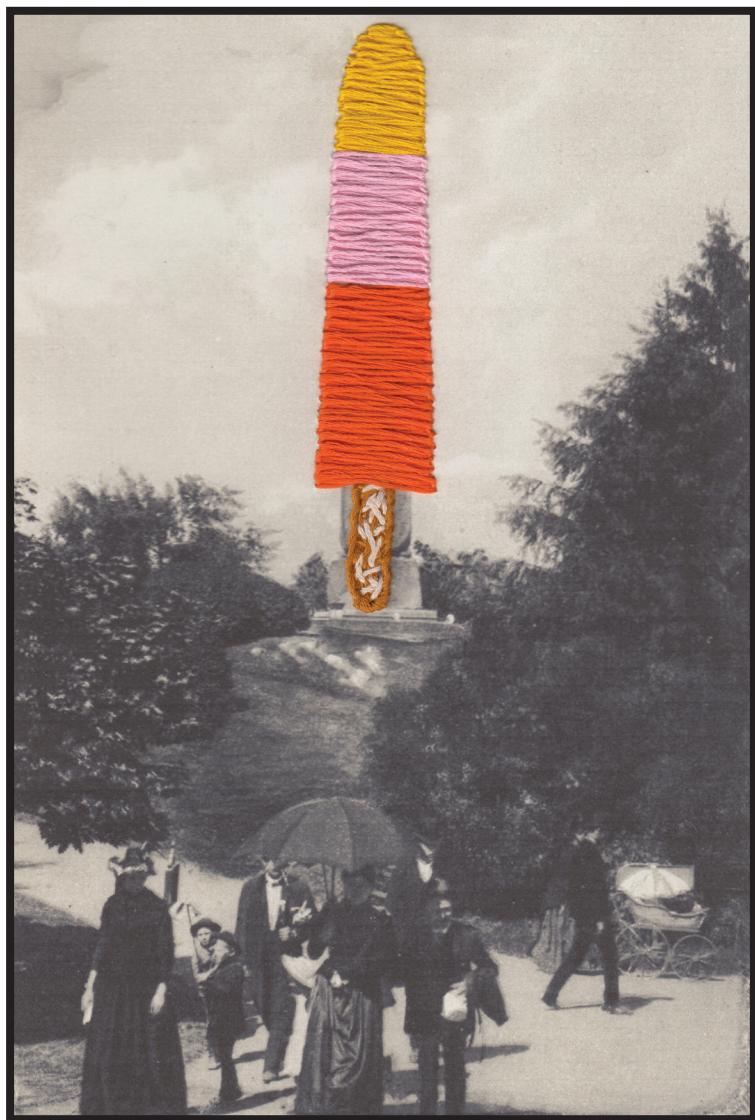
What happens next?

It’s all about as uncertain as I am. About what will happen to my grandma. About whether my husband and I will buy a home in Portage Park and plant deeper roots here. About where our country is going and what my place in it will be.

I, like the streets that intersect at Six Corners, balance on the tightrope of time, waiting until the moment’s right to move forward, praying it’s the best one for all involved.

There are some things I do know, though, as I wait for the 80 to scoop me up from the gritty Six Corners bus stop and deposit me at Independence Park a neighborhood away. In the Sears bag I’m carrying are some chocolate truffles from City News and some carnage of the Sears closing: an electric blue skirt I found for 70% off, dangling from a rack half toppled by the confused weight of left-behinds.

One side of my lip turns up into a smile thinking about how my grandma would have appreciated the discount and hated the skirt. But I don’t doubt she loved me.



# MISSING

*A list of uses for baling twine, as culled from a childhood spent playing in haymows, the treehouse equivalent for farm kids:*

- Keep gates, the massive bag of cat food, the rabbit hutch roof, and one tricky outhouse door closed shut
- Lengthen the metal pull cord for the lightbulb by the baby calves
- Goal lines for a game of soccer in the gravel driveway, to be played until the milk truck putter pops its way over the hot stones and onto the “field,” pausing the game until tomorrow
- “Ribbon” dancing
- Makeshift belts, hair ties, hair bows, headbands, or thingies that hold up your rolled up T-shirt sleeves as you milk cows in the parlor
- Thread for making a necklace, buttons from Grandma’s craft room for jewels
- Luggage tag for your suitcase, packed and ready for 4-H camp
- A perfectly acceptable device for stringing up pictures or artwork on a wall, such as the embroidered piece in Grandma’s kitchen, letters of Huesta Farm formed by different farm items, apples in barrels

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as the outer columns of the H, an upturned horse-shoe for the U

- Hopscotch boundaries
- Material for braiding friendship bracelets that you share with your favorite cousin, who is only a year younger than you but who is so wise and kind and beautiful that you hope sharing these bracelets will in some way enchant her beauty to rub off on you because you're figuring out that's an important factor for how people treat you and the way boys look at you—or don't
- Measuring tape
- A small memento sent in a fangirl care package to the Backstreet Boys, along with a few snappy hair-clips and your favorite mini plastic whale pencil topper, which you're 100% certain they received and enjoyed because one of them (AJ, the bad boy) totally pointed at YOU, dweller of the very last row of the stadium's nosebleeds, when your friend took you to see them in concert
- Bookmark for your library treasures, which you love smelling the pages of almost as much as you love reading
- Bookmark for a magazine stashed between bales of straw, which turns out to be a fly-poop-speckled "Playboy" or something similarly pornographic, a magazine that mysteriously belongs to no one once discovered by the children
- Ankle fasteners for plastic bags pulled over your school shoes, so you can walk across the storm-soaked field that connects your great grandma's house to your beloved great aunt's house, where you're staying overnight for sewing lessons and pizza

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- A free string game to play with the barn kittens, which Dad has some sixth sense for finding, despite how well the mama cats can hide their newborns
- Pulley system for lifting important items up into the haymow, including the following: jugs of ice cold lemonade (thanks, Mom), a box of crayons (paper having already been brought aboard and up the ladder, stowaway passports in your pockets), a younger sibling (too heavy), a handle of vodka (much later)
- Tie the dry erase marker to the whiteboard used to record notes about cows in heat, reminders of broken equipment, or hastily drawn smiley faces
- Jump rope
- Hold together straw (yellow) for bedding and hay (green) for food in the shape of Mini-Wheats for giants, aka bales, which can be unbound by the swift tug of a sharp pocket knife (red, bequeathed only to the boys—as is written in hillbilly scripture) or, in a much more satisfactory manner, by lifting up the bale and pushing one knee (scraped) into the side of the bale while simultaneously pulling one of the two tightly wrapped strands of twine quickly toward you; successfully pulling off the twine all by yourself means you're a teenager now
- Hold together bundles of green beans from Grandpa's garden
- Hold together a broken swing dangling from a haymow beam
- Hold together a basketball hoop
- Hold together a family across generations, forever and ever amen



# “GONE COUNTRY”

BY ALAN JACKSON

*“He commutes to L.A., but he’s got a house in the Valley/  
But the bills are piling up and the pop scene just ain’t on the rally/  
And he says, honey, I’m a serious composer, schooled in voice and  
composition/  
But with the crime and the smog these days, this ain’t no place  
for children/  
... He’s gone country, look at them boots/  
He’s gone country, back to his roots/  
He’s gone country, a new kind of suit/  
He’s gone country, here he comes.”*



My favorite song by the Backstreet Boys when I was in sixth grade was “Everybody.” The only good reasons for this must have been because I didn’t own a CD player until junior year of high school, so I only knew the radio hits of 1997, and because I am a loyal person who fell in girl-love with Nick Carter before I even knew who Justin Timberlake was

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or heard an N'Sync song, even though we all know whom/which band would have been the far superior fan investments.

Plus, I really liked when Nick sang "Am I sexxxxxu-aaaallll" (pronounced sec-shoe-ul) during the chorus.

When singing this lyric, he even thrust his hips a few times at the corner of the stage, below the lip of which pre-teen girls screamed and their forlorn parents tried to be OK with everything. At least that's how it went down at the concert I attended that same year—my first concert, if you don't count the time in a few years earlier that I watched Aaron Tippen sing at a nearby county fair. And I don't.

This BSB concert, which was held in Columbus, about an hour drive from my hometown and the largest city in my childhood's small radius, made a big impression on me. But not because of Nick's groin pumping.

The morning after the concert, I was to be transported to our family's farm to milk cows and do chores. This, I concluded, was d-e-v-a-s-t-a-t-i-n-g. I didn't have the vocabulary yet to say just exactly why I found this task so upsetting, and the best I could come up with was, "I'm not a farm girl! I'm a Backstreet Boys girl!"

What I meant to say to my parents was that, yowza, that city looked real exciting and just being there in a minivan traversing its streets made me feel alive in a way I have never experienced before.

See also: "You couldn't possibly have picked up on this yet, but I have. I'm a budding liberal who will dabble in vegetarianism and be really interested in Buddhism and vote for Obama and make up dances for drag queens during adulthood. I'm so sorry for all the ways in which I will be a loveable but grating disappointment."

It's not that my parents ever told me they'd be disappointed in me for pursuing other interests, but I got cultural clues early on about the great divide between a place like

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Columbus and place like my hometown, a divide that was bigger than a few miles and malls.

Today, one need only look at the way the billboards change. An increase in the number of pro-Trump, Hell Is Real, and Abortion Kills A Beating Heart signs rolling by as you drive are usually a sure sign you're well on your way out of the city.

But in terms of my childhood, it was less obvious to me. The easiest example I can give you is the song "Gone Country" by Alan Jackson, which came out before my revelatory evening with BSB. The song was a huge hit off AJ's album "Who I Am," and became a rallying cry for who we was: Country and proud of it.

The song's lyrics tell stories of men and women who tried to make it in the city but came "home" eventually, because the country way of life is like the N'Sync to the city's Backstreet Boys. The implication was that country people were the "real Americans" who did "real work" and made "real things," gosh dang it!

It's a weird cycle. In response to feeling patronized by city folk, the country folk devalue any and all kinds of city experiences or work, which, the city folk then use to sell stuff to the country folk. Like Pace Picante salsa ("New York City?!"); that Pauly Shore movie "Son in Law"; eventually, a president; and sometimes even their own stuff, like the food they grow and buy but which, as the campaign goes, we should all "thank a farmer" for, not the slimy white collar types making "propaganda" in skyscrapers and coming up with slogans to sell that food across the world. Etc.

There were other things, too. Things that I saw or heard during my mid-nineties, early-2000s formative years that are less easy to define and less tangible to point out but which played a role in my fear of disappointing my people because of choices I had a sneaking suspicion I'd make in the future.

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For example, boys were the only ones who were spoken of in need to “sow their oats,” and there’s no prodigal daughter story in the Bible. Even the prodigal son is a heart-warming, righteously held-up story because the wayward boy eventually comes back home to be a family man.

These things told me the country was where one went to find relief, find their humanity, find God, and find their real selves, a la “City Slickers” and, later, “Sweet Home Alabama,” the Reese Witherspoon movie with a storyline of self-obsessed-city-girl-finds-her-way-back-to-real-love, later co-opted by numerous Hallmark holiday specials.

Furthermore, famous women in the nineties, which we unapologetically spied on in the grocery store aisles from behind paparazzi cameras, seemed to face very strict Madonna-or-Whore fates: Nicole Brown was murdered because she was a “cheater” (funny how we latched on to that storyline when what happened was so complicated to understand that ESPN did a five-part documentary series that you should go watch immediately if you haven’t already... we really buried the lede that this was a tragedy no matter which way you looked at it), and Monica Lewinsky was a young woman smart enough to get an internship at the White House but also a “huge dumb slut” who, if some people would have their way, should forever live in shame for her choices because she gave her precious flower of a body to her much more powerful man boss. The “good girls” seemed to fare no better: Princess Diana died in a gruesome car accident, her caricatured goodness chased and documented frame by frame, and Mother Teresa had no sex.

There *was* Oprah though! Ah yes, everyone liked Oprah, and she was black! That meant all was well and civil rights worked and we all can just shut up about race now! There was so much denial from white people about racism during that time. Where I grew up, there was only one or two black

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students in my county high school. The kind of racism I saw was the quiet but real kind, like not letting white daughters go to prom with African-American sons “because of what other people might think.” The majority of the African-American community went to the city school because most of them lived in the small city part of Marion and not out in the county homes with vast acres of land attached to them.

This segregation by skin color was never really discussed. The implication was this was just where everyone liked to live. I never considered that maybe my friends who were African-American and went to the city school wouldn’t feel safe around all us white people in the country part of our town. Not until a whole lot of years, classes, books, and conversations later.

This is what underlines a turning point for me.

Many years after my sixth grade BSB concert, I visited my hometown. It was my first fall semester at college and “visiting home” still felt like a weird thing to do. My shitty dorm room certainly didn’t feel like home yet.

During this weekend trip, I joined a friend for a party out in the sticks. That’s how we thought of the area we were heading for a night of bonfire and beer, back in the woods, down a dirt road, three four-wheelers parked in the driveway.

Country music blared from someone’s pickup truck and inside the garage, where I played beer pong for a while. Then, in a timeout or maybe as I waited my turn to play again, I finally looked around the garage. The walls were covered in old advertisements, photos of musicians and NASCAR drivers, and something that made me feel sick to my stomach. There, framing our beer pong party, were several proudly displayed vintage drawings of an African-American man drawn like a monkey, eating watermelon, carrying a bindle stiff, and dressed in rags.

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It was fucked up, and I was furious at them for showing off and cherishing something so disrespectful. They were just partying it up around these images like it didn't matter. I was furious at myself for being there and, moreover, for not having the guts to say anything about the posters. Because I didn't. All I said was that I wanted to go home. And by home, for the first time, I meant anywhere but here.



# A WORD PROBLEM

*Question:*

Johnny finds three oranges in his cool new lunchbox that has a picture of Donatello from “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” on the front. He takes two oranges to school and leaves the third orange at home to eat after mini-football practice. What’s that called again? That mini-football league? You know, the one where the boys are, like, 9, and they play football like adults and “look at my little man” is said aloud and “whew, he is normal and, therefore, going to be OK” is thought in secret, and little girl cheerleaders are part of this league, little girl cheerleaders about the same age as the boys, and these mini-cheerleaders are cute but they also make things kind of awkward because cheerleaders-as-we-know-them are supposed to be sexy but not sexual and operate as, like, a wink at the crowd while not wearing any pants but also yelling at you, a grown adult, to yell too. There is usually one or two little girls every couple years who also play the game of tiny football and wear a tiny helmet and swim in a tiny jersey made for a tiny-big boy, and the local paper writes a story about her and her cute girl-sized ambition (*boop!*) to play a sport made for manly men, and the story of the mini-football-playing girl makes all the grown women

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remember Becky “Icebox” O’Shea from “Little Giants” and how they wanted to be like her but just couldn’t pull themselves away from the siren call of those bigass hair bows and tight spankies that the cheerleaders got to wear and how they would have maybe liked to play mini-football, maybe, but they didn’t even try because they felt awkward around the little boys because, as girls, they had already sniffed out the fact that grown men (and some grown women) were awkward around the kind-of-but-we-don’t-talk-about-it-sexualized little girls who are the cheerleaders, which are always girls, at least until college. And the little cheerleaders and their genuine love of pom-poms and jumps and cartwheels never get writeups in the local paper because, while they are as important to the fabric of a small town as the annual pie baking contest and halftimes dedicated to talking about Jesus, they are certainly not the most important marker of success or excellence or physical acumen and are to be just slightly ignored and just slightly derided because “cheerleading isn’t a sport,” and Johnny probably never wonders why the Ninja Turtles all got kickass names from genius, history-shaping, game-changing European Renaissance artists but their sidekick was just a hum-drum human woman named April, named for just another month in a year that passes, a countdown until those mini-cheerleaders are 18, or why TMNT’s April, despite her best intentions, usually found a way to muck up the mission and need saving by the boys. Boys who were turtles and only ate pizza. Pee-wee! It’s called pee-wee football. How many oranges does Johnny have?

Answer (circle one):


- a) As many as he wants, because he’s a growing young man.
- b) None. Kids don’t willingly eat fruit.

## **GONE, COUNTRY**

- c) You're allowed to let go of friendships, places, people, interests, and ideologies that no longer serve you.
- d) All of the above.



# FAITH



Faith is understanding that to worry  
about time is to waste it.

Faith is believing you are here, whatever that  
means, to do something important.

Faith is not a prerequisite for morality.

Faith is a difficult subject.



# A YELLOW HOUSE

There's a yellow house with yellow wallpaper where

the girls I once was


the girls with empty blue sky eyes and aluminum bracelets  
chewing tunnels through their ankles wait for the woman  
they became

to walk up the steps carrying a bag filled with fresh fruit,  
seashells that cup the ocean's song, kept promises.

# **“REDNECK WOMAN”**

**BY GRETCHEN WILSON**

*“Victoria’s Secret/  
Well their stuff’s real nice/  
Oh but I can buy the same damn thing on a Walmart shelf half  
price/  
And still look sexy/  
Just as sexy/  
As those models on TV/  
No I don’t need no designer tag to make my man want me/  
You might think I’m trashy/  
A little too hard core/  
But get in my neck of the woods/  
I’m just the girl next door.”*



I didn’t buy a real Victoria’s Secret bra from a real Victoria’s Secret store until I was 32 years old. And only with the encouragement of my husband, who was tired of seeing my boobs smushed and popping out, like dough in one of those twisty cardboard tubes, in bras that didn’t fit.

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I had been avoiding VS for a long time, thanks to my outward self-righteousness and inward jealousy about the models with stereotypically perfect bodies/ faces (Barbie doll types) and XL undies being very hard to find in-store. (They keep them in bottom drawers that are just inches above the ground, which means you have to bend all the way over to hunt for one your size, a process that makes you shove that beautiful big ass you're already feeling a bit self-conscious about, out for all to see.)

There was more to it. I secretly despised VS because I couldn't afford its clothes for the majority of my life. VS was one of those brands that was unattainable to me until very recently. Growing up without name brand clothes—the having of which was a surefire way to get yourself into the popular pool—led me to turn my nose up at all of them as an adult.

In eighth grade, in preparation for a school field trip to an amusement park, I cut the tag out of a man's Calvin Klein shirt I found for \$2 at Salvation Army and superglued it onto the front of my favorite old red tee. I thought I looked really cool, what with my CK brand name shirt?! (Granted, an Abercrombie & Fitch or American Eagle or Hollister tag would have been infinitely cooler at the time, but Salvo was going to have to tear those babies out of a middle schooler's cold dead hands. No one was giving those away. I had to work with what I could find.)

I didn't care that there were seam ripped threads sticking out of the sides of the CK tag. Or that the tag was only about half an inch big and, thus, my brand name status was mostly unreadable. Or that, dude, there's no way to make a tag from the inside of a shirt look like it belongs on the outside of a shirt. It was so obvious what I had done.

BUT I DIDN'T CARE.

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What I did care about was that the superglue wasn't so super on the amusement park's water ride and, by the time our vessel pulled to a stop after churning under waterfalls and bumping over rapids, my precious CK tag was floating at the bottom of the boat like a drowned cigarette. I surreptitiously grabbed it as I stepped out of the boat and pocketed the evidence, hoping no one saw it and found out my true, non-CK-wearing identity.

Alas, no one noticed that my CK shirt was no longer a CK shirt, because no one noticed it was a "CK shirt" in the first place. But that was a turning point for me—fuck this noise, I thought (but in whatever way an eighth grader in 2000 would say such a thing). Brands, I decided, were stupid, and I hated the way they made me feel, and people who seek them out are lemmings. (And that, readers, is how rednecks and/or punks and/or redneck punks are born!)

There's an angry pride that can grow out of poverty, pooriness, and even lower-middle class austerity. Living "simply" becomes a way to feel superior to others' wealth—wealth that so frequently makes you feel like shit. In my experience, these people with poor pride also champion their focus on family time and their supposed superiority as parents because they don't spoil their children. They have developed an attitude that rich people can't possibly know what it's like to value the important things in life like they do. Because if they did, then was there any upside of being so damn broke? If rich people aren't all assholes who are deeply unhappy under all that nice stuff, what does that say about my own existence?

The whole thing is often exacerbated by the Christian ideal that good people are paupers. No one markets the moral value of monetary martyrdom quite like a church. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!" and all that. I once dated a poor country boy much like myself who used

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this Bible verse to make me feel guilty about earning approximately \$1 an hour more than him in our college student worker jobs. Gross.

This pride in willfully living a low-class life becomes a way to throw a big middle finger to the seemingly inescapable systems that don't let you access a lot of things, brand names just being my most childlike example. It's a middle finger to the McMansions and swimming pools and gated communities of Withs that we're so paranoid are looking down on those of us Withouts.

This pride makes you reside in a strange paradox: You love the thought of YOU earning more money but begrudge the people who actually do, so much so that you create stories about them to help you sleep at night.

My prideful middle finger started going up when I was a kid, because other kids can be such terrible people sometimes. Like, did they not know that the cool stuff they had was because of their parents, not because of anything they did to earn it?

Whatever. Clearly, I'm still chiseling this chip off my shoulder, and my disdain for paying more or full price for brand name items continued from that day on the water ride into my adulthood.

But by 32, I'd had enough time to live on my own and earn my own money and decide what things were real and what things weren't. I'd had enough time to meet all kinds of people to learn rich or poor doesn't matter, there are happy and unhappy, kind and cruel, people in all classes, races, genders, political parties, etc. I'd had enough time to see that high school popularity didn't count for shit in the real world and so many tables had turned and will probably have turned again once we're 42.

By the time I took myself into that perfume-polished lingerie store with the intent to buy a whole new bench of

bras, I had also figured out this: The way you love yourself and take care of yourself has a direct correlation to how you love and take care of others. Wearing clothes that are clean and well-taken care of and that fit is an expression of self-love. Self-love is the only conduit for love of every other kind. And a conduit of love is all I really want to be anymore.

Ding, ding, this realization is exactly why I was now standing in a pink and black fitting room with mood lighting and bows everywhere. I was surprised at how into all of it I was. I was surprised that it felt good, not traitorous, to do something nice for myself and to invest in underwear that would last a while instead of buying cheap stuff that never fit right (and, thus, sent me off buying more and more wrong pieces). I was surprised it felt good to not attach shame to buying underwear—whether through body issues, sex hang-ups, or, most pressing, fear of letting down that defiant eighth grade self who found solace in thinking about a future devoid of conformity and financial snobbery.

A perfectly delightful VS sales pro (do we call them Angels or is that just a name for the models and credit card holders?) helped me figure out my correct bra size. I had, not surprisingly, been wearing both the wrong cup and bust measurements my entire boobed life.

I dropped \$500 on bras and underwear that day. As I watched the salesperson at the checkout fold each item and place it gingerly in hot pink tissue paper, I considered how deeply my relationship to money had changed since I was a kid—and how much it hadn't; to get a discount, I had signed up for the VS credit card, which meant I didn't have to actually pay that \$500 until later. This stressed me out.

"Can't I just pay it off now? When will I get the bill? I don't want this to gain interest!" I frantically said to the salesperson, who looked at me like a crazy person. I'm certain they didn't get this kind of request often. I'll do anything

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to avoid feeling like I owe someone something, most of all money.

Later, as my husband and I walked through the mall, he asked why I had always been so weirded out about buying VS bras, because the experience had gone pretty well, actually. All I could think of was the song “Redneck Woman” by Gretchen Wilson and the lyrics about buying the same damn thing somewhere else for half the cost.

“I like being a redneck woman,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, “but you’re not really a redneck woman.”

“True,” I said, “though I think some part of me still wants to be. It makes me feel like I have an identity? That’s not really it, though, because my whole life has been spent trying to overcome the fact that I don’t wholly identify with where I’m from. The same way I am a feminist, but don’t identify with all of feminism. I think Jesus was a cool dude, but you’d have to drag me into a church. Any identity I try to choose ends up feeling like dogma and I instinctually turn away from it eventually. Maybe it’s not about labels. Brand name or intangible social sect or otherwise. Thinking I’m a redneck or hillbilly or white trash intelligentsia (hopefully the non-racist version, all) makes me feel connected to all the good things about where I come from. The independence, the Don’t Tread on Me, ‘fuck y’all’ sentimentality. Though I’m kind of an elite now, I guess, if believing in free education and healthcare for all makes one an elite. Thinking I’m a redneck means I have roots. It makes me feel safe. Labels, no matter how insufficient they really are, make an unknowable world feel understandable. Thinking I’m a redneck means I know how to sniff out people who will understand parts of me that are buried so deep, I don’t even know they’re there.” \*

\* My soliloquy was probably less eloquent than what I just wrote, so he was confused. Which is fair. Issues of identity are all very confusing and tenuous, making them hard

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to pin down. So, running hot off the memory of that song, I recalled a story from my freshman year of college—a giant free-for-all of gluttony and re-identification in and of itself—which was also the year Gretchen Wilson's song became a huge hit.

I lived in a freshman-only dorm, and some of my new neighbors soon became my close-knit group of girlfriends. By the time we had all settled in, which happens by spring semester, I hung out with a group of five or six of them almost exclusively.

I loved these crazy bitches. They were hard-partying, "Feminine Mystique"-reading, Tool-loving, Marlboro Reds kind of gals, which have been and always will be my favorite variety of lady bird.

We didn't talk much about the social classes we came from, though I think part of what attracted us to each other was the fact that we were all a little bit country. We had similar stories, wore the same Gabriel Brothers and Goodwill clothes, were dealing with similar changes.

With one exception: The city girl who had an iPod.

I had never even heard of an iPod, let alone seen one, until she showed me hers. This girl was endearing and really smart and the least angry, and therefore the nicest, of all of us. She was also rich, comparatively.

One afternoon I came back to the dorm from class and heard something had gone down. Ms. iPod and another girl from our friend group had gotten in a fight. It had gotten physical. Ms. iPod didn't throw the first punch, and the other girl was awaiting her fate. We feared she would get expelled.

I don't remember the full story of what happened. Isn't it funny how we lose the most important details but never forget how we felt?

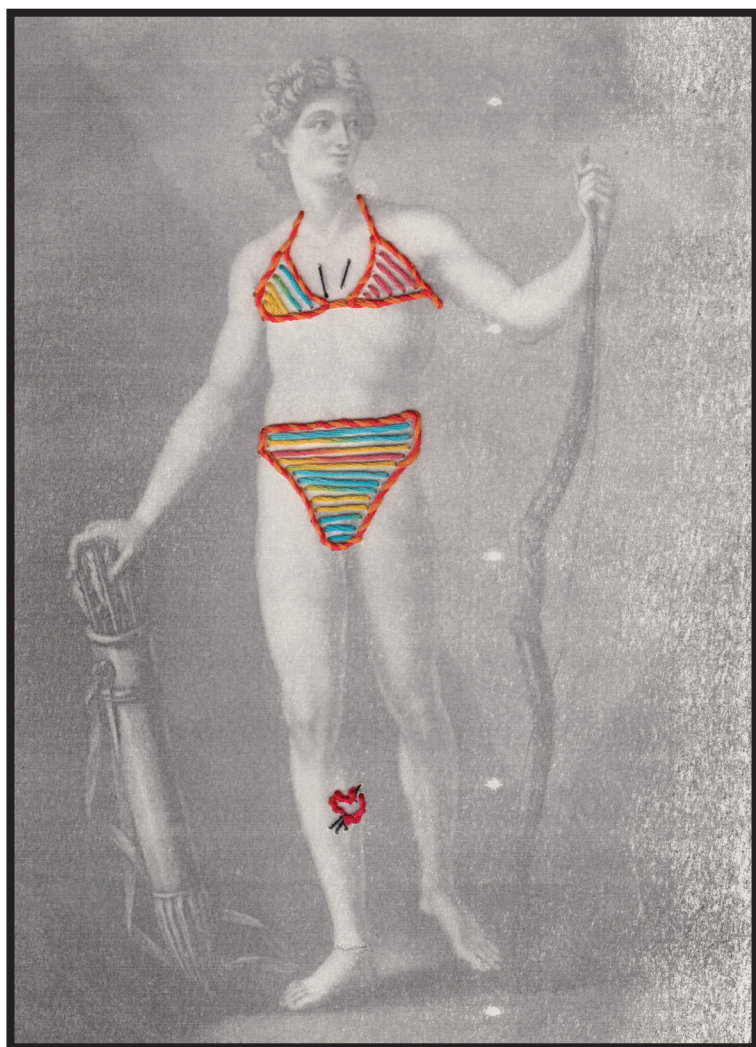
## GONE, COUNTRY

I and everyone else in our friend group sided with the girl who threw the first punch. Picking her side wasn't a matter of right or wrong for me. It was a matter of instinct.

These were two good girls. Girls we had grown to love. But when it came time to choose, I chose the one most like myself, at least on the surface. Perhaps others chose this side because they felt like it was the morally correct one, but that wasn't the case for me.

In First Punch's angry fist, I saw my own. I knew why violence became her go-to for frustration. Violence, passive aggressive or physical, felt like a bridge between our worlds of social standing. I projected my rage about our differences—differences that were in no way Ms. iPod's fault or even a marker of her character—into this incident.

After that semester, I stayed in touch with all those girls but swam further into feminist and journalist circles, new-to-me identification systems I was finding fit me quite well, even if my bras didn't.



# SEARCHING

*An abridged survey of questions I asked Google in my twenties:*

Q. Will he like the raspberry lip gloss or the bubblegum lip gloss better?

Q. Which filter is best to use in fluorescent office lighting?

Q. Can I microwave paper?

Q. Should I quit drinking?

Q. Do you think he hired the other guy because I'm a woman and he'd rather have young-guy eye candy in the office than me?

Q. When should I ask for a raise?

Q. Why is my cat throwing up?

Q. How much did college cost in the 1970s?

Q. How late is too late to start a new career?

Q. How much should I have saved if I want to make a down payment on a home?

Q. Why do Baby Boomers hate Millennials?

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Q. Why are Baby Boomers so selfish?

Q. What is the average length of time it takes someone to pay off their undergraduate student loans?

Q. How much does the average Millennial have in savings?

Q. What is average?

Q. How much does it cost to have a baby?

Q. When does a fetus form a heartbeat?

Q. Do other people also read the spoilers before watching a scary movie?

Q. Should I hire movers?

Q. How do most people define happiness?

Q. Am I most people?

Q. Is “most people” even a measurable thing?

Q. Is it rape if I agreed to have sex but only because it felt safer or easier than saying no?

Q. What is the difference between chlamydia and syphilis?

Q. How is telling a child they were born dirty with Original Sin not considered child abuse?

Q. If what is popular is not always right and what is right is not always popular, what does it mean when what is popular *is* what is right?

Q. Why does everyone seem to think they have an anxiety disorder nowadays?

Q. Do I have an anxiety disorder?

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Q. Is social media making me angry?

Q. What should I say when someone calls Brazil nuts ni\*\*er toes at the family barbecue (!!!!!)?

Q. How do I explain that protesting police civil forfeiture does not make me a Nazi?

Q: What the fuck is happening right now?

Q. What should I do if I feel like a better person than someone I'm supposed to love unconditionally?

Q. Why am I such a monster?

Q. Which lip gloss will I like better?

Q. When does "that's just how I was raised" wear out its welcome as an excuse?

Q. Is this a hangover or allergies?



# GIVE ME YOUR ANGRY WOMEN

The priests say God knows the exact number of hairs you have on your head. Like a cotton candy congressman who never guesses wrong, the universe a dive-bombing raven in the black of his rotting tooth.

No one asks if it might be cheating that God made the answer and the question. Divining the hairs of something he so painstakingly made. A creation he cared about so much that he entrapped a lot of people into spending their lives writing a story—on deadline, no less—about how good he did (except for those meddling kids in the garden!).

The priests never say anything about this, either: Does God know how many hairs are curling up, like a pit of wild ravaged arms reaching for heaven, from the battle ground of your pubic mound?

They talk around it a lot, and they are certain to stake their claim over it, plant their three-pointed crucifix flag in it. But they don't say anything about the fact that Jesus is topless in, like, every portrait, image, carving, and cross. Every murky glass puzzle. It goes unmentioned that he looks salty and

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sweet. Get you a savior who does both! Sticky fingers turn the hymnal page.

Instead, they tell you that your candy is better if it comes from the freezer. Frigid. Under lock and key by order of the church's ice box in the cellar.

How many licks to your selfhood did they think it would take before you fought back?

Forget all that now. They don't speak for the god you have come to know.

Pocketed somewhere between your last wisdom tooth and the side of your cheek that's as smooth as an unpopped cherry, rests an answer you chewed out and tucked away a long time ago for safe keeping.

I want to tell you—I want to spoon between your lips so tenderly, so many times, that you never forget the way it melts in your mouth and tastes of roots and ash and milky light—this: You don't have to believe anything anyone tells you about yourself. Trust your tender, aching gut. You'll know when you've had enough.

Be not afraid. This is the body of you.



# NINE LIVES

1. There's a legend in my family I've only heard once. Before he died, my grandpa talked about it after a little friendly prodding from my writerly aunt who loves a good story just like me. I sat on the farmhouse's trim green living room floor, picking out the red gumdrops—the best flavor—from the dish of candy he always kept by his arm chair, next to the cigars, and listened.

I think he was reluctant to tell the story because who even knows anymore if it is true. I also think it's likely that because it's such a sad story, it didn't get passed down as legend because everyone just wanted to move on.

It goes like this.

The first members of the Mantey family (then Mantei or something like that) who came to America (from Poland or Germany or somewhere like that) arrived by boat. The excitement was palpable as the ship pulled into harbor. A new country, a fresh start. A way off this damn boat. They hadn't seen, let alone smelled, a flower for months, but the stink of smoke and shit was good enough. It came from the city, where buildings taller than anything they'd ever seen grew like Jack's beanstalk from the dry steady land.

Gathered together, the family likely saw many other things they'd never witnessed before. Americans, for one. And other races of people from around the world, clamoring

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at Ellis Island's gates to get into the promised land. Registry clerks who were once Albanian soldiers. Women in Dutch caps. Russian Cossacks in full garb.

After a bit of gawking, trying not to stare, polite people that they were, they walked with trepidation closer to the people who seemed to be in charge. Trying to keep track of their trunks and paperwork and whatever else they carried, the group was likely asked at that point how many people were with them.

That's probably when they did a head count.

That's probably when they realized they were coming up one short.

Like a nightmare version of "Home Alone 2: Lost in New York."

The littlest child was missing.

Vanished.

He or she was young. Maybe two or three. (Like I said, this story might not be true, or it's been passed down in a hushed whisper for so many generations that the details are fuzzy.) Have you ever dealt with a two- or three-year-old? With no stroller? While carrying your life's possessions in your arms? After leaving the only home you've ever known? For a new place packed with strangers forced by survival to look out only for themselves? A crowd reeking with a cloud of desperation to get in?

The family rushed around looking for their child. Panic rose from belly to head and back again until it irretrievably hardened inside their hearts like a lost stone at the bottom of a cursed and deadly wishing well. A rift formed between husband and wife and the children that were left, never to heal in this lifetime.

At some point it was decided there was nothing they could do. They couldn't talk to the authorities because they couldn't speak English, but more importantly, they didn't

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want to give these authorities any reason to send them back to the boat and back to a land where they faced whatever violence they had come running from. It was decided no one would speak of the young one again. It was too painful. America broke their hearts right from the start.

The child was gone. Lost. Maybe the mother secretly went to the police every morning for the rest of her life to see if the child had been found. Maybe the child had fallen into the water and no one saw. Maybe the child was taken, sent westward to work as soon as his or her body got big. The least horrifying option I can think of is that maybe the child was kidnapped and sold to an obscenely wealthy couple that couldn't conceive.

Desperation makes us all do unthinkable things.



2. Your body is a map. You can trace the lines where you've laughed or frowned or lost weight or scarred. You can trace these lines with a fingertip that is marked like no one else's in the world. In that way, we're all snowflakes. And like snowflakes, we can come together to take the power out. When you're a child, you don't know any of this. You're just getting by, just figuring out how to read your unique map of skin and bone. Still just looking for the key, the compass. There is, at first, potential for you to form a spiritual connection between the mind growing inside you and the body taking shape around it. That potential is stolen when you are hit, no matter how often, no matter how hard. That potential is stolen when you are told to ignore your body, that it is part of the problem. You learn to exist outside the skin and inside the head, disassociating mind from body in order to keep on moving, a process that leaves behind a threadbare trail

## GONE, COUNTRY

that's traceable, too. Hansel and Gretel leaving crumbs in the woods.



3. I've felt ugly most of my life. I'm redhead pale. My teeth, crooked and yellow, are made wallflowers by a lot of showy gums. When I smile, my left eye stays wide open and my right eye closes shut. I call it my derpy eye. My husband calls it face dysmorphia.

All of this is really dumb. I know looks shouldn't matter and physical beauty doesn't define a person, but I can't understate how much this feeling of not being pretty impacted my college choices in romantic partners.

Like, let's call him, Mike.

I met Mike right after I graduated. Distracted, floating in my own disconnected state, I didn't realize how disconnected his mind was from his body as well, so much so that his body ruled his mind. After surreptitiously moving in with me, I learned. Quickly. I found empty bottles of liquor and pills hidden in dirty laundry hampers, stuffed behind books in the bookcase, tucked under my twin mattress that sat on the floor because I didn't own a bed frame.

The abuse started slowly, and I didn't call it abuse for the years it lasted because it didn't look like I thought abuse would. It didn't look like what I saw in the movies. He didn't hit me regularly, and when violence did happen, it was easily excused because usually I had hit him first and we were always drunk. I could make up reasons to move past the physical violations. Being dragged by my hair from a hiding place in our closet. Getting spit on. Waking up with a sore asshole, only to learn we had had anal sex the night before. I had never done that. I had never wanted to, even though

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he had been pressuring me to for months. I was black out drunk. He said I asked him to.

The physical violence was easy to compartmentalize because I had been trying to disconnect from my physical body for as long as I could remember. Like the frog in boiling pot—a slow build and long distance formed so quietly that I couldn't possibly recognize what was happening or just how lost I was. I wanted to be a good Catholic girl, so I focused on my mind and ignored any need my body presented. I wanted to be a sexually active teenager, so I got drunk to do it. I wanted to survive in a sexist society, so I made my body what I thought everyone else wanted it to be.

Instead, the most egregious abuses happened because his hungry body wanted to eat my mind. He always wanted to know where I was. I feared going out with friends because I knew he'd get jealous and accuse me of cheating on him. He was constantly trying to get ahold of me, blowing up my email and G-chat while I was at work, my first career job, where I was trying so hard not to fail. He told me I was bad at love, and no one would ever love me like he did (thank all that is holy, no one ever would). I was insecure and inexperienced enough to believe all of it, or at least believe I could change it if I just tried harder. I am a smart person. I was also a person trapped.

I know of at least one time he cheated on me. Because he gave me an STD. He denied having sex with anyone else and blamed it on me, and I was confused enough from months of gaslighting to wonder if I had and question my body, which I really knew nothing about in the first place. A few hours before we finally went to an urgent care, I was laid up on my floor mattress, legs spread open with a can of Dermoplast pain relieving spray by my side. Dermoplast is used by new mothers who have just had their vaginas torn open, and that's what mine felt like. Open sores covered my

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lips and I sobbed for hours in pain. Mike said he wanted to have sex. I couldn't believe he could even ask. Clearly, I was in terrible pain. He began to harp his tired song that I was a bad partner, a selfish person for not letting him have sex with me in that state. Exhausted from the pain of the sores, I was too tired to fight. I let him.

The STD was curable with a shot of antibiotics. I don't remember what STD it was or what they gave me. I couldn't tell you what urgent care we went to or the name of my doctor. I blocked it all out as soon as we got back to my apartment. My mind knew what to do to make it all go away. My mind knew what to do to get me to the next day.



4. A book showed up in my mailbox nearly 10 years after I finally got rid of dirtbag Mike. The book had been sent to me by a publisher hoping for a review. It was written by a licensed therapist and metaphysician whose practice involved past life regression.

"No longer simply the stuff of New Age practitioners," the book jacket read, "past life regression therapy is a powerful tool that can improve your understanding of your personal challenges and deepen your connection with the world around you."

Fascinated, I read the entire book in a day. She wrote of patient experiences in their hypnotized state and the "essential truths" they uncovered while there. A woman afraid to leave her house recalled a life where she had left her little sister at home to go to the market for food. A tornado hit the house while she was gone, and the sister died. A man with ankle problems recalled life as a slave, during which his Achilles heel had been sliced by a violent master. A woman

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overwhelmed by fear of losing love, which kept her from getting close to anyone, recalled a life as a male peasant in medieval France. A lord had kidnapped his wife and the peasant husband was thrown in jail.

The idea is that uncovering stories like these can free up energy that has been blocked. If you want to believe in past lives, the thought, as I understand it, is that we can carry our deepest traumas with us from lifetime to lifetime and recalling them can help us better understand and improve our current lives. Birthmarks can sometimes be old wounds, even wounds that killed us. Obsessions or passionate interests in specific time periods, historical events, or foreign places could be a sign of a past life spent there. If you don't want to believe in past lives, regression therapy is just a powerful tool for tapping the subconscious to create a story that helps you frame why you might be how you are.

Not long after I finished the book, a new therapy office opened in my apartment building. In addition to its offering of traditional psychotherapy, a therapist on staff was trained in past life regression. Not one to question serendipity, I signed up for a session.

Our first meeting was a chance for me to ask any questions I had about past life therapy and for her to explain the process. Our second meeting, I laid on the couch and she guided me in a meditation that culminated in a countdown. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, I was hypnotized. Hypnosis isn't scary. I felt in total control. I knew I could snap back to my normal state at any point. I could hear cars rolling by on the street right outside. I felt safe. I knew I was Jackie Mantey.

Through a series of directives, I was asked to go back to a life. Not all people will see a life, but I immediately visualized a scene of small black shoes standing in the grass. They were my shoes, attached to my legs.

Do you know your name? Erika, I said.

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My voice was different, stale. At this point I thought “wtf that’s not even an old name, this isn’t real,” but the therapist had said to just go with whatever came to my mind first, so went with it I did.

Do you know what year it is or what country you are in? I don’t know.

That’s OK. What is around you? I am standing in a forest, a big blue house in front of me. My name is Erika, and I’m 24 years old. I live in this house. I am the maid for a family—a husband, a wife, and two children. I can’t remember why I am here, but I think it has something to do with the fact that my family is poor, and I needed to work for this family to live.

In my vision, I could see the house. When asked to go inside, I found a big open kitchen, wood. A dining room. A table. When asked to go to a place in the house that was meaningful to me, Erika went upstairs to the attic. Her room. There was nothing there but a bed and a chest for hanging clothes. A small window that Erika said she loved. My body eased when we were in this room. This room was hers and it was where she loved to be after working for the family all day.

Can you tell me about the family? Oh yes. I’m bringing food to the wooden table. I can’t make out the mother and father’s faces, but I see two children sitting there. They look like strangers to me, Jackie Mantey.

Do you recognize them? My next thought is that these two are my current-day niece and nephew. I love them, Erika says. I love them so much.

We spend a little more time exploring the house, which I see as if I were watching a movie.

Let’s go to another moment of Erika’s life, the therapist says. I am Erika walking through the woods, holding a kind of basket I’ve never seen before (or saw a very long time ago in a book or something and am calling up now). I am walk-

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ing somewhere to get food for the family. Out of nowhere appears a figure on a horse. The figure has the body of a well-dressed man and the head of a wolf in a hat. He is circling me and laughing.

At this point, my Jackie Mantey body is having a physical reaction. I feel myself getting hot, as if I am angry. My shoulders rise up to my ears. My muscles tense. My eyes clench tighter shut.

This man wants something from me, Erika says. I have turned him down for something before and he thinks he is owed whatever it is.

Do you know this man or what he wants? I say I don't, not telling my therapist that I think it might be Mike. This man wanted me to live with him, Erika continues. He said then I wouldn't have to work for the family. He has hurt me somehow. He is dangerous to me. But I am not afraid, only angry. I know I am stronger than him, but I don't know how.

Is there anything you want to say to him? Fuck off, Erika says (though Jackie Mantey probably had more to do with the choice of words).

Let's go to a better memory. Can you go somewhere that makes Erika happy? I'm back at the yard behind the house, playing with the children. We are running around the trees and jumping over logs, splashing in puddles. They are four and five years old (at this point, my real life niece and nephew are eight and ten). I start crying. Real tears falling from my Jackie Mantey eyes. I just want them to know how much I love them, Erika says, adding, I am not unhappy.

Let's go to your death. This is a standard way to close out a session. I am in a room. It looks different than the others I have visited, and my body feels different here. This room is much dirtier and brighter and surrounded by stone. I am alone. For the first time since the session began, I am not in Erika's body. I am watching Erika die. My therapist has

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told me this could happen; during death scenes, the subconscious will often put you in a place where you can just watch what is happening instead of reliving it.

Where are you? I had to go to the city. The father of the family died and the mother took the children to go live with her parents. I miss them. I hope they know I will always miss them. I had to come here to find work. I got sick soon after I arrived in the city.

My Jackie Mantey body starts to have another physical reaction. I feel as if I am sitting on top of a giant balloon that's being blown up more and more, and my body is being pushed away, further and further into the therapist's couch, as it fills with air. It's not a bad feeling and it doesn't hurt. It's just strange. It is the feeling of leaving.

I am sick, Erika says. Something growing inside of me is making me sick. It is pushing me out. I am not scared to die. I am not sad. This was a good life.



5. In the litany of terrible moments in my relationship with Mike, there was also this one: Near Christmastime, I was staying with him at his parent's house. We partied at his friend's basement in a nearby cul de sac, and when we got back to his home, he wanted to have sex. I said no and that I was tired. We got in a fight. I pushed him off me and off the bed. He got back up. Held me down. And peed on my face.

This was my most traumatizing moment with him because it wasn't a drunken choice or a decision led by addiction. It was one human wielding his power over another and debasing her to animal status.

We were back together a few weeks afterward. It was the lowest I've ever felt about myself. What's awful isn't always

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the abuse, it's the slow terror of waking up to the fact that you cannot bring yourself to leave. I was afraid to be alone. I was a body with a long string attached to a mind, like a game of cans tied together to play telephone.

The spring after that Christmas, I got pregnant. In college I had been trained in feminist theory, but learning about feminism and practicing feminism are two very different things. I wasn't taking my birth control properly because I still had a childlike fear of going to hell. Even though I despised religion for all of its abuses by this point, I was still afraid of God.

My body made it about a month and a half along. That was enough time for me to really consider what life with a child in this kind of relationship would be like. It was going to be awful, I knew, but I was numb to it all. The more pervasive thought was this: It's going to be a fucking boy. I can feel it. These men and boys destroying my body, taking everything they can and leaving me with nothing.

Whew. That's no way to enter a pregnancy, but I continued moving along through time and space, letting life happen to me instead of doing anything to help myself. If fear of damnation made me not take birth control, you can only imagine how I felt about abortion, at least when it came time to make that decision for myself.

I was frozen. That's when, I think, my soul stepped in. There is a word in Sanskrit that means "spiritual seizure." Called a *kriya*, it's like the cry of a soul. It is your body manifesting something your mind has not allowed you to deal with.

A flu right after you leave a job.

Bronchitis the day you're supposed to hit an unachievable deadline.

A miscarriage after a month and a half of dread and a year and a half of abuse.

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It happened while I was at work. I was in a lot of pain and went to the restroom, where I bled out the start of tissue that would have formed into a nameless, faceless child. I stayed in the stall for about 15 minutes. I knew what was happening to me. I put a pad in my underwear. I went back to my computer and worked until 5 pm. Then I went home and slept.

When I think back on the experience of having a miscarriage, it seems like a lifetime ago. I am a different, wiser, harder person today (tougher on others who cross me, gentler on myself). I am so sad for that unrecognizable woman who looks like me alone in the bathroom stall. I am so sad for her and I want to hold her face in my hands and tell her everything will be OK. I want to tell her to fucking leave that asshole.

The would-be baby did the difficult work for me—you have to leave, it said. You have to get out. You cannot survive this. Nothing can. That is what finally gave me the courage to kick him out for good, leaving Mike to figure out his life and addiction and traumas on his own.

I mourn for the portion of my life lived in such despair that I felt like I could not and did not want to go home from work even though I was having a miscarriage.

I do not mourn that baby.



6. I mourn, instead, the one I chose not to have.

Four years, one breakup, and one reunion before my husband and I got married, we had sex for the first time. And when we had sex for the first time, sperm latched on to egg and cozied itself right at home in my uterus. Ain't that fucking rich?

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Having been through this before—body disconnected from mind, body plugging along and doing what it does best—I wanted to make a different decision this time. I remembered how I once thought having a baby would feel like giving over my body for good—cutting the last bit of thread connecting me to it, a decaying string that, nonetheless, made it mine and mine alone. I remembered how my loved ones reacted when I told them about the first one.

This time I told nobody. I wanted to make this decision without any outside influence. I took a pregnancy test the exact day I was to start my period. I knew if I was going to have an abortion, I needed to do it soon. A few more weeks, and I don't know how I would feel. I don't know if I could have just thought of it as a mass of tissue, which is exactly what it was at that point. Time was running out.

A few days after I took the test it was Easter. My good friend asked if I wanted to go to church with her. LOL church. At a time like this? I had gone to mass every Sunday, per parental unit imperatives, for 18 years. I stopped going as soon as I could make that choice for myself.

I've never believed the church knew what's better for an individual's body than the person who inhabits that body. After all, wasn't the whole point that God decided who was bad or good? So why were humans making these judgements? I also hated (I hated a lot of things about it, truth be told) that any time I had a question, the answer was always some riddle that had the same outcome as the riddle that came before. "Any doubt you're having is just the devil at work." No, thank you. I would find other ways to cope and connect.

I still pray every day, if you want to call it that. I talk to something. The universe is how I prefer to think of it. Mostly what I'm saying is thank you. I also still pray whenever an ambulance goes by, a task I taught my nephew once, the boy I saw in my hypnosis as Erika. We were walking down

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the sidewalk near my apartment in Columbus when he was about three. An ambulance flew by, making us jump at the siren. I crouched down to his level, folded my hands around his, and said, “Dear Jesus, please let everyone be OK.” He said, “Dear Jesus... fire truck.”

Something inside me, maybe the devil, told me to go to church that Easter with my friend. What I found there was God waiting with an answer.

Soon I was at a clinic with the would-be father. He took very good care of me that day. It was nice to not be alone and to have him be part of the decision. The nurse who helped me after the procedure wore a gold cross necklace. I felt like God was with me, even if the people outside screaming about him thought he was the type to pick sides and had chosen theirs.



7. Wild mushrooms have learned to grow in ecosystems destroyed by natural disaster or human error. Adapting. Finding a symbiotic way to live in whatever's left behind. Wild mushrooms have evolved a resilient ability to grow in whatever landscape they find themselves—every landscape except captivity.



8. I went back for a second regression session, curious about who else I would meet.

We started with a childhood memory from my current life. I saw my sister. I recognized her haircut and her jean coat with a red hood.

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Where is your memory taking you? I am sitting at the table in the home I share with my family. I am in my childhood body, hands on the cheap wooden tabletop. I feel my legs and shoulders sticking to the beige plastic chairs I forgot ever existed. I can see the yellow and green tile on the kitchen floor, which we would later cover with blue carpet. Across from me is my sister. We're just sitting there. She's five, maybe. Which would make me three. We must have just moved in. This is my memory. Just me looking back at my sister looking back at me.

At this point in the hypnosis, I thought this was quite the boring childhood memory. Afterward, I figured maybe it was my subconscious preparing me for what I was about to see next. It would be difficult, and I needed to remember that I was not alone or without connection in this life. You, my subconscious was telling me, know faces, faces like that of your sister, so well that you could write them in the stars.

From here, we go to a past life. Instead of a clear vision, as I had with Erika, I get a panicked pace of images racing toward me. A green and white striped awning. More woods. Burnt ground. People walking ahead of me and beside me. They are all taller than I am. They are covered in brown hoods. I am struggling to keep up.

Where are you? I don't know. I don't know anything. I don't understand. I don't understand. We are running. I can't see anyone's faces. All I see are their bodies running or walking forward. I don't know any of these people. I am scared.

This is all I see and think for some time. Flashes of forms that I know are bodies. But I can't see their skin or faces, hands or arms. At one point I feel like I am at a make-shift camp, but it is all so restless I can't say. This is what it feels like, I think, to be truly alone.

Can you tell me your name? All I get is silence. And this: I don't understand what is happening.

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Can you go to...? Before she even asks if I can see how I died, I get my first strong image. I am still in the body of this person. I am laying on my side. My face is in the mud. I see tan boots marching with purpose past me, in front of my face. The boots don't have legs attached to them. They are just boots moving on, as if by an army of ghosts.

What are you thinking? I'm so hungry. I'm so hungry. I'm so hungry.

What do you need? At this point, I am looking down at the body of a little boy, face in the mud. He has been shot.

When I was Erika, the therapist asked me what Erika wanted me to learn. With this little boy, I had the feeling that he needed me instead. I folded my hand over his and together we floated above the trees. I looked at his dirty figure, which I still couldn't quite make out. I couldn't tell if he was black or white or brown. I couldn't see his face. But I could tell he was just a child. So small and so thin.

You are free, I tell him. You don't have to be scared. You don't have to run. You are loved. You can let this go now.



9. Some people find a higher power in nature, in church, in the bottom of a bottle. I find it in books. Not the stories as much as the magic that happens when I am called to one, or when one with just what I needed to find, finds me first.

I discovered "Miss Rumphius" by Barbara Cooney in a bookstore not long after I had the abortion. Miss Rumphius is a children's book about a woman who starts out as a girl. As this girl, she dreams of traveling the world and living by the sea, just like her grandfather had. He tells her she can live that life, but in return, she must be sure to do one thing: Find a way to make the world a more beautiful place.

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Near the end, Miss Rumphius has traveled the globe and met all kinds of people, but she has yet to make the world a more beautiful place. She gets sick and then gets better. She goes for a walk and is inspired by a field of blue and purple and rose colored lupine flowers. She spends the next year doing more walking around and planting seeds. "Along the highways and down the country lanes. ... Now some people called her That Crazy Old Lady."

But she didn't mind. Neither did they by the time the next spring came around, when they discovered what she had been doing all along, as the flowers popped up in bouquets around the places they called home.

That this book found me... that this book about the curious, childless Miss Rumphius finding another way to make the world a more beautiful place was dedicated, "To Saint Nicholas, patron saint of children, sailors, and maidens," made me believe in something.

If not St. Nick, if not God, if not past lives.

Something.



Lupin. } 1. Flower.  
          } 2. Pod.  
          } 3. Lupin. } *Lupinus.*

*Eliz. Blackwell delin. sculp. et Pinx.*

# THE FLIGHT OF CLARK GABLE'S MUSTACHE

**H**elicopter seeds have such terrible timing. In autumn, when trees are shedding their leaves, everyone is looking reverently toward the sky to speculate their rich foliage and behold a symbolic fall.

In spring, no one is looking for what the trees are getting rid of.

Too bad. Because there they are. Helicopter seeds twirling in the spring sun like dust, glitter. A wild rainfall of potential growth, not eminent death! Twinkling they fall, and we barely notice, understandably distracted by the roses blooming, the lilacs wafting, the bees buzzing. Helicopter seeds perform an incredible feat, encapsulating a story of nature and survival, but because they make their descent in the spring, they're not admired the way fall leaves are. It's as if they read nature's Save The Date wrong. Dropping too soon; or maybe too late, depending on how you look at it.

But! They can fly.

Helicopter seeds can travel up to a mile a day. With some luck and a sturdy ride supplied by nature's puff, round

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and round they'll go in hopes that their once-in-their-lifetime journey plants them somewhere good. Somewhere they can root and grow and eventually produce cute little baby helicopter seeds of their own and maybe, you know, write a book about their hard-won life experiences. (For digital release only, lest a brethren tree be sacrificed for a print release.)

Usually, they don't make it to the promised land. It's just sidewalks that end up lousy with 'em. Here lie a hundred helicopter seeds, doomed to rot, splayed out uncereemoniously on the concrete. *No, don't you dare feel bad for them! They chose their path, and they chose poorly.*

There's an easy way to tell what type of tree a helicopter seed originated from: Just compare its shape to a famous mustache, according to something I once read online. Got that artsy Frank Zappa droop? It's a Sycamore seedling. Handlebar-of-all-handlebars, little tips getting all pretentious at the end, a la Wyatt Earp? Hey, hey, that's a Norway Maple. Or does it have short, tidy wings extended into a near straight line like the sexy shadow on Clark Gable's tough upper lip? Field Maple.

Clark Gable was an Ohio boy. That fact is important to people from Ohio, a state renowned for being flown over; for choosing the wrong answer for all of us in presidential elections; and for not knowing how, exactly, to trade in its worn down Rust Belt for a shiny new one like those of its most successful peers.

When an Ohio kid succeeds to the point that his facial hair is forever referenced by, of all people, armchair horticulturalists, there is hope for the rest of us Ohio kids—no matter how long ago this success happened. Ohio, sea of small-town reds choking a few oases of blue, is breeding ground for dreams thought needed to be achieved elsewhere. Hello, LeBron James, just a kid from Akron who went searching in Miami. See also: Steven Spielberg, Gloria Steinem, Dave

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Grohl, Marilyn Manson. All, just kids from the Buckeye State. (Look Ma! Another silly seed.)

My husband and I are both just adults in Chicago who were once just kids in Ohio. My husband wanted to become a comedian after listening to George Carlin, Lenny Bruce, and Richard Pryor. I wanted to become a writer after reading Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood. Clark Gable, lore has it, wanted to become an actor after watching the 1932 movie “The Bird of Paradise.”

Its real-life female lead and presumed “bird” of paradise was actress Dolores del Rio, née María de los Dolores Asúnsolo López-Negrete. She made a splash that caused a national wave of pearl clutching because she swam nude in one of the movie’s scenes.

The real ornithological members of the Birds-of-Paradise tribe live in rainforests and swamps, not Chicago. The birds we mostly see here are pigeons. Brave, jaded, fucked up pigeons. Pigeons who don’t give a shit if that’s a French fry, a helicopter seed, or a used Band-Aid: It’s dinner. Those of us waiting for the train watch their devil-may-care pecking and think about the pure carnage those Band-Aids must be reeking on the poor guy’s tiny intestinal track. We think about this mostly if the train is running late, our stress levels rising higher than the Hancock.

Birds-of-Paradise, however, are breathtaking. Scientists recently discovered a new species of The Family Paradisaeidae in New Guinea. It has feathers colored by some of the darkest black pigment in the world, as well as shockingly blue features made especially prominent in the mating dance of the males. *National Geographic* writes that “to woo a female, this bird flips up his cape, puffs out his chest, and shimmies his little feet.” Shimmies his little feet! Eeeee! I’m wooed already. But I’m also pretty easy. The lady BOPs are picky, and this

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newfound bird's jet, velvet black feathers ensure the male's dressed to impress.

Birds-of-Paradise were, at one point long ago, thought of as the mythical phoenix, the bird that rises from the ashes. Though, that notion, and belief of myths in general, dissolved as time passed and the Anthropocene took hold.

I think that's surprising because, though time weathers us, though time atrophies our lives to objects and people until *they* are the outline of our lives more than our actual selves, what time most makes us hold on to is our beliefs—especially a belief that involves a dream about our own success. The longer we wait for this dream, the less likely we are to let go of it. We've invested too much already. Faith grows the more it is challenged.

And, not to make you feel bad or anything, but Clark Gable's dream came true pretty quickly.

When he left Ohio and went to Hollywood, movie makers were looking to grow their “stable of male stars,” and I'll be damned if CG wasn't the most handsomest, most thoroughbred of the bunch. And Old Hollywood was not one to look a Gift Horse in the mouth. Unless, of course, it was a Lady Gift Horse, in which case Hollywood deemed itself entitled—*nay, required!*—to look in her mouth, legs, armpits, breasts, and myriad other unmentionable orifices, just to be sure she was worth the investment. *You shall swim naked on screen, my dear!* (On the set of one movie, CG worked 71 days and made \$120,000. His female co-star worked 125 days and made \$25,000. I learned this in a fact book written to sit on the back of a toilet and entertain mid-poop.)

But no, CG was a man. And he was white. And he was a star! One of his earliest-ish Hollywood friends, Lionel Barrymore, even thought so. Yes, fate easily found and befriended him Lionel of the iconic Barrymore Family.

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Was it easier for CG to make it because of his timing? Ugh, certainly not entirely, but thinking so offers a great deal of relief to me. It's easier on a 21st century-dream-drowning heart to imagine that other people, way back when, were successful not because they had more talent than you do but because they had the time to be successful, granted by way of a series of lucky privileges the time period allowed. Mostly they had good timing.

"Good," here, I acknowledge with an invisible asterisk; there may have been greater chance to "make it" but there was also a list of seemingly insurmountable challenges, sexism/racism/poverty/state sanctioned violence, no safety net, economic depression, no Halo Top ice cream, and no iPhones with apps to brand your identity and achieve stardom with nothing more than a clever hashtag.

What there was, was war.

Well, there's war now, but war back then was harder to ignore because war was fought by all Americans, Hollywood's Fancy Field Maple Clark Gable included. He enlisted to serve in WWII when he was in his forties, an age at which he was already such a successful star that Adolf Hitler—cue infamous mustache bell—supposedly offered his most-monstrous of men a ca\$h reward if they captured CG alive. Presumably to make him *dance, gift horse, dance!*

During his time at war, CG flew. He made a recruitment movie for aerial gunners and even rode shotgun in combat zones, though his studio tried to pull strings to get him duties in which he, their big earner, was not in danger of dying a war hero in a plane crash.

He didn't. But his wife, Carole Lombard, did. An actress, Carole Lombard was the first war-related American female casualty of World War II after she died in a plane crash on her way home from a tour selling war bonds. Her plane crashed into an American mountain and it killed all

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the passengers aboard, which included servicemen as well as Lombard's mother and press agent, who was also CG's best man in her wedding.

Clark Gable flew to the crash site to claim their bodies. Wife. Mother-in-law. Best friend.

At my most frustrated, it's simple for me to assume his life was easy. This sad moment of his life, though (a moment that supposedly broke him and forever changed him, just a kid, just a kid from Ohio), reminds me we're all suffering like a son of a bitch. It's often just by a matter of degrees. Degrees and timing.

The helicopter, machine variety, really came into its own during another war: Vietnam. Here American boys died often to prove themselves MEN, an ideal established by the PR depictions of CG, who *Life* magazine once called "all man... and then some." All this in a time when being "all man... and then some" was a pinnacle of popular success.

On an evening decades later, my husband and I are leaving our small apartment pin dot in a map of Chicago. We kiss and branch off in separate directions down our sidewalk. Two wings of one helicopter that flies better together. I'm heading to a coffee shop to pretend to write for someone who cares. Him, to yet another worthless gig. Is our timing off or are we just not good enough yet? Will we ever be able to achieve our definition of success in the uncertain amount of time we're given? Is our faith in ourselves waning? Does it make a difference?

It doesn't. Not yet anyway. We continue spinning, day after day, because it's all we can think or want to do. We're just performing the dance nature calls us toward—a longing built deep in our psyches and connected by dirty velvet feathers into our DNA.

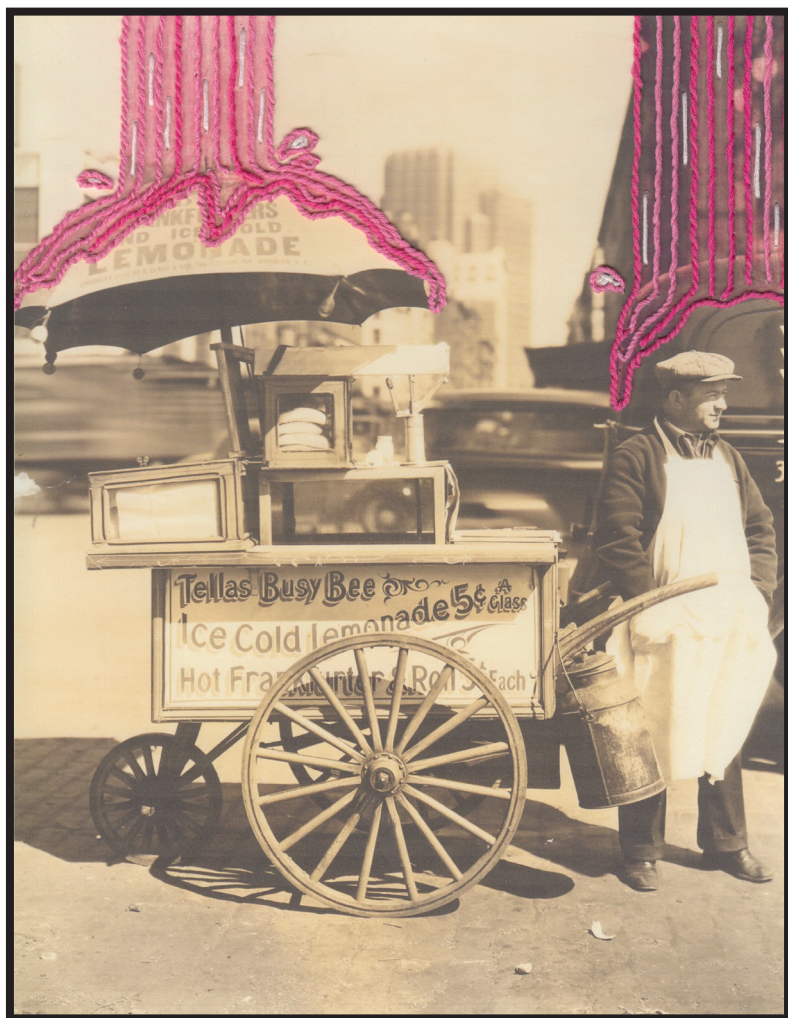
We spin over sidewalks and cigarette butts and pigeon Band-Aid poop, looking for a place to land, and we crunch

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dying, forgotten helicopter seeds underfoot on our way. I get some satisfaction imagining that what we're actually shimmying our feet on is really Clark Gable's stupid, successful, mustachioed, deliciously handsome face.

Still we spin. Ripe and gone with the wind.





# HOPE



Hope is knowing what you need and how to get it.

Hope is responsible for every human action.

Hope is a prayer in sheep's clothing.

Hope is what's keeping you alive.



# GOD MADE AN ARTIST

**A**nd on the Last Day—because She had spent too much time procrastinating out of fear that what She made wouldn't be good enough, and because sometimes just thinking about something and refreshing a Twitter feed or researching MFA programs She'd probably never have the money to attend feels like She's making actual progress, and because finishing anything takes a divine-like discipline—God looked down on the real mess the humans were making of Her almost-finished masterpiece and said, “I need a rebel.” So God made an artist.

God said, “I need someone who is willing to question what's being presented as truth, spend 16 back-to-back days in the studio or on the stage or at their iMacs making work that turns out to be totally unusable, chain smoke things they know will kill them but are addicted to because they wanted to look cool at Warped Tour, then start over on something they were hoping to have finished a month ago, AND THEN stay up until 5 am in the rippling cold sweat of insomnia, YouTube rabbit holing, ‘Planet Earth’ binge-watching, and depression.” So God made an artist.

“I need somebody with an outlook and lifestyle that offends most Me-fearing people, someone who is strong

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enough to not be welcomed by the masses but still open enough to understand what their rejecters need to hear, see, or think about. Someone who is so sensitive, everything has the potential to hurt them. Somebody to break things, dig through trash for supplies, recognize the value of accidents, see things that are not there in things that are real, and annoy their walking partners by making them wait so photos can be snapped of a really interesting rust pattern on the Dumpster. Somebody to say, ‘Last one, I swear to God! That shape has given me a great idea and is just what my mood board needs right now.’” So God made an artist.

God said, “I need somebody who will make something out of nothing, despite the fact that no one really is asking for it, let alone paying them to do it. I need somebody who will continue creating these things even when everything and everyone else seems to be telling them to be logical and pick a real major and/or career and grow up. Someone who will have the courage to make something even if no one else ever sees it. I need someone brave enough to continue making after a bad critique. Someone with the patience to wait out the work and keep going, someone who understands that each wrong stroke, wonky scale model, missed note, bad joke, wasted material, flat dialogue, or one-dimensional character is leading them to a moment that will finally tectonic-shift it all into place and make the embarrassment that goes hand-in-hand with creative trial-and-error worth it.” So God made an artist.

God needed someone whose work and passion wouldn’t be respected until the “right people” deemed it so. Someone who would fucking hate the notion of there even being “right people.” Someone who would break out into hives at the term “influencers” but also know those are usually the “right people.” Someone who would forge ahead when no one attends a show or buys a painting or reads a piece, blam-

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ing it on “there’s just a lot of other things going on tonight” or “it’s hard to get people out when it’s snowing” or “it’s hard to get people out when it’s raining” or “it’s hard to get people out when it’s sunny outside.”

God had to have somebody willing to leave their parents and friends behind, not have health insurance to start their own families, live in milk carton-sized studio apartments, Uber the Finance Bros to \$120K+ a year jobs, work a 50-hour gig week for the freedom to travel, and live outside the safe gushy centrist spots of first-world human existence, where a lukewarm simplicity seems a better bet than burning the midnight oil on something that will probably set no one’s heart on fire. But might. Just might. Just might change someone’s mind. So God made an artist.

God said, “I need someone who has to market their own work. Ideally this is someone who is for sure not an extrovert and to whom talking about their own creation feels completely foreign at best, gross at worst. Really, they’ve gotta be just absolutely terrible at this skill set; but they have to exercise it if they want to survive. Also, they’ll have to learn how not to take criticism personally—and there will be a real buttload of criticism and comment sections to weather—even though they are usually the most emotionally open, and therefore emotionally soft, of human creatures (their work requires them to be), and even though what’s being criticized (that work) feels as much a part of them as a fingernail, which, by the way, I spent a lot of time perfecting (kept accidentally making them claws).

“They’ll have to write all their own social media posts. Write their own invoices and figure out their own taxes. Submit their own event listings on internet calendars that ask them to enter a shit ton of information but then bury the listing or sometimes don’t even post it at all. Build their own websites. Send a million and one unanswered PR emails into

the empty void (if they're the visual type, they'll be terrible at spelling, too, so they'll annoy those newspaper story gatekeepers right off the bat). And share all of this until they get unfriended on social media, like, a lot. They'll need to keep going anyway." So God made an artist.

God said, "I need somebody who is just the right amount of unsatisfied by anything they've ever made in the past, that way they'll be motivated to keep making in the future. Somebody who finds it very difficult to get something done because saying something is done implies they think it's good. BUT, even with this self-disgust and perfectionism, they also must be able to talk positively about what they've made in the past so they can earn enough money to support the next big project, which they think is going to be 'The One That's Ready For You All To Look At Now, OK?'"

God needed somebody to be the brunt of rudimentary, dumb jokes about their "silly" skills, their sexuality, their extreme capacity for feelings, their weirdness, their disinterest in football. Somebody who won't have much of anything to show for themselves at family or high school reunions (unless, on an off chance, there are people there who know what a big deal it is to get a like or retweet or "hey, that was amazing" or "hey, I've never heard/seen/read anything like that before" from fellow makers one admires). Somebody who will be lampooned as selfish and navel gazing and starving, and who suffers from mounting insecurity because there will be no generalized career markers of success that the majority of people would understand and a pitiful bank account and no awards ceremony (except the kind that are exclusive enough to be aired on national television, which, if they reach this level of success, they'll automatically be deemed sellouts). Oh, and literally anyone can put on their LinkedIn or dating profile that they are one of these people

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and never have to put in the gut-wrenching work that proves it. So God made an artist.

God said, "Look, maybe I'm not selling this in quite the right way.

"Because despite all of these cons, there will be this: I need somebody to make others think about things in a new way. I need somebody to show others that they are not alone, that there are people in that world of theirs who feel just like they do, hurt just like they do. Somebody to make others feel a little less crazy. I need somebody who could save one of my children from killing themselves too soon. I need somebody to make something so gorgeous or meaningful or new or hideous or hilarious or sensual, it becomes a respite from the terror. I need someone to remind themselves by reminding others that the vulnerability of being alive may not be a gift they asked for or necessarily want all the time, but it is wrapped up in some really sublime packaging that can make every tomorrow worth, at the very least, waking up for."

So God made an artist.



CHOIR.

# “LONG TIME GONE”

BY DIXIE CHICKS

*“Delia plays that ol’ church piano/  
Sittin’ out on her daddy’s farm/  
She always thought that we’d be together/  
Lord, I never meant to do her harm/  
Said she could hear me singin’ in the choir/  
Me, I heard another song/  
I caught wind and hit the road runnin’/  
And Lord, I’ve been a long time gone.”*

Raindrops slow-streaked down the wide windows, like a crowd of concertgoers trickling closer to the stage. One or two drops (ugh, the WORST kind of concertgoer) elbowed their way to the front of the fall. The trance of their constant descent seemed a meaningful backdrop for Penny, the plastic wild horse ride, forever frozen mid-stride.

I was four deep in line at my busy hometown Meijer, lost in thoughts of rain and concerts and rainy concerts (=

muddy = BEST) when I heard my aisle's plucky clerk ask a question as he churned groceries over the scanner.

"What's one thing that was a big part of your childhood that isn't part of your life anymore?"

Struck by this unusual question, I listened for the customer's answer, pretending to be totally smitten by the Altoids selection.

"Oh, I don't know. Homework I guess?"

Lame. Anyone could give that answer. The other customers ahead of me said something similarly disappointing, caught off guard and mostly just wanting to buy their sour cream and cheddar chips and get home before the storm got worse.

When it was my turn, the clerk, undeterred, smiled and asked me the same question. I was prepared with a different answer.

"Cows," I responded, staring back at him, wondering where this would lead us, me and thoughtful-grocery-store-man.

"Cool!" he said, not looking up from his task of scanning my groceries (and now Altoids).

"What about you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Homework I guess?"

I drove back to my parent's house as the rain picked up speed, passing our family's barns along the way. If cows huddle together, a bad storm is approaching, and they'll turn their big meaty butts in whatever direction it's coming from.

Maybe. Those are Farmer's Almanac-ish, front porch swingin'-style fun facts I've carried with me since I was a kid, but they have most certainly been confused with other things stuffed into my brain's small crevices—cocktail recipes, women's history, my social security number, niece and nephew birthdates, Usher lyrics—in the decade and change since I've been a long time gone.

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What do you remember about the thing that took up a decent chunk of your childhood but is not a big part of your life anymore? The knowledge I have readily available in my adult brain about farming is pretty unimpressive. Mostly I just remember it's hard—an undeniable fact I secretly revel in whenever a big city colleague talks about how charming and idyllic a farm childhood must have been.

"Why! I might even become a farmer!" they muse. "That's the dream!"

Then I scoff. To myself. I'm a secret insufferable snob when it comes to how challenging the farming life is, even though I know very little about its technicalities when all is said and done. I'd love to see you try, I think.

Like most people, I have a small but omnipresent need to try to fit in when I go back to my hometown, a need that's like a cold mushy leftover shit sandwich from being a kid. It manifests itself in a personality shift I call chameleon-ing. I try to blend in or distract until it's time to go back to myself. Whenever I visit, I am largely quiet about who I am and what I think. This can lead to some very interesting things being said to me.

An example: A few years ago, I went to our county fair for a day. I ran into the father of a childhood friend and shot the proverbial shit with him for a while. I asked how his daughter was doing, commenting that I saw on Facebook that her own young daughters had recently both broken bones.

"Healin' up good?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. They just went to the zoo [in the city an hour away], and I said be careful, you know those liberals! They just might call child services."

Eep. Yes, lest we look out for the children.

I changed the subject and quickly ended the conversation because, for the most part, I'm a weak-willed co-depen-

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dent scaredy cat who will do anything to avoid confrontation. My memorable moments of courage have only come after long bouts of great duress. Or great fury. Like when Donald Trump became president.

In my rage I posted something like this on my Facebook page (I'm paraphrasing because I can't find the post anymore): This election reminds me of why I can never and will never move back to my hometown, which sucks because it's really beautiful there.

Look, no take-backsies. Rural areas I've lived in have been the places I experienced or saw the most obvious and persistent forms of racism, sexism, hypocrisy, and homophobia—hog tied in a gingham bow and slathered in barbecue sauce. DT has lived a life and ran a campaign rooted in all of those things, and the rural folk had just made him leader of the free world. Fuuuuck.

But I do know my post hurt some feelings of people who find more love and joy in those small-town communities than I ever could. I also understand how it could feel shitty to think everyone can't wait to "get the fuck out" of the place you call home, either by choice or because you didn't have the means or ability to go anywhere else.

I'm fairly certain this is the post that got me unfriended by an old friend of mine. A friend who I found wasn't my Friend anymore only after he died of an opioid overdose. Mutual Friends of ours were posting in his honor, shocked that he was gone, this man who was always the life of the party. I went to check out his Facebook page to see what was going on only to find I'd been removed from his digital landscape of loved ones.

He was ornery, and that was his appeal. He was also one of the kindest people I'd ever met, willing to lend a hand to anyone (including me, many times age 18-22, when I got too drunk at things or ate all the party's pot brownies like a real

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prick and needed someone to take my sad ass home). He was a constant champion of where we both came from. I clearly was not.

Social media has changed everything about how we decide what we think of one another. You forget who else is listening. Or you don't, and make passive aggressive posts in hopes that they scroll-stumble on to it/ haven't unfollowed you yet.

When I consider the dad who joked that liberals would call child services on a parent, any parent, I am struck by the fact that I didn't even know what "liberal" or "conservative" meant until I got to college. Those weren't words in our everyday lexicon when I was growing up; we were just Americans—especially after 9/11, which happened one brisk morning my sophomore year of high school.

That attack was a catalyst for where we are now, especially socially. It forced us have a new conversation about what our country stood for and who we were to the rest of the world—and where we individually stood on those life-or-death topics.

Enter: The Dixie Chicks.

At a 2003 concert in London, lead singer Natalie Maines said, "Just so you know, we're on the good side with y'all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas."

Oh. Boy.

Word quickly traveled across the pond, and country music radio stations stopped playing their hugely popular songs. Fellow country artists spoke out against the band, most notably Toby Keith, of *We'll-Put-A-Boot-In-Your-Ass-It's-The-American-Way* idiocy.

Theirs was a quick and shocking fall from country music's white-washed grace.

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What Natalie said on stage seems ridiculously quaint in comparison to today's cultural conversations, not to mention the fact that expressing political stances is now, in 2018, an integral part of many a musician's "brand." <gaaaaaah>

But what's most surprising, to me at least, and what doesn't get talked about much in retellings of this infamous entertainment news story, was that Natalie said this right before singing the band's new single, "Travelin' Soldier."

"Travelin' Soldier" is a sweetly sad song about a U.S. woman in love affected by the Vietnam War. It is, on a larger scale, about how all wars are experienced in small American towns. The song genuinely honors the sacrifice people make for their country, especially veterans who did what they were told or asked to do.

But none of that nuance, that complicated geography of ideology between statement and song that Natalie Maines expressed in mere minutes, mattered to the people who only heard her say something they disagreed with.

She was banished.

French fries were renamed.

The skanky, rotten hot air of righteousness continued to wave the American flags on our football fields.

As a teen, I quietly watched all of this happen on my periphery and knew that if it could happen to a country darling, it could happen to me. I, too, disagreed with the war and thought it was a rash decision. I, too, was ashamed of the president, though I held very little attachment to Texas or anywhere in the south for that matter. I, too, used art and music as ways to reconcile my outrage with the love I felt just as deeply for the goodness in America worth salvaging and the better, harder, more humanistic answers worth pursuing.

I never was a huge fan of "Travelin' Soldier." I felt a deeper kinship to a song the Chicks put out a year before that London concert. "Long Time Gone" lodged itself into my

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cultural rubric and never left. The song is about leaving the farm and church to pursue different dreams and the low-key hum of guilt that can come with that decision.

Under lock and key until I was 18, I decided to drink instead of dealing with any of these complicated feelings, which warped new shapes out of my cowardice, which by the way, was a capital crime for British soldiers until 1930.



# TROPHY HUNTER

## *Soap*

There's only one poem I can almost recite in its entirety. I learned it in second grade and it was titled "My Box" or something like that. Instead of reading it, you sang it, which probably made it easier to remember. The poem is narrated by a child, who I imagined, of course, as a little girl who looked just like me!

In the poem, she recounts all the treasures she keeps in a small box that no one else knows she has. Under its lid, a magical world awaits. There's a secret key. A note she wrote to the guy next door. *And never gave him and much, much more!*

Having secret things enchanted me at that age. I loved "The Secret Garden" and another book I can't remember the name of, but which featured a tiny home in a forest that the leading little girl character discovered and ran to whenever she could. She tended its flowers, washed its walls, put broom to floor. Pippi Longstocking, my favorite, had red hair just like me, her own horse, and, most importantly, her own house full of treasure she'd found while sailing the high seas—though she kept her house decidedly less clean than

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that other book's little girl did hers. Having a horse and no parents/ barn can do that to a girl.

I wanted something that felt like it belonged only to me, and why not secrets? Secrets were like trophies, weapons to yield. And since I wasn't very likely to get my own secret things, since I'd have to pay for them or steal them myself, both of which I just couldn't do, I found other ways to draw a line between where the confusing, scary world stopped and I began. Internal secret keys that only I could find hidden away.

There was secret knowledge I pretended to have, until my siblings got wise to me, which took all of two seconds. I told them I knew the difference between female cats and male cats because I, biologist and extremely generous petter that I was, discovered that our own cats' shoulder blades felt like different shapes; therefore, pointy mountainous shoulder blades, like the ones in Cuddles, belonged to boy cats, and curved shoulder blades that sloped like the hill our house sat on, like the ones holding Black Beauty together, belonged to girl cats. I believed it. I also told them that Cuddles, Black Beauty, and I could communicate with our minds. I knew that wasn't true but stuck to it anyway for as long as I could, hoping maybe if I kept saying it, it might come true.

I had secret prayers. Perhaps the only thing I subconsciously decided to pocket away as "good advice" from my elementary religious education was that you could say a prayer about anything. (It was like casting a spell! Shh! You should also keep calling it that to yourself in Catholic school!) I learned this in third grade. Our room had a bulletin board where we could pin-up folded notecards, on which we scrawled what we wanted "Mary Queen of" to pray for us about. Mary, kween that she was, had a direct line to the Big Guy, not just His snail mail address like the rest of us. So, for example, you could write "Mary, queen of peace, pray

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for us” or “Mary, queen of recess kickball games, pray for us” or “Mary, queen of Polly Pocket birthday gifts, please please pray for us.” Each night, after my family said our goodnight prayers together at the foot of Mom and Dad’s bed, I tacked on the same “Mary, queen of” prayer silently: “Mary, queen of education and grades, pray for us.” So, I think that tells you something about the kind of child I was. You say nerd, I say hardcore overachiever. Good grades and awards were trophies, to be cashed in for love.

I had secret soap. That I kept under my bed. Beside a white plastic knife. I can’t remember what grade, exactly, this started, but it had to have been sometime around fourth, because I stored the soap under my schmancy new day bed. I got that day bed in fourth grade after years of sleeping on one-half of a full with my older sister. (That might sound rough, but it meant that we got to share stories together at night! And lice, which wasn’t as nice.)

Soap, I had learned in an art lesson that year, could be carved into shapes! That’s what the knife was for. My class had carved little people out of soap to give as gifts. For whom or what occasion, I’m not sure, but it was probably a cheap activity and a good segue into a discussion on hygiene. Whenever my sister wasn’t in our room, I’d throw myself under my bed and hum while shaving away little pieces of Irish Spring, pilfered from Dad’s medicine cabinet, into hearts, animals (cats, duh), people.

I planned to wrap them and place each in my family’s stockings at Christmas, though I don’t think this final step happened. That’s not what they were under my bed for anyway.

### *Wounds*

Nothing is secret when you get a little bit older. Things that happen to you, especially dramatic but not totally

un-overcomeable things, become girls' trading cards. Being hurt becomes a new way to get love or admiration or to bond you to another person who is going through something similar.

Sometimes this is OK, cherish-worthy even. Girlfriends learn to speak a language of empathy and care early on and it's beautiful; I don't really go for "The Future is Female!" stuff because I hope, instead, that the future is human, but the fact that little girls are encouraged more than little boys to be open with one another about what's going on in their lives is a piece of the feminine pie we should definitely wrap tightly and pack for tomorrow's picnic.

Sometimes this is not OK (and can happen regardless of gender). Like when the wounds become your trophies for unlocking love—the more you have, the more you get—and, before you know it, you can't stop yourself from seeking them out or turning anything into a reason to live wounded.

When this happens, you start to get lost in the story of your pain. Instead of writing new chapters, you're stuck in old ones with people who want you to stay there because they can't turn the page on their own pain either.

And then you drink together. A lot. And you congratulate yourselves for being honest about who you really are instead of being like the sheep who never even take the time to look, not realizing you're doing the exact same thing but under a different kind of conformity (albeit one dressed way cooler). You're just at a different pit stop of the same fruitless journey.

While dogs you're proud of leaving unleashed dig fangs into your heels.

### *Notches*

The thing no one can prepare you for once you get out of school for good is that you will no longer have daily mark-

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ers of success to feed the need for approval that has been purposefully built into you by adults ever since kindergarten screening.

There are no grades, no dean's list, no college admission or bright shiny career waiting to begin to motivate yourself forward. Nary even a roll call at the start of the day to remind you someone cares that you woke up in sound enough body and mind to dress yourself, with nothing to gain themselves in your being there.

As an adult left to find my trophies on more abstract terms, I ramped up my impulsivity and -aholisms of anything I could get my hands on. Men, to prove I wasn't ugly. More men, to prove I wasn't a victim. Work, to prove I was more than a body. Drinksanddrinksanddrinksandshots, to prove I was more than a square. Likes, to prove I couldn't possibly be as alone as I felt.

When you drink like that, the only trophy you really get is in the morning, seconds before the headache that's wrecking your brain comes barreling toward you like a train in a tunnel. It's the soft sound of your throat's pulse tapping out on the pillow. Trying to hold on. Begging for mercy.

### ***Chips***

I went to my first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting the afternoon that followed a terrifying morning I found myself one state away from my home in a dirty hotel room.

The night before, I had tried to drive to the apartment of my ex-boyfriend. This ex had broken up with me for several reasons, most of which caused or stemmed from my irrational drinking. He had warned me for years that if I didn't at least start drinking one glass of water between each drink, he was going to break up with me.

I'm not being hyperbolic when I say this: At that time, consuming even one glass of water once I started drinking for

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the day seemed about as possible as plucking Jupiter from the sky with a toothpick and placing it in my martini.

So he left.

He's now my husband.

Why?

Easy.

I quit fucking drinking.

Our solutions for a better life are usually quite simple, we just convince ourselves they're complicated because that's easier than doing the work.

First though, I had to quit on my own terms. Because this Spice Girls-, Destiny's Child-trained independent woman was not making that decision for a man. Great Valerie Solanas' ghost, hell to the no!

Also, I was addicted. To the fun. To the people. To the identity. To the chemical reactions. To the fuck you I won't do what you tell me. To the escape.

That morning, though, waking up to remember I only made it halfway and had driven for hours drunk on a fucking highway?

Fuck you, Jackie.

And only you.

Fuck you so hard.

The thought of what could have happened was enough to carry my shaking body back to my car, back across state lines, and into the resolution to stop living in chaos. I was fine with hurting myself. I'd done that for more than a decade of balls-to-the-wall binge drinking; in fact, I think that's part of what I liked about it. Blacking out was only half the escape. I also got to spend days hungover and in physical agony, which distracted me from what was going on inside, like some socially approved and encouraged form of cutting.

But in that harsh morning's revelatory sunlight, the thought of how badly I could have hurt other people the

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night before made me want to do something drastic. I decided I had two options: I could put a fucking gun to my head and pull the trigger, or I could go to AA. And, like I've said, I'm mostly a coward, so to a church basement my slimy self crawled.

I didn't go to many afterward.

I relapsed.

I started drinking again.

I started sobriety again.

This time it stuck.

Finally.

For the latter half of the decade I spent being 20-something, I had been trying to just drink better or differently, ignoring the knock on my soul's door that carried the warning that I needed to cut it ALL out as soon as possible. The memory of that night on the road and the morning after wasn't a light knock, it was a hurricane that blew my entire house of cards down. Even with a relapse between it and my final sober-versary, I consider that day the one where I truly recognized that the way I was living (not my life) needed to come to an end.

I went to AA again and quickly realized that if I needed help (I did), this was not where I was going to find it. AA works for a lot of people and has saved a lot of lives. I don't mean to diminish its value, but it wasn't right for me.

There were the stories. I was what I would call a functioning alcoholic. At meetings I would hear awfully sad retellings of addiction, and I would leave thinking that at least I never got that bad. I knew those thoughts would eventually turn into excuses.

There were the chips. Those golden-colored coins you got when you hit a milestone in your sobriety timeline. I knew those would trigger me, too. They're helpful rewards or reminders for some, but to me, they looked like trophies.

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Obsessing over achievement in lieu of real self-love was part of what got me to rock bottom in the first place. I needed to break that attachment more than I needed a coin or a calendar.

There were reminders of what people do when they are sick. Reminders that brought me back to my own experiences living with a need-a-drink-in-the-morning kind of addict, which would flare up my defensiveness and leave me drowning for the day in bloody head wounds. Those memories made me want to find ways to escape reality, which is what usually led me to drink.

Socially, we have two extremes of things we most commonly say to victims that leave them stuck. On one side, we stand up for them and say crimes like sexual assault are circumstances from which one never recovers. In some respect that's true; you're never the same again, certainly. On the other side of the extreme, we minimize their pain and say it could have been worse. Also often true, but not helpful.

One side of the coin leaves a victim feeling deeper in a hole of powerlessness, the other leaves them feeling ashamed for not bouncing back or, worse, spiraling the day away in thought about all the other violent ways humans are victimized. Both keep them frozen exactly where they are.

What I needed to hear was that I was not responsible for my victimization or how I had been hurt, but I was responsible for what my life looked like afterward and for drawing lines that I and those in my life were never to cross in order to best prevent those situations from happening again.

It's hard to say something like that to someone who is hurting. But in the wisdom of self-responsibility, I found empathy and empowerment alike. Making my life better, clean, and shaped by boundaries I made myself became my new way to say fuck you to everything bad in this bad, bad world.

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I'm two-plus years sober now, and somewhere in that time I stopped wanting trophies so compulsively. In fact, what I want today is to want nothing. Only to live like the hour hand of a clock, slowly enjoying the ride until time's up.

The things of my life before sobriety were never really mine anyway. For something to be yours is to be yours eternal, and all you have power over in that regard is yourself. Toys, trophies, beliefs, babies, fears, loves—as soon as you equate your worth with the value of a physical thing that is not your own naked mind and body, it's pretty much guaranteed it will at some point hold you back.

Loss is the universe trying to teach you that these things, all things, will never not be different soon.

Even the hurt.

Especially the hurt, if you so choose.



# **13 REASONS WHY “MERCEDES BENZ” BY JANIS JOPLIN IS THE BEST KARAOKE SONG**

1. It's Janis, whose twang is super fun to imitate.
2. It's not as if you're trying to crank out some “Me and Bobby McGee” or “Piece of My Heart” on that two-penny voice of yours. It's not a song requiring Legendary-Singing-Superstar-Janis-Joplin-Status. In other words, a voice that is magic, like blue smoke coming from a match that burnt out years ago and has just been kickin' it in the kitchen, under the refrigerator, friend to dust bunnies, mesmerizing idol of dropped and forgotten crumbs.
3. It's a funny song. Especially if you say, “I'd like to do a song of great social and political import!” as it's starting and “That's it!” as it's ending, just like she does on the recording of “Mercedes Benz.”

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4. That recording was made only three days before her death, a terribly sad but fun fact you can share with your friends at the bar when they ask what song you picked.
5. If you want to be a real showboat, you can also casually throw in the fact that your second karaoke song, Otis Redding's "Sittin' On The Dock Of The Bay," was also recorded three days before he died (plane crash). Bonus points: Janis turned her game up to *JANIS* levels shortly after watching the incredible Otis perform live at the Fillmore; his hypnotic writhing and passionate performance on stage left her so moved.
6. "Mercedes Benz" is a short song, clocking in at just under a minute and a half. That means you won't be up on the sticky karaoke stage forever trying to improvise something that's, dear god, hopefully clever or, in the very least, doesn't make you look bad, during a long instrumental break.
7. Seriously, you don't realize how many of your favorite songs have painstakingly long instrumental breaks until you try to sing one live at karaoke crowded with strangers. Such as every single Bob Seger song ever written by that beautiful, bearded fountain of youth.
8. It's a little obscure to people your age, but that doesn't matter, because "Mercedes Benz" is the easiest song to learn. The lyrics are repetitive, and it's got a cadence that's written in the primal auditory memory of everyone on this planet. All your fellow barmates (at least those not distracted by the great effort required of picking their own tune) will join you in a singalong by the last verse.

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9. You feel a kinship with Janis, a wild, angry, needy, ugly girl with addiction and impulse issues, weighed down by the ball and chain of a highway-long trail of letters written to a family and community she secretly longed would accept her and be proud of her. But you also like her because she was more than all of that. So much more. She had an unshakeable will to see the world, no matter how bad it got, and a strength of self that was her true super power. She was only just starting to listen to and harness that inner power before she died. She didn't get a chance, though, and that stings a little bit, because we always try to make temporarily sick but successful people seem like ourselves. So we can understand what's going on in our own heads a little bit better. So we can feel hopeful that we're also only sick temporarily. So we can think, hey, maybe great potential is buried somewhere by my insatiable hunger too.
10. She'd probably really like your third karaoke song pick, Harry Belafonte's "Jump In The Line." *OK? I believe you!*
11. Like the narrator of Janis' song, you also don't have a Mercedes Benz, you could use a new color TV, and you would like the lord to buy you a night on the town, an evening that would no longer involve whiskey at 4 am or hundreds spent on shots.
12. Because, unlike Janis, you (wild, angry, needy, ugly, impulsive girl) were granted the chance to change.
13. And you (grown, recovered, self-aware woman) took it. Just like you're taking this cab ride, heading home, karaoke complete. It's not a Porsche. It's not a Mercedes Benz. It's not even yours. But it's safe and so are you. Safe. Safe. You are finally safe from your worst most ravenous self.



# WANTING

*A reminder for people who are trying to stop binge drinking:*

Everyone who binges starts bingeing for different reasons, but it usually comes down to trying to mask something, to make other people or yourself more bearable, and/or to carry the weight of the burden of impossible things.

It doesn't have to be that way. Every day is a new one, a chance to build a muscle, from one very painful day to the next tiny-bit-less-painful-day, until suddenly years have passed, and your old way of life seems like the impossible thing. A burden you've allowed yourself to leave behind. A merciless hunter you've outsmarted.

We find animal species thought gone still roaming earth all the time—heart beating, death defied. Impossibly alive and thriving.



# LOVE



Love is formed by well-tended boundaries  
that were once overgrown walls.

Love is asking before acting.

Love is the sound of a box fan, pulled up from  
the basement on a firefly summer night.

Love is why we change.



# TO THE WOMEN WHO LOVED ME BEFORE HE DID

Behind every love story, there's one like ours.  
The kind where we tried everything together.  
Haircuts, Indian food, Irish car bombs.  
Ideologies, birth controls, road trips.  
Face masks, protests, jobs, and drugs.

You are the foundation for my future. That foundation is so ridiculously, life-makingly, goosebump-inducingly fun.

But I know I was not always easy. You were often better friends than I was. I text you when I get home safe, but I squirrel myself away when I hurt. Bury myself in the caverns of my mind, throwing you off the scent of my wound. Isolated but not alone.

I know I would never just let you have it, take my pain for me, no matter how many ways you asked for it. Some ancient manifestation of pride would make me keep you at a distance, would not let you see an open fit of tears whenever something spoiled.

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Only my mom got to hold me through something like that. Once. When my college boyfriend broke my heart.

You remember.

I know you do.

Because you carry my scars as if they were your own. Trapped securely under bell jars in the recesses of your own hidden caves, the trails to which are lined with lavender and guarded by fearsome wolves with fur the color of your hair. Blonde and black and brown and pink and red. You've all sacrificed parts of yourselves to be my protectors.

Whenever I ran, I knew you weren't far behind. The peace that gave me, even when I pushed you away, always lured me back to the light.

You've shown me how to love and to forgive. You were the guides and the guard rails. You saved me from the nights, my shining armor.

I want to say thank you. For loving me first. Ceaselessly. Sisterly.

Behind every great woman are 20 like you.



# STONE MAIDEN

**W**hen someone asks you to marry them—especially if that someone is a man and you are a someone who is a woman—you are, in fact, being asked to answer several questions.

1. Will you marry him?
2. Will you wear white?
3. Are you willing to share a bank account? After all, her money is a modern girl's virginity.
4. Will you take his last name or keep your own?

Let's focus on that last question. Many people, a big majority, a reported 70% of American adults, actually, think you should take his. Around half of them think it should be required BY LAW that you, dearly beloved, make his name yours\* and set women's freedom of choice back to a time when it was socially acceptable to call an unwed 21-year-old gal a *spinster*.\*\*

If that were the case, I'd gamble we'd have a much smaller number of weddings to attend each summer. Or maybe not. It should come as no surprise that Millennials love irony. We grew up conquering the Oregon Trail... on a computer. So while we love feminism when we can put a cute

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hashtag or pink hat on it, we continue to take our husband's names in droves.

Why? Tradition. Sentimentality. Choice. The best case I've heard for it came from, of all places, "Grey's Anatomy," when Jo Wilson, once a homeless, parentless child and ex-wife of an abusive husband, told her fiancé she wanted to take his name because he was the first person who truly loved her. Oh! I also liked the nihilistic pro-taking-his-name argument a former colleague of mine made; she decided to change her name to his because her maiden name was given to her at birth because it was a man's anyway, so why not? Ha!

Every woman's choice varies, and that is her prerogative. Thus, it's a better use of our time here to tell you why I think you should consider keeping your own.

- 1) Giving your name up for his signifies a shift in power. You should expect to have a marriage grounded in equality, and you shouldn't get married to someone who doesn't want to start off on equal footing.
- 2) SEO. You already bought that domain name, snagged the Twitter handle, and worked on building that byline/ reputation/ internet presence/ professional standing all by yourself. It's not selfish to not want to trade those in. It's practical.
- 3) Women are already asked to give up so much of themselves or contort themselves into different people to prove they are good or worthy.\*\*\* Revolutions happen best when they start internally and work their way forward. Come on, baby. Buck the trend. Make the world a fairer place for all the girls born after you. You're your own person. Stay that way. Not taking his name doesn't make you a worse wife than someone who did.

4) Lucy Stone.

Let's focus on that last one. I've got a bit of a ye ol' girl crush on Lucy Stone. *Oh, she was an American girl, raised on patriarchy!* Born in 1818, Lucy grew up to be an important suffragist and abolitionist. She's also partly famous for refusing to take her husband's last name when they got married. "A wife should no more take her husband's name than he should hers," Lucy said. "My name is my identity and must not be lost." *Lu-cy! Lu-cy! Yasss!*

Her husband was way cool with it, which was way cool of him. Plus, the subtitle for a biography about her is "An Unapologetic Life," and if that's not something for all of us to look up to, I don't know what is.

You may have never heard of Lucy Stone. Her legacy was squandered a bit by history's scribes in favor of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, suffragists our friend Lucy parted ways with when Stanton and Anthony fought against the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave black men the right to vote. Lucy supported it.

Storytellers are still progress' greatest weapon. Consider commercials flipping the toxic masculinity script and admirably slipping cultural change into our Netflix and chill: Jockey's "Show 'em What's Underneath" campaign features real men opening up about their struggles and how they overcame them. American Express and Amazon Echo ads feature competent, caring stay-at-home dads. Cheerios made waves with an ad of a family unit made up of two dads and their adoptive daughter.

I'd implore these storytellers, as well as those who write books, movies, whatever, to take reshaping gender roles a step further by using more references to married couples as Mr. and Ms. Let a character be a wife who has a different last

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name than her husband, without making a huge deal about that fact. This can help normalize an empowered choice.

At the very least, don't do a "Die Hard." I love that series, and young Bruce Willis as John McClane was a major babe, but his wife, Holly, flippity floppin' back and forth between her married name (when he proved manly enough for her love after taking a few flesh wounds and killing all the bad guys) and maiden name (when she was pursuing her career) was a plot device that infantilized Holly and, well, women everywhere.

But, though she similarly used her McClane surname as a bargaining chip in the battle with her daddy (and daddy issues), maybe the screenwriters were giving us a little wink with John McClane's daughter.

Her first name?

Lucy.



\* According to a 2017 follow-up study by a Portland State University sociologist, respondents' most common reason for having these opinions was that a woman should prioritize her marriage and family above herself. And I guess taking her husband's name signified devotion? The fact that she just promised to love, cherish, take care of, and bone one person for the rest of her life wasn't enough? That's dumb.

\*\* In her 2005 tome "Marriage, A History," Stephanie Coontz writes, "The norm of youthful marriage was so predominant during the 1950s that an unmarried woman as young as 21 might worry that she would end up an 'old maid.'" See also, a 1947

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best-selling book titled “The Modern Woman: The Lost Sex,” which featured this little turd: “All spinsters [should be] barred by law from having anything to do with the teaching of children on the ground of... emotional incompetence.”

\*\*\* A recent Women in the Workplace study conducted by Lean In and McKinsey & Co. found that women who negotiate for a promotion or raise are more likely than their male counterparts asking for the same thing to be told they are “bossy,” “too aggressive,” or “intimidating.”\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\* Keep scaring the pants off everybody, ladies! Then maybe we’ll all get a chance to wear ‘em.



# **“BORN TO RUN”**

## **BY BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN**

*“We can live with the sadness/  
I’ll love you with all the madness in my soul”*

*“Baby, this town rips the bones from your back/  
It’s a death trap, it’s a suicide rap/  
We gotta get out while we’re young/  
‘Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run”*

Here’s a hot take: “Born to Run” by Bruce Springsteen is the greatest love song of all time.

It’s so very star-crossed lovers to think oneself a tramp. And then to find a soulmate tramp? <kisses fingertips and throws them into the air>

It feels like Sid and Nancy. Bonnie and Clyde. Romeo and Juliet. All sans murder, suicide, and lack of 401K, of course, but songs are meant to dial up the drama, so it works. That “us against the world” mentality is a sexy one when you’re young. It’s fueled entire relationships—and impending divorces.

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The real soul-stirring success of this song, though, is that it manages to create that feeling while infusing realism backed by surges of sound.

Those lyrics, baby. Chills every time. We don't know if Wendy and her lover ever find a place to land. We just know they're trying and that it's not easy and that is so damn familiar it hurts. In a good way. The best art makes us feel seen or heard. Not alone in wanting what we seek or fending off what's chasing us.

The closest we get to a description of what they're looking for, the place they "really wanna go," is somewhere to "walk in the sun." Walking in the sun usually means death. In the meantime, they're driving, putting the past in the rear-view mirror, driving some more, all in really cool cars.

How very "Play it As it Lays" of you, Brucey boy! (Again, sans suicide.)

I love that this song's love story doesn't put a filter on things. To want "to know if love is real" is to admit that it might not be. Not everyone finds it, gives it, is capable of it. To say "we can live with the sadness" is to say sadness exists, even when there is love. To say "I'll love you with all the madness in my soul" is to bare a nakedness more intimate than sex and to give hope that love is possible for everyone, even those of us who are sad, mad, sick. To say a town can "rip the bones from your back" is to say a place can kill you, by way of the physical work you have to do there or the emotional stagnation it can cause if it's not right for you.

Of all the sentiments, though, the most realistic one in "Born to Run" is that when you're running, you're rarely focused on what you're running to. You're more focused on what you're running from.

And we're always running. All of us. Whether you stay put or move. No place is perfect. Until you die. That's life.

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The urgency of the song's sound is a reminder of why we look for love in the first place: Because everything is temporary, and impermanence is the lynchpin of this whole human experience. That's reassuring (impermanence is necessary if "this too shall pass" is to be true) but also fucking scary (impermanence is why you can't go back). True love makes it all so less overwhelming.

In the apartment Justin and I share in Chicago, we have two doors. Each door has an alarm system box beside it. Each box is powered on and works but isn't programmed, so if you broke in, it would just tell us which door opened. It wouldn't scream "INTRUDER" or call the cops.

Nope, the alarm system simply just beeps when one of the doors has been opened. A female robot voice, in a hyper-enunciated, matter-of-fact way, says: "Front. Door." or "Back. Door." Depending on which one is spinning on its hinges.

The alarm system was like this when we moved in. We've never talked about getting it fixed. We've never tried to figure out how to work its high tech buttons, though I do like to run my fingers over their lit-up plastic surfaces, hard but squishy at the same time. We've never considered taking the system down and putting the two chalky, chunky wall fixtures in the recycling. It's just there.

Maybe we both like the illusion of protection the on-but-not-programmed alarm system provides. Maybe we're lazy. I suspect, though, we just don't know what to do with something so foreign to our normal, base-level apartment habits.

What's this? You want us to make a home?

We know we won't live in this place long, so what's the point?

We are those modern American nomads, gatherers, tramps, emotional pioneers, stewards of the land for all who

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come next—be it just a granite countertop and hardwood floor kinda land, sure, but this is all we've been left with so it's wonderful because it's ours.

For now, anyway.

I wonder if the person who lived here before us did the same thing, and before her the same, and again and again. Everything is different, but still we are the same.

Could we trace the lines of lazy alarm-keeping through the generations of strangers who have lived in this apartment? Do you think the robot who lives inside the alarm system is bored, waiting like a genie for freedom or at least one new sentence to say? Do robot voices and genies rent just like us? Is our alarm system's one-sentence assignment the equivalent of a studio apartment as they "get back on their robot feet" after a metal heart crushing robot breakup? A respite?

Our robot's potential emotional turmoil means little to me as I scowl at the alarm box in the early morning. I'm willing it to quiet down so as not to wake my sleeping husband. He'll wonder why I'm leaving. Why I'm going out the "Back. Door."

This was more of a concern when I would sneak smokes at sunrise. Now I head outside to smell the fresh air. Today, Spring is confused as to what it will become. The weather is going back to being Winter every other day. Thinking maybe this time it will work out. She'll get over it soon, poor dear. We've all been there.

This smell, this wonderfully biting air, reminds me of the bunny hutch we kept at the farm near the baby calves. These bunnies, I'd eventually accept, were for selling and stewing, but at the time, they were for ogling through the thin wire walls that kept them safe from marauding felines.

I didn't love much about the farm, but I did love the bunnies. They were cute and fluffy, but here's what I loved most: To get to them, to get beyond the wire walls, we needed

our dad. We weren't allowed to (and were no doubt too weak to) slide off the hutch's wooden slab roof ourselves in order to reach in and lift out the babies.

Dad was always busy, but he'd often take a moment to lift the roof—"Top. Door." This act always scared witless the poor rabbits underneath, but it delighted us kids because it meant that next he'd pull out a baby bunny to let us pet and inspect.

We never were allowed to hold them ourselves. They were too fidgety and would escape our little kiddie hands too easily, and their assumed escape most certainly would lead them to the paws and jaws of a hungry cat.

Dad would hold the tiny animal close to his chest and we'd run a finger or two over its folded back ears. I liked being close to my dad in these moments. How tender he could be to these bunnies. How present he seemed with us. How close. I loved the bunnies but mostly I missed my dad. I wanted him to come run around outside with us more.

Being a parent must be so difficult—you're always letting someone down.

A few months ago, when visiting Ohio, I was talking about how much I loved these bunnies and getting to haphazardly pet them between chores; however, Dad remarked he didn't realize we still had the bunnies around when I was around. (Somewhere between my learning fractions and cursive and elapsed time, the farm got rid of the bunny hutch and its renters for good.)

At first, this hurt my feelings. How could he not remember one of my favorite farm memories?

And then... I let it go. It's important to remember how easy it is to forget. I'm sure he has memories of me that I have no recollection of. None of it matters anyway. What matters is now. Impermanence means I can't change what someone remembers about the past, mine or anyone else's.

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There's also this: I am aware that I can dig out reasons to get mad at the people I miss, the people I have left behind. It makes the missing not so painful. It lets me focus on another pain. Most self-destruction is distraction. Most anger valid but purposeless. Distancing oneself is a learned behavior.

I've accepted that when my anger starts to bubble up, that is the exact moment to stop running. To sit it out and let all of the aggressive emotions ride themselves until they're gone. It's like observing a black and blue storm fight itself out and eventually pass overhead from the safety of a covered porch or, as in my current case, a wooden stoop with a "Front. Door." just mere steps away in case things get out of control.

I try to listen to what my mind brings up, but let it go again just as simply if it doesn't help anything.

It's like that damn alarm system. I want to know which door just opened, but I'll shut it again if I want to keep everyone inside whole. That's what keeps us safe—not the alarm system or the diligent, passive, heartbroken robot—but the action, the human, the movement, the hands. The holding.

Unconditional love is forgiveness unconditional. Happiness is having the freedom to run toward what you need, even if you're sad while doing it. And even at my happiest, I'm still sad a lot. But like my mirrored lovers in "Born to Run," I think admitting that brings me even closer to peace.

I keep going. I keep trying. I don't let fear of the storm keep me on the porch the whole time. As is probably sung in another Bruce Springsteen song somewhere, "Life on the ropes is no life at all."

For now, I float like a butterfly who thinks this cocoon will do just fine for now. A home while searching for the place where we really wanna go.

But till then.



# GOING

*TLDR:*

**I. One of the best gifts my husband and I received in honor of our wedding was a salt and pepper shaker shaped like a non-descript ceramic bird perched on a green ceramic nest.**

The bird, all rosy puffed chest and yellow beak, and the nest are unattached. When you lift up the bird, you find that he (or she, though it just seems like a he) is hollow. He spends his days hovering over two small ceramic egg-shaped vessels that have holes poked through their topsides. These eggs are the salt and pepper shakers. A brown plastic plug at the bottom of each keeps the salt or pepper from escaping.

I love this little guy, though my husband and I have never used him for his intended utilitarian salt and pepper purposes. No, what I love about the bird and all its parts is that it once belonged to my Great Grandma. She collected hundreds of salt and pepper shakers in her lifetime, which were later inherited by a cousin of mine.

My cousin gives one shaker set out as a gift when someone in the family gets married. I used to dislike this tradition of hers, for reasons that, as is usually the case, had more to do with me than anything she did. What if I never got married? Or what if I was gay and couldn't get married? Why did find-

ing or being picked by a partner suddenly deem me worthy of an heirloom tchotchke that would mean so much to me?

My annoyance of it eased eventually, once I accepted what a waste of energy and time it is to care about someone else's traditions if they're not hurting anyone.

It eased even more when the Supreme Court guaranteed a nationwide right of same-sex marriage, the news alert of which I got while vacuuming my apartment. I spent the next hour crying alone at my kitchen table with relief, leaning my head and hands on to the vacuum handle for support. That breaking wave of emotion was like nothing I've ever experienced before or since. It was feeling like finally we'd found a road map and were now heading in the right direction, the whiny selfish small ones buckled up in back and coming with us whether they liked it or not. It was feeling like other humans could be trusted to make kind, just decisions and could use their power to back up those decisions by law. I hope I get to feel that again someday.

When you make a seat at the table—that modern Rosetta Stone of human connection—for all, old open tears are easier to stitch up and leave to scar as important reminders of the past. Even if it's just you at the table, ugly-crying and ordering rainbow glitter from Amazon to celebrate.

**II. Our salt and pepper bird has a worn yellow belly and brown feathers faded from years spent perched in protection.** I think he looks rather portly, like a gentleman who's indulged one too many fish and lost his top hat in the dinner rush, or maybe he's just prepped and ready for the winter. Sigh. They just don't make kitschy shit like they used to, right?

I've tried to search Google to find what type of bird he is, officially, and my best guess right now is some kind of wood thrush. Just your basic, salt of the earth birdy trying

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to do right by his ceramic young still cookin' in their shells. Black or white, it doesn't matter. He looks out for them just the same.

Our bird doesn't sit in our kitchen or on our table. Instead, we've found a home for him on a cabinet in our office. Perhaps we put him here subconsciously because of salt's historical uses beyond food—to be thrown over a shoulder for luck or poured in a circle to ward off the devil—because this cabinet is also home to an assortment of tall candles.

There's a green Success candle we picked up in New Orleans on our trip to get the spirits Jujued from my pre-used wedding ring. There's a virgin Mary candle, which Justin bought because it reminds him of his Guatemalan grandma. There's a guardian angel candle I found at the grocery store in our neighborhood on the bottom row of the flour aisle, which I light all the damn time because heaven knows I need it and am thankful for whatever's been looking out for me all this time. There's a candle for Chango Macho, another New Orleans find that represents an African god of luck, which Justin lights whenever he goes gambling. There's a candle for Freya, Norse mythology's goddess of love and sex, beauty and fertility, a birthday gift from a dear friend that I can't bear to burn all the way down and then have to consider throwing away.

And there's our salt and pepper bird.

The various religious symbology surrounding him makes me think of Lot's wife in the Book of Genesis. That's all she is known as in Christian tradition: Just the wife. The wife of a man that Bible-God clearly cared about more. Sodom burned, she ran, and, ignoring the warning she was given from on high, turned around for one last look at life as she knew it going down in flames. As punishment, she

became a pillar of salt and a warning for others who dare to be unworthy of saving.

I like Lot's wife. Girlfriend just wanted to see, to know the truth, to say goodbye, to listen to her own instincts for once. She knew she would miss her home. In some Jewish traditions she is given the names Ado or Edith.

In her honor, I name our bird Eddy.

**III. The most unintentionally funny Bible reference to salt is probably this one: "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."**

Ha! I like to think the Bible is telling us all to be a lil "salty," a slangy word whose meaning has most certainly changed from the days of sandals and togas and state-sanctioned crucifixions on the reg. I'm all for it (salty convos, not cross deaths) if bitterness is our most honest expression of something. As long as we don't stay in that expression for long.

Too much salt, and you've got a wasted meal, a wasted life, on your hands.

Instead, Eddy reminds me to honor and protect what is inside of me, the rhythmic earned learning wrapped in my body, fragile and easily broken without my protection, without my steady calm watch. He reminds me of the people who made me and that no matter how far away I fly, I started out in a nest that was thoughtfully made of trash and tumbleweed and the unrelenting force of love crashing on the beach.

The evil in this world is humanmade. But so is the joy, the care, the fearlessness in the face of destruction. You are nature with a conscience, which changes everything and can change anything, most of all yourself.

You can wake up earlier. Make the bed. Go for a run. Call your sister. Stop smoking. Quit your job. Turn off the

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news. Listen to the other side. Laugh at the other side. Read new books. Eat more carrots. Have better sex. Choose what the best life looks like for someone like you—animal gutted and god like—and spend just one minute a day building the road that takes you that way.

There's a reason salt and pepper shakers, like Noah's pound puppies, American landscapes, parents and partners, come in twos. Some things are necessary together.

But your mind?

That gorgeous/ fucked up/ changeable thing is a party of one. It deserves a name. It deserves you.

When you find a home inside yourself, it doesn't matter what you lose along the way.







# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



**T**hank you 745,178 (and counting) times over to the New York Public Library for creating the digital collections database, which supplies me endless inspiration, source images, and historical insight (you can peruse its digitized items at [digitalcollections.nypl.org](http://digitalcollections.nypl.org)). If knowledge is power, then access to information is freedom and librarians brick-lay the foundation for democracy—book by book. Thank you for doing what you do so thanklessly. Special shout-out to my favorite librarian and researcher, Joel.

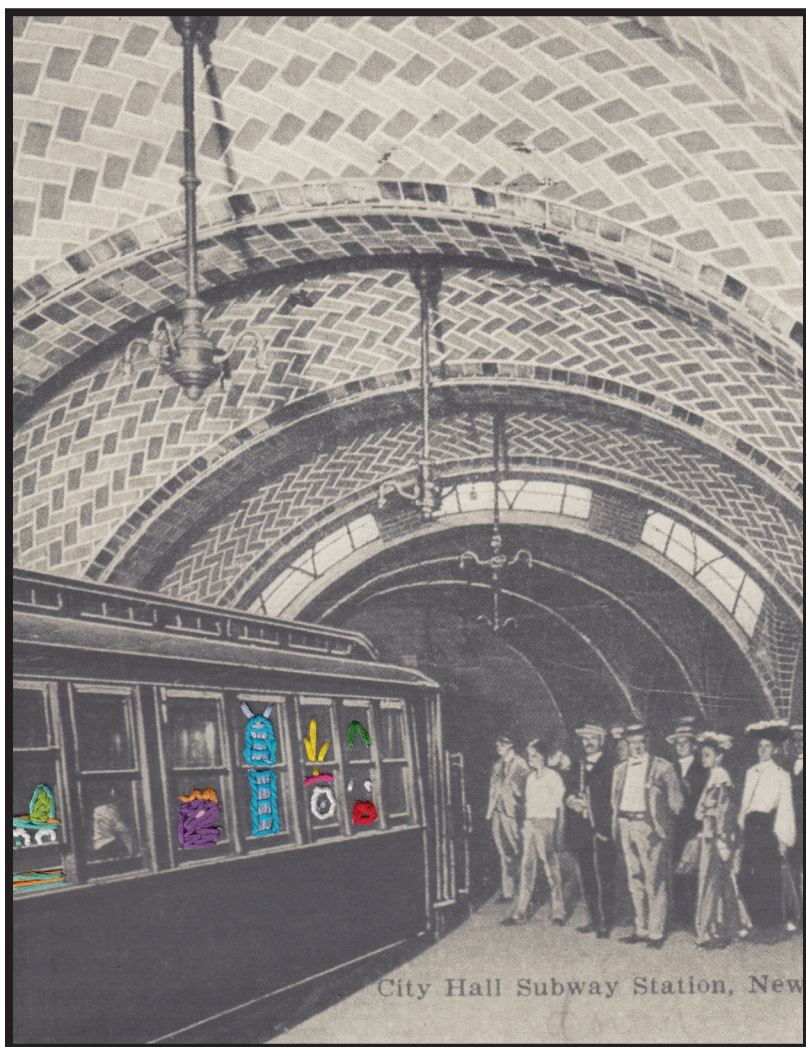
Thank you to Marion for grounding me, Kent for showing me the sun, Columbus for tending my bloom, and Chicago for picking out the last of my thorns.

Thank you to Slate Arts gallery in Chicago for exhibiting my work and offering a place for the city's creative community to express itself and freely explore challenging new ideas. In an era of overwrought "safe spaces," you are my favorite brick-and-mortar example of how to balance progressive empathy with art's big, necessary balls.

Thank you to my mom, dad, sister, and brothers. For the work ethic. For the memories. For the brilliant nieces and nephews. For the rides. For scooping Little Dude's litter box at sunrise and kissing his head at dusk. I miss you every day and love you till the cows come home.

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And Justin. I dare not even say “thank you” lest I arouse finality from its slumber. “Thank you” implies a sign-off, a goodbye, a hat tip for the warm meal before hitting the dusty road. And I am not done with you yet. Not even close. Won’t ever be. You can hush any noise. Tweeze salt from any wound. Pull any knotted thing lithe. You are the ship I wished on moons for.



City Hall Subway Station, New



# RESOURCES

## SHOW NOTES



### Yes; However

- “Paul Harvey’s 1978 ‘So God Made A Farmer’ Speech: A Super Bowl Advertisement for Ram Trucks Featuring Excerpts From a Carter-era Address to the Future Farmers of America Convention Struck a Chord with its Religious Imagery,” *The Atlantic*, 2013: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/paul-harveys-1978-so-god-made-a-farmer-speech/272816/>
- Quote from “Born To Run,” book by Bruce Springsteen, pages 314-315, published by Simon & Schuster, 2016
- “Born To Run” video I waste a lot of time with: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxuThNgl3YA>

### Portage Park

- “Kanye West’s ‘New Slaves’ Shuts Down Wicker Park’s Main Intersection,” *DNA Info*, 2013: <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20130518/wicker-park/kanye-west-s-new-slaves-shuts-down-six-corners-wicker-park/>

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- “Chicago’s Best Places to Live,” *Chicago Magazine*, 2014: <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/April-2014/chicago-neighborhoods/> & <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/April-2014/chicago-neighborhoods/Portage-Park/>
- “Where to Buy Now,” *Chicago Magazine*, 2017: <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/April-2017/Where-to-Buy-Now-2017/>
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- “Why the Pharmaceutical Industry is Giving Up on the Search for an Alzheimer’s Cure,” Quartz, 2018: <https://qz.com/1282482/why-the-pharmaceutical-industry-is-giving-up-the-search-for-an-alzheimers-cure/>
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- “MarionMade: Edward Huber and the Huber Machinery Museum,” The Marion Star, 2018: <https://www.marionstar.com/story/news/local/2018/05/21/marionmade-edward-huber-and-huber-machinery-museum/611736002/>
- City Newsstand: [citynewsstand.com](http://citynewsstand.com)
- Rich Jones: [soundcloud.com/richjonesmusic](https://soundcloud.com/richjonesmusic)

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### A Yellow House

- I wrote this poem, if you can call it that, after reading about the life of Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967). She was a revolutionary Iranian poet who moved the needle for female writers and all who read her work. You should check her out.
- I have no chill about my own cleverness, so I'd also like to point out another little feminist Easter egg in this piece. "Yellow wallpaper" refers to the short story of a similar title by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). The story is an important text in early American feminist literature, with themes of the damaging, sexist 19th century attitude toward women's mental and physical health. You should also check it out.

### Nine Lives

- "The Past Life Perspective: Discovering Your True Nature Across Lifetimes," by Ann C. Barham, 2016
- "What Would Miss Rumphius Do? Barbara Cooney's beloved stories and illustrations carry lessons for young Americans about moral courage," *The Atlantic*, 2017: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/12/childrens-books-for-uncertain-times/544104/>

### The Flight of Clark Gable's Mustache

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### **“Long Time Gone” By The Dixie Chicks**

- “15 Years Ago: Natalie Maines Makes Controversial Comments About President George W. Bush,” *The Boot*, 2018: <http://theboot.com/natalie-maines-dixie-chicks-controversy/>
- “The Bonds of Battle: How PTSD Became a Problem Far Beyond the Battlefield. Though only 10% of American forces see combat, the U.S. military now has the highest rate of post-traumatic stress disorder in its history,” *Vanity Fair*, 2015: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/05/ptsd-war-home-sebastian-junger>

### **13 Reasons Why “Mercedes Benz” By Janis Joplin Is The Best Karaoke Song**

- “Janis: Little Girl Blue,” documentary narrated by Cat Power (eeee!), 2015: [www.imdb.com/title/tt3707114/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3707114/)
- “The Story Behind Janis Joplin’s ‘Mercedes Benz,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2015: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-story-behind-janis-joplins-mercedes-benz-1436282817>

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- “Otis Redding Recorded His Greatest Hit Three Days Before His Death – But Was It Finished?” *International Business Times*, 2017: <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/otis-redding-recorded-his-greatest-hit-three-days-before-his-death-was-it-finished-1650467>

### **Wanting: A Reminder For People Who Are Trying To Stop Binge Drinking**

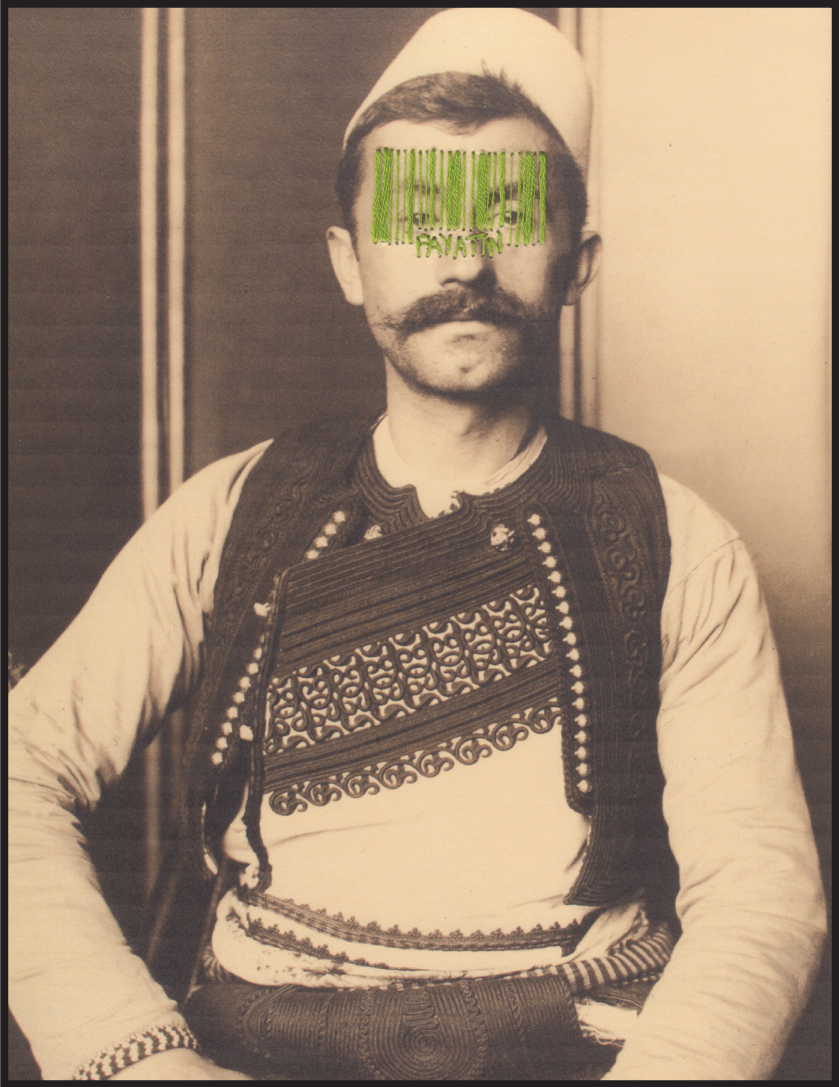
- Listen to this: HOME Podcast, [soundcloud.com/thisishomepod](https://soundcloud.com/thisishomepod)
  - Read this: “Lit: A Memoir,” by Mary Karr, published by Harper Collins, 2009. This book was crucial during the early stages of my sobriety and relapse. #marykarriloveyou She brilliantly writes that the only people who notice you’re not drinking at a party are other people with drinking problems. It’s a minor point in a big book but it’s stuck with me. I used to be one of those people. And now it helps me when I feel pressured to be who I once was.
  - Remember that. You don’t owe anyone anything.
  - And remember this:
1. Chaos isn’t chivalrous. Get your shit together. Indecision is worse than grief.
  2. Ironically enough, living life to the fullest means it’s not going to feel like that every day.
  3. Seek and speak truth. And invest the time into figuring it out. Truth always takes time to find.
  4. Discipline is not a bad word. And neither is failure. In fact, the two go hand in hand. Discipline is a matter of trying to be your best every day and

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failure is what happens the majority of the time.

Keep going.


5. Softness is the greatest strength.
6. Make your own money.
7. Nothing lasts forever.
8. You already know all this stuff. You carry all the wisdom you require. You know who you want to be. Why aren't you listening?





# RESOURCES

## IMAGE INFORMATION



From the New York Public Library digital database, marked public domain and “free to use without restriction.”

“The ‘Burbs” // Inside Front Cover

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. (1942). *Fort Belvoir, Virginia*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/ce30d970-c350-0135-7cd5-0f1fd2aadee>

“Rose” // Front Matter

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### “Pizza Or Die” // Page 11

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### “Abandonment Issues” // Page 30

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. (1936). *Windmill and tank on an abandoned farm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/70ed6820-2289-0132-c6de-58d385a7bbd0>

### “American Born” // Page 32

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### “Statues” // Page 47

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### “White Trash” // Page 51

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### “Female Troubles” // Page 58

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### “Punk Rock Jesus” // Page 62

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### “Bikini Man” // Page 74

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“You’re So Pretty You Should Smile More” // Page 78

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“1941” // Page 81

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“Grow Something Beautiful” // Page 99

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“Pink Revolution” // Page 108

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### “Delivering The Good News” // Page 116

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### “Pool Boys” // Page 124

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### “Future So Bright” // Page 134

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. (1942). *Anacostia, D.C. Frederick Douglass housing project*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/daa32910-c350-0135-3c87-11462f3aefe2>

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### “Born To Run” // Page 151

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### “Yellow Gold” // Page 164

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### “Try Again” // Page 177

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