



Memoir Mixtapes

Vol. 7: Back to School

November 1, 2018

Created by Samantha Lamph/Len

Curated by Samantha Lamph/Len and Kevin D. Woodall

Edited by Kevin D. Woodall

Visual identity design by J. S. Robson

Cover stock photography courtesy of [Charlie Foster](#), publicly available on [Unsplash.com](#)

Special thanks to our reader, Benjamin Selesnick

Letters from the Editors



Hello, everyone, and welcome to *Memoir Mixtapes* Vol. 7: *Back to School*.

For those of you who are new here on the *Memoir Mixtapes* campus: welcome! You can definitely sit with us. To those of you who have been with us for a while, thank you for your continued support & readership. We're so lucky to have you in our little community.

Between the ages of 5-18, we spend the majority of our waking hours in school. And while our perceptions and memories of school vary widely from individual to individual, it is pretty safe to say that we have all experienced at least one profoundly formative experience on a school campus.

For many of us, our first friendships were forged in a classroom or on a playground. Many of us flirted with our first crushes and shared first kisses with our first loves in the halls of our high school in between class periods. The unlucky among us may have even experienced our first heartbreaks on school grounds, and then cried it out in our favorite bathroom stall during lunch. Most of us learn life-changing lessons at school, sometimes in the form of setbacks, failures, or traumas, and sometimes in the form of major accomplishments and sweet, sweet victories.

We wanted to read all these stories, and we're happy to say that our Vol. 7 contributors delivered in a big way. We hope you'll enjoy these pieces as much as we do.

Huge thanks to Kevin—someone I was lucky enough to meet on a school campus—for being the best partner in crime I could ask for, and to our reader Benj for all of his help in this process. And the biggest thanks to you, our readers, for giving these pieces and songs space in your brain.

Until next time,

Samantha Lamph/Len
CREATOR & CO-CURATOR



Hi, everyone.

Welcome to Vol. 7 of *Memoir Mixtapes*.

Once again, for those who are new here, welcome—we hope you find today's lecture enlightening. For those who are returning, I've marked you "present" on the attendance sheet. For those who are tardy or absent from class today, we'll be expecting a note from your parents explaining why you're missing from today's lesson.

As the title of Vol. 7 says, his time around we thought it would be interesting to take us all on a trip back to school. We're always on the lookout for a wide and varied selection for our publication: tales of self-love, growth, and reflection. Tales of sadness, pain, and joy. We want anxiety. We want laughter. We want it all, and what better way than through the lens of our school years? That time is foundational and transformative for everyone, and by asking our contributors to plumb those depths we knew we'd get some stellar work.

I've said it before, but once more, our contributors came through strong. I think you'll agree that Vol. 7 is one of our best yet.

My thanks go out to our contributors, without whom we would not be able to do what we do, and to you, dear reader, for taking time to read our magazine. As well, I'd like to thank MM's creator, Sam—I'm eternally grateful that I took out my earbuds long enough to talk to and get to know her in our creative writing workshop at UC Riverside back in 2008—and our reader Benj, who continues to be most excellent.

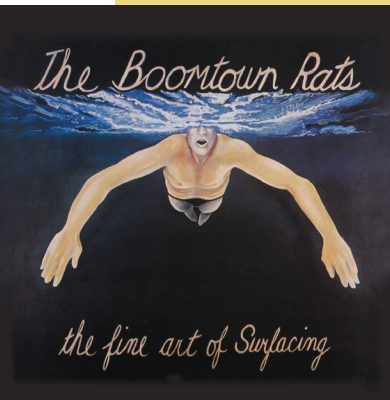
Okay, I've held up the lesson for long enough, and now we're running behind. Without further ado, we hope you enjoy this trip back to school.

Kevin D. Woodall
CO-CURATOR / EDITOR

Tracklist

TR 01.	I (Don't) Like Mondays Jody Kennedy "I Don't Like Mondays" // The Boomtown Rats	1
TR 02.	Lindsay Lohan Sings of Endings Rachel Tanner "Over" // Lindsay Lohan	2
TR 03.	Negaraku Joel Mak "Negaraku" // Pierre-Jean de Béranger (Music) / Saiful Bahri (Lyrics)	7
TR 04.	Shake it Off Lisa Mangini "Shake it Off" // Taylor Swift	12
TR 05.	Don't Change Your Plans Levi Andrew Noe "Don't Change Your Plans" // Ben Folds Five	14
TR 06.	Mixed Messages René Ostberg "Holiday" & "Burning Up" // Madonna	16
TR 07.	On Discovering Explosions in the Sky During My Freshman Year of College Stephen Briseño "Time Stops" // Explosions in the Sky	21
TR 08.	Teenage Wildlife Jessica Berger "Teenage Wildlife" // David Bowie	24
TR 09.	Playground Love Scout Bolton "Playground Love" // Air	27
TR 010.	indelible in the hippocampus C. Kubasta "Rump Shaker" // Wreckx-n-Effect & "O.P.P." // Naughty By Nature	31
TR 011.	Rust Belt Blues Lauren Parker "He Stopped Loving Her Today" // George Jones	32
TR 012.	All We Ever Wanted Was Everything—for Russ 1966-1990— L Mari Harris "All We Ever Wanted Was Everything" // Bauhaus	34
TR 013.	On Figuring Myself Out, and Mac Miller Prem Sylvester "I Am Who Am (Killin' Time)" // Mac Miller	37
TR 014.	An Education Marina Blitshteyn "Videotape" // Radiohead	40

TR 015.	The Heroes We Thought We Had to Be Adam McCulloch "Backstreets" // Bruce Springsteen	42
TR 016.	When this world is trying its hardest K Weber "One Caress" // Depeche Mode	46
TR 017.	An Unexpected Education Juliette van der Molen "This Used to Be My Playground" // Madonna	48
TR 018.	Just a Girl Elizabeth Ditty "Just a Girl" // No Doubt	52
TR 019.	See You in September After "Wild Sage" by The Mountain Goats Katie Darby Mullins "Stronger" // Kanye West & "Wild Sage" // The Mountain Goats	54
	Contributors	58



The Boomtown Rats
"I Don't Like Mondays"
The Fine Art of Surfacing
06/1979
Columbia Records

I (Don't) Like Mondays

Jody Kennedy

What if you could go back again to when you were fourteen-thirteen-twelve-eleven-ten-nine-eight-years-old? How you (8) hated school already. The early morning wake-up, the Pledge of Allegiance, the straight back chairs, the failing mathematical tables, the popular girls who lived in big houses on the hill (you were not their kind), the playground rivalries, the *train-train*, your shyness an albatross, a great, big, heaving curse. How those boy crushes kept you buoyant, kept you afloat, light-headed, dizzy, drunk, distracted, butterfly-stomached, dry-mouthed, weak-kneed, like seeing Margot Kidder in that March 1975 issue of *Playboy Magazine* for the first time, offering some hope of being noticed, consumed, fallen head-over-heels with, hands held and lips kissed (no tongue) nothing more, no *Lolita*, not yet anyway.¹ How weekends were your refuge, your warm, soft womb, the cartoon characters, alarm clock paused, you (9) scrambling down hills and over dry creek beds, hours lost in books and dreaming. T. S. Eliot once said, "I always feel it's not wise to violate rules until you know how to observe them." And how you (10) just could not, could not fall in line or apply yourself, could not play the game or even half-heartedly pretend. How the hurts began to pile up at school, the slights from classmates, the inattention of teachers, the whole system set to bruise and batter those of us—lost shamans, cut off from our love lines. How you (11) had enough one day with that blond-haired girl and her insults and so you threw a punch and how it felt so good to see her stunned and crying, nose bleeding regardless of the head Principal's disappointment and detention. How the humiliations began to pile up like when you (12), egomaniac with an inferiority complex, tried out for cheerleading and forgot your cheer and stood shell-shocked while the whole room (you imagined) screeched and hollered. How you hadn't learned yet that hurt people hurt other people and the point of power is always within. How the fuck you's and the fantasies of revenge began to pile up. How you (13) swore at a teacher for calling you out and you stormed away, a raging inferno. How a joint you smoked during lunch break was laced with something mysterious and returning to school, head spinning and pale, you vomited in a hallway trash can under ugly, bright fluorescent lights. How those incapacitating migraines came and skipping school came and that vicious, vicious cycle between the desire to belong and the fear of joining came and how you, (14) bewildered latchkey kid, latched onto music, lived and breathed it like you soon began to live and breathe alcohol, cigarettes, and sex. Do you remember how all of the boys you offered yourself up to couldn't even save you? So you slipped in with the out crowd and pushed the others aside to keep from being hurt any longer. But what if you could go back to when you were fourteen-thirteen-twelve-eleven-ten-nine-eight-years-old again? What if you could start your day (life) over? Follow the rules this time instead break them? Forgive the early morning wake up, the Pledge of Allegiance, the straight back chairs, and learn your mathematical tables? What if that stunned and crying, bloody-nosed, blond-haired girl was really an angel or a long-lost friend? Would you be sorry and would your heart break then? What if all of your hates and resentments were semi-automatic rifles pointed directly at you? What if you discovered you'd chosen all of it, every last ounce of it? What if your great, big, heaving curse was a blessing, the albatross an olive-branched dove? What if you could truly understand that hurt people hurt other people and the point of power is always within? What if finding yourself meant learning to like Mondays again? Would you choose it?

¹ Variation on personal essay "For Anne Sexton" (forthcoming on Juked <http://www.juked.com/>). 29-35.



Lindsay Lohan

"Over"

Speak

12/2004

Universal Island Records

Lindsay Lohan Sings of Endings

Rachel Tanner

I don't know if I love Kurt, but he *does* have a car. I love his car, maybe. Does that count for anything? Probably not. Do I love him? I don't know. It's 2005 and we're two teenagers in maybe-love, cruising down the main thoroughfare in his car that smells very specifically like a slightly moldy boat floating on Pine-Sol instead of water. I'm 14 and he's 16; we're young and running out of things to do in our one-Applebee's town, so sometimes we just park next to the woods and read the Bible out loud to each other. I keep a stack of CDs in his car, choosing moment-by-moment soundtracks. Choosing how we will remember each other. Choosing the sounds that will turn into forevers. Today, we listen to Something Corporate's *North* and study the Book of Isaiah.

Lindsay Lohan's *Speak* carries us home before curfew.

We're only one grade apart, but 9th grade is at the middle school and 10th grade is at the high school. It's hard to be in a long-distance relationship. It is excruciating to be so far apart. Our schools are on the same road, 1.5 miles from each other, and our church is in the middle. Also, and I may have mentioned this already, he has a car. The car makes things easier.

In the beginning of us, back in the late fall of 2004, AOL Instant Messenger helped me lay the necessary groundwork for our relationship. I knew we were going to date long before he did. Like, a really long time before he knew. Maybe a week and a half before he knew. We'd met through some mutual friends, exchanged screen names, and had a lot of long conversations that were basically some variation of

him: hey

me: hey

him: what's up?

me: not much, u?

him: same lol XD

[3 hours pass]

me: well i g2g to bed. talk tomorrow?

him: yeh. g'night

I'd put up away messages with popular (but not TOO popular) song lyrics about loving, being in love, falling in love, having a lover, being old enough to be in love. He took the bait. He asked my friend Natalie if I had a crush on anyone, and she messaged me right away to tell me what he'd said. I told her not to answer him just yet. I had a plan. I always had a plan.

Everyone loves a good romantic comedy, right? I sure do. Big romantic gestures. The drama of it all. The tragedy. The depth. The hyperbole. The drawn-out monologues spoken by a lover trying to connect with the only heart they've ever truly wanted. Why can't life be more like that? Ugh.

The middle school and high school cross-country teams practiced (ran?) together after school. Kurt was on the high school cross-country team. Know who was on the middle school team and saw him every day? Natalie, who sat beside me in middle school wind ensemble. So one day at school, when the band director was focused on the trumpet section (as usual), Natalie and I had a chance to put down our clarinets and scheme. I'd written a rough outline the night before but my handwriting was messy, so I asked Natalie to write out a new note in what I can only describe now as cursive bubble letters.

I don't remember what the note said, but I know he wrote back. We passed notes back and forth via Natalie for a few weeks, and the notes got sappier each time. AIM was fine, I guess, but it was difficult to explain my feelings with as much detail as they deserved after being asked "how r u?" for the millionth time. In a note, I could talk for paragraphs and paragraphs without being interrupted. I wrote poems, copied my favorite song lyrics, told him which parts of my day reminded me of him. He did the same, kind of. I would write *The happy sun snuck its warmth through my window while I was sleeping and I laid there for a few minutes this morning, eyes closed in thought, hoping it was the same sunlight holding you. Hoping one day soon you'll be the one holding me.* Similarly, Kurt would write *I had a good day at track.*

That winter, we ended up at a holiday party together in the church auditorium. It was all finally happening. Everything had been leading up to that moment. He sat down on the floor next to me. My hand was on the floor, palm down. Right there. RIGHT THERE. All he had to do was put his hand over mine. I pretended to crack my knuckles on the carpet to make sure he knew my hand was there. (What if he couldn't see it? My hands are pretty small. They were probably even smaller back then. This was months ago.) I cleared my throat a few too many times, a little too loudly. I tried to catch his gaze then briefly look away. He didn't take my hand. HE DIDN'T TAKE MY HAND. He DIDN'T take my HAND.

I stood up and stomped to the bathroom, trying not to cry. My girlfriends promptly followed to tell me that I didn't need him anyway. They tried to tell me that he sucked and I could do better. I told them I didn't want to do better; I just wanted to hold hands with Kurt. I'd been having a really rough time with guys. Earlier that year, my former friend Brandon said I was pretty, kissed me on the cheek, and told me he carried one of my poems around in his wallet. But the next day, he announced that he was suddenly dating Laura. LAURA. Like...it was fine, I guess, if he didn't want to be with me...but LAURA? Of all people? *Laura*. Okay. Sure. Whatever. I didn't care. I still don't care.

Did Kurt suck as much as Brandon? I couldn't give two frickin' fricks about Brandon. He was with Laura, anyway. "Brandon." Bbbrrraannndooooonnnn. Man, I hated Brandon. Still hate Brandon. All I could think about in the tearful moments following *The Lonely Hand Predicament* was *Am I going to end up hating Kurt, too? Will I end up hating everyone I used to dream about kissing? Would Kurt beat up Brandon if I asked nicely? Kurt doesn't even like me enough to hold my hand, so why would he beat up Brandon? Jesus probably said don't beat up boys named Brandon. I should look that up. Bbrraannddoonnnnnnn. What a terrible name. Kurt is a cute name but Brandon used to be a cute name, too. Will I end up hating everyone's names? I don't want to hate everyone's names. If I hate everyone's names, how will there be any names left for my future kids? Will Kurt make a good dad? Brandon won't. Brandon'll be the worst dad. Brandon sucks. Kurt has a "sweet dad" vibe. He's gentle. He's patient. He can drive. He has a car. He's cute. He isn't named Brandon. He's the whole package.*

I stayed in the bathroom for most of the rest of the party. Natalie made sure to tell everyone it was because I was solemnly thinking about life and not because I had an upset

stomach. When I finally came out, Kurt sauntered up to me, asked for a hug, gave me a hug when I said okay, then shyly mumble-asked if he could drive me home. I know what everyone must be thinking: wow, this is moving a little fast. But I didn't care. Everything that had transpired over the last few weeks had made me an adult. Brandons of the world be danged. I was in maybe-love.

Now we're together and he's perfect. We're perfect. He drives me home from school every day. Sometimes we'll go straight home but other times we'll sit in the park and talk. He also drives me home from youth worship service on Wednesdays, which is very cool. We feel so grown up, driving through town doing whatever we want (even if what we want is to go to church, then Applebee's). We play basketball at the church gym and I always win. Not because I'm good, but because he'll stop paying attention to the game to say something like, "Did you know that 6 PM is the average American dinner time? I heard that on the news." He says boring stuff like that a lot. A whole lot more than he says interesting stuff. I do most of the talking. It's better this way.

So, maybe *perfect* isn't the right word to use about him, or us. But he's sweet and kind. Full of a gentleness I don't quite recognize. I'm antsy and full of thunder. He takes the loud parts of me and soothes them until they're manageable. I'm more respectable around him. My parents don't know we're together because I'm not allowed to date yet (sorry for lying, God!) but Kurt's parents know. They love me. They send food and well wishes whenever they know Kurt's going to see me. I can see myself becoming one of them someday. They're a family I could learn to fit into, I think.

I'm trying to love all of him, even the parts I don't understand.

I'm really, really trying.

It's the night after Valentine's Day now and I don't know what to do. I've always hated V-Day and I don't know why. Seems boring. It's in February which means it's colder than a brass toilet seat on the shady side of an iceberg...but the Valentine's Day mascot isn't wearing clothes? That's annoying. Give the baby a coat, at least.

The whole sex expectation thing is annoying, too. We've been together for months and the most Kurt and I have done is hold hands. We haven't even come close to talking about intercourse, besides a general agreement that people should wait until marriage. Everyone else wants to talk about sex in February, though. As I said, it's annoying. Valentine's Day is the most annoying holiday and I can't wait until I'm an adult so I can ban anything cupid-related in my house. When I'm an adult, I'll be whatever the opposite of annoying is.

Lately, I'm weird and grumpy all the time. I don't know if that's Kurt's fault or my fault. I don't like dealing with him more than I have to. Love has mountains and valleys. This is normal. I avoid him sometimes and assume these feelings will pass.

Brandon and Laura posted their cute Valentine's Day photos all over their Xanga and MySpace pages on, like, the fourth day of the month somehow, but I don't care. And for once, I kind of mean it. My cell phone has free minutes after 9 PM, so Kurt and I stay up until at least midnight talking most nights. I love him more on the phone than I do in person. I think we could be happy for a long time together, if we only communicated by phone. I'm not sure why. Talking to him on the phone is easier than talking in person, or even on AIM.

Last night he called both phones (cell and landline) several times but I didn't pick up, and I told my mom to please just take a message. I didn't feel like talking; we'd agreed to not do anything for Valentine's Day until next weekend. A few hours later, my mom knocked on the door to my room, said, "That boy's been outside since six." It was 8 PM. He'd been outside for two hours, and I'd had no idea. I felt awful. Guilty. Like I'd accidentally punched one of the apostles in the face. Everyone at my house was still pretending I wasn't dating anyone, so I met him outside. He understood why I could never invite him inside. He was okay with it.

He hopped out of his car, smiling like always. He handed me a card and some chocolates. I did the whole *but I didn't get you anything* song and dance. He said it was fine, like always. Said we were fine, like always. Kissed me on the cheek (a first!), jumped back in his car, and drove away.

I watched his car putter down the street and turn the corner. But for the first time, I didn't miss him. I didn't consider running inside and logging onto AIM to wait for him to message me, letting me know he got home safely. I wasn't really even thinking about him at all. It scared me. If love can just *leave* like that, what's the point of it? Would I have felt this torn apart if I'd ended up with Brandon? Is this kind of thing why my parents got divorced? Is this why Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake called it quits? Kurt was still head-over-heels for me, as far as I could tell. So was I the bad guy? What had I done wrong? Did I need to pray about it more?

I opened the card once I got back to my room. Kurt had written *I love spending my life with you inside*. I set it on my shelf and haven't picked it back up since then. Later, we talked for a few minutes on the phone before I told him I was tired and needed to go to bed. That was another lie. I'd never lied to him before. And now, a day later, I don't know what I'm doing. Love goes through ups and downs. Everyone says it. Everyone says that after a honeymoon period, you get bored and complacent with your partner. Are being in love and being bored the same thing?

I toss Lindsay Lohan's *Speak* into my CD player, since it's the last album Kurt and I listened to together. I keep the song "Over" on repeat. Maybe there's an answer in there somewhere. I've made huge life decisions based on song lyrics before, so why not this one?

*I watch the walls around me crumble,
but it's not like I won't build them up again.*

If we break up, it will be entirely my fault. I've seen what happens when my friends break up with their boyfriends. No matter whose fault it actually is, it always gets blamed on the girl. Am I strong enough to break everything down then build myself back up higher than before? Does one of us get custody of our church or do we both just keep going to the same one? Did Jesus ever break anyone's heart? Maybe there was someone who was sweet on Jesus when He was alive, but then He had to be like, "My Father says I'm not allowed to date," or, "I actually love everyone the same amount so I can't just focus all my affection on you, Susan."

*I'm always stuck with these emotions,
& the more I try to feel, the less I'm whole.*

I guess the adult thing to do would be to discuss this with Kurt. Maybe he feels the same as I do about it all. Maybe he wants to end it, too. The way he still hugs me a little too long suggests otherwise, though. The other day he told me, "My parents were high school sweethearts. Wouldn't it be nice if we ended up like them? They got married right after college."

How could I even explain to him why I wanted to sledgehammer our future into nothing? "Uhhh, I just sort of stopped liking you. You didn't do anything wrong. Every single mannerism you have annoys the ever-lovin' fool out of me now, though. I don't even like the way you turn doorknobs." I just need to figure out one decent reason to leave. One good reason for goodbye. But *what?* He's perfect. He holds doors open for me and lets me finish his breadsticks. He's okay with it when I talk for hours on end about how secretly sad I still am that *NSYNC broke up.

*I can't live without you. Can't breathe without you.
I'm dreaming 'bout you. Honestly tell me that it's over.
Cuz if the world is spinning & I'm still living,
it won't be right if we're not in it together.
Tell me that it's over & I'll be the first to go.*

I burned "Over" onto a blank CD. I wrote *I'm sorry* on the front of it and left it on his car. I guess he got the message, because I didn't see him around for more than a month. I don't know how I can be so sure of a decision and so sad about it at the same time. I wasn't happy with him and I'm not happy without him. How is it possible that I could break both of our hearts at once? Maybe I just have to wait until I'm older to understand any of this. Maybe the reason I can't find my giant box of jawbreakers is that I left it in his car.

Negaraku

Joel Mak

I'm on opening duty. Under a flickering fluorescent bar, I try to unlock the door. The padlock clangs and echoes down the empty hall as I fail to find the receptacle with my key. Inside, my hand has to grope the wall looking for the switch, my fingers running over the bumps of paint, squashed mosquitoes left to rot from yesteryear, possibly poisonous mold.

The light seems to heighten my sense of smell. As my bandmates flick the latches open on their cases, what greets my nose is a concoction of copper and zinc, dried saliva on brass, evaporated saliva in instrument cases.

Oh, and a load of valve oil.

The sun has yet to peek over the horizon and while it's still somewhere over there, burning some other country up, it's relatively cool here. A solid 25°C. The felt temperature is about 30°C, but over the course of the next hour or so it will feel about 35°C as I sweat and insulate heat underneath my white long-sleeved shirt and pants, new black leather shoes, and a navy blazer made out of cheap cotton. Since fingerprints will bring about punishment, I also have to wear white cotton gloves. All of that is garnished by a tie, on the centre of which is my school's badge: a roaring tiger surrounded by ribbons with a motivational Latin quote. Over the years, the thread has frayed, and so it looks like the tiger has no stripes, or is all stripes.

Studio A, a storage area for brass instruments, is actually just spare space underneath a staircase. Here sleep the brass instruments in their Yamaha cases: tubas, trombones, trumpets, French horns, and so on and so forth. I play the euphonium, a three-valved instrument similar to a baritone. In our marching band, it bridges the rounded bouncing notes of tubas to the forceful braying of trombones. The name comes from Greek to mean "sweet-voiced," though if you only have one or two in your marching band, such as ours, it won't be loud enough to seduce any ear.

I play the euphonium for about five years in middle school and every day I wonder why.

It is 7:25. Boys and girls at a ratio of roughly 95:5 (girls are only accepted for the high-school curricula, though by this time they are, for all intents and purposes, women) converge on the school field. An elevated view would show a thousand odd students filing in from various parts of the campus to form a square bracket. The base of the bracket faces an elevated stage, on which there is a podium, and a few of the best-looking chairs one can find in this public school, for big shot teachers such as the principal, the morning session coordinator, the chief disciplinarian, and other people I would rather not face in the long school year ahead. On the right hand side of the stage are three flag poles: one for Malaysia, one for the state in which we live, one for our school.

Every morning starts with a school assembly, but Monday is the day we go all out. Thirty-minute guest speeches, moral lessons of the week, applause for sporting achievements, poetry readings, everything is game.

It is the first day of school and in a time before permanent and instantaneous Internet connections, when summer holidays sucked your friends away into the aether, teenagers



Pierre-Jean de Béranger (Music) / Saiful Bahri (Lyrics)

"Negaraku"

Adopted as Malaysian National Anthem in 1957

are reuniting by waving, by hollering, by reigniting games put on hold from the year before. In a quiet, small, Malaysian city, there are no new kids to be curious about or former students to remember. In classes, students arrange themselves in rows of two, with enough spaces in between them for roaming student prefects who try to bring order and quiet. Teachers arrive from their air-conditioned quarters, taking their seats next to the stage.

Instead of trading jokes with friends whom I haven't seen in months, I am way at the back in the middle of the field. Woodwinders and percussionists arrive from a different part of campus and we set up in three parentheses of increasing length, our conductor like the bottom period of a wi-fi bar.

Our job is to play two songs: the national anthem, "Negaraku," and the school anthem. We are the only ones who do not have to sing, providing the melody to everyone in attendance while broken male voices chime in with the vastly outnumbered female ones, as we all watch the three flags climb the poles.

I am in the last year of middle school. I was not born here, nor have I been in the Malaysian schooling system all my life, but I know I have been attending these assemblies for seven years and performing for two of those. At an average of 37 assemblies a school year, not including the times I spent learning the lyrics or any other special occasion which warrants the anthem such as Sports Days or Teachers' Days, I have sung the national anthem at least 185 times and played the euphonium part 74 times.

In a time before cheap, portable music players, when one could not simply play the latest pop jam on a smartphone, there was no music in the classroom. To hear any music at all on school premises, one needed to sing or attempt beatboxing. You could tap and slam your hands on the tables for percussive rhythms. If you weren't afraid of theft, you could bring a guitar and play it at recess. To remember these times is to realise that, for a lot of students, growing up in a place of relative socioeconomic poverty, arriving at school via school buses before the sun was up, the national anthem our band played was the *first* piece of music that one heard every single week.

As far as national anthems go, "Negaraku" is not particularly special. No national anthem is. Regardless of the age or geography of a country, national anthems contain the same gene of rote pomp, bravado, and machismo. Most are composed with yesteryear's folk instruments in mind. There is, to my knowledge, no national anthem designed for synths and guitars, even though current definitions of folk instruments would have to include them. Post-classical instruments do not inspire praise for a country, ground it in a triumphant historical narrative, or evoke the sanctity of religious institutions (as most states are, to differing extents). As it stands, if a new flag were erected on Mars, future founders would still fall back on the trumpet and flute to accompany the ceremony. Ideally, lost perhaps amidst the Colin Kaepernick v. Donald Trump debate, one should not have to stand for the national anthem; instead, the national anthem should make you *want* to stand, to fight, to sacrifice yourself for the nation's purposes.

It's easy to do this with lyrics. In a mere two stanzas, "Negaraku" has school students singing about spilling blood in the country, advancing the country, asking favours from God to protect the citizens and king. As for the arrangement: a melody carried by either high register brass instruments or strings; marching bass drums of varying notes generating the thunderous beatdown that the nation is going to dish out its enemies; snares militaristic in their rolls; and flutes, clarinets, and oboes providing the graceful

flourishes, the pirouettes, the curlicues of decorum and finesse that all countries must have.

Which leaves us with the low register brass. Your tubas, sousaphones, trombones, and the euphonium of yours truly. In marching contexts, these instruments could be as menacing as the All Blacks lineup doing the haka. Not for nothing are these instruments called the bass of the orchestra, able to alter the heartbeat of a given listener. In John Williams' "Imperial March" and Wagner's "Ride Of The Valkyries," the trombones and the euphoniums are the ones making people back off, release cold sweat, and tremble in their boots.

Yet, while it's possible to create good music without bass, a bass playing on its own is like a goldfish in a bowl. There's only so many places you can go. In practice runs in our small bass cohort, we sounded like a line of men with beer bellies of varying sizes taking random turns belching. Plus, on most Monday assemblies we only had the personnel for a tuba, a trombone, and a euphonium. We didn't even own a sousaphone.

The boys at the end of the lines turn back at us as they chatter. A couple of them jeer. Everybody's favourite method of making fun of the band is to mime playing a clarinet and make melodic farting noises. It makes no sense and doesn't apply to me because I don't play the clarinet nor the trumpet, but I'd still rather they cut it out. I spot a couple of my friends, ambling slowly to our class' row. They've got two hands in their pockets, one-strapping their bags, yapping on about personal video game achievements. Chilling, one might call it. One of them has the audacity to pinch their collar and fan his neck while sweat tickles my unreachable lower back.

A euphonium weighs about four kilograms and I am holding it against the left side of my body with my left arm. As per marching band protocol, my right fist is by my right pocket. Working on its own, my left bicep is host to a mellow fire which will only be put out when the conductor raises his wand and I'm allowed to rotate the euphonium, bring the mouthpiece to my lips, and ease the weight with my right hand.

The master of ceremonies clears his throat. He's some fifteen-year-old student prefect that the school is grooming to be Head Boy one day. Assalamualaikum and greetings to the most respected principal, the most respected vice principal, the most—and I clock out.

While the MC continues to rattle of his respects, stumbling over the words he's written on a folded up piece of paper, an insect with flying capabilities takes interest in one of my nostrils. I'm not allowed to move my limbs so my only line of defense is to exhale forcefully. It leaves my line of sight and I feel something land on the back of my neck. Instinctively, I swat at it, breaking stillness.

Someone with a higher ranking than I do barks, "Joel, you owe me twenty."

That's twenty push ups for a fly that might come back around. In my head, I curse and plead for it to go bother the conductor instead.

Years later, my friends ask me why I was in the band. Since I am their friend, I can assume they think I'm cool, regardless of whether we are to others are not. Given this assumption, we can also surmise that this question is loaded with a sizzling insult, a quizzical judgment of my "uncool" teenagehood.

Fill in the blank: school band members are _____.

Readers from a western cultural hemisphere (especially the States) might complete the above with "nerdy," "geeky," or "awkward," but they might also suggest "cool," "fun," or "the life of the party." A football half-time marching band show or a drumline faceoff doesn't bring down the adrenalin of what preceded it. No, it maintains or elevates it. At the college level, band membership numbers in the hundreds and their viewership on any given night is not double, nor triple, but exponential. The extra-curricular activity has even been made the subject of a Hollywood film (see *Drumline*, dir. Charles Stone III).

Being in a Malaysian school band does not carry the same prestige.

At the start of middle school, my friends or people I wanted to be friends with were in the band. Then, as now, I considered myself musical and wanted to make music that did not come from a recorder. I had played the angklung, a percussive instrument made from bamboo, in elementary school and enjoyed the feeling that arises when multiple people play music at the same time, my notes blending with others, organised noise.

As can happen over the course of school, friends in the band became mere schoolmates and schoolmates outside the band became brothers. The sun grew stronger every passing day, punishing us as we learned marching steps and routines. Drum majors put more and more faith in shouting as a disciplinary method. The supervising teacher slapped a trumpeter silly for daring to question him. Every minute at practice was not spent enjoying video games at home, or with non-band friends such as girls from other schools. My grades dropped, my skin grew tanned, my popularity stagnated.

In versions of "Negaraku" that you can find on YouTube, the bass continues where the melody drops off. The bass either echoes or alternates the scale of the melody. The result is a neat push-and-pull, the bass filling in the brief but silent moments in between verses.

Our school band, technically less adept, relied on a simpler arrangement. The euphonium's motion was oblique to the trumpets. That is to say that, while we both started on the melodic note of the verse, the euphonium toiled away on the bass clef, blowing minims and semibreves. The trumpets went off to do their thing on the treble clef, voicing the syllables of the verse. Light as they are, they were the ones lifting the voices of an entire school.

Consider too, the shape of the euphonium. The one I held was not of a marching band build. When played, the bell faced upwards. As a highly directional instrument, whatever sound I produced went in the direction that the bell faced. In orchestra settings where we sat down, one could angle the bell to face the audience. While standing up, short of actually bending over and killing the lower back, my part of the national anthem went straight up into the uncovered sky, scattering into a million waves. The only living things that could hear me were the birds.

I am fifteen-going-on-sixteen. I'm shorter than everyone I want to be taller than. I can't do a lap without spitting out a piece of my lung. I'm nervous about things such as the girl who hasn't texted back, about a year of not understanding Chemistry, about some teacher noticing that I'm not wearing a name tag. People in class are talking about pre-college and matriculation and med school.

I don't know it but ahead of me is a life of emigration. This is not where, as the anthem goes, my blood will spill. At the end of the year I will leave and never have to sing, play, or hear the national anthem ever again. I will adopt another, one with more verses and metaphors, and with God as an optional pronoun. This anthem will just be one sandwiched between many others. I will travel places and be visited in others. I will go to university and later find a job that doesn't bother me. I will forget the Malay language bit by bit and learn another bit by bit.

I will lose weight, gain height, and fix my hunch. I will learn the guitar and impress one or two girls with my mediocre songwriting and fingerpicking. I will see many shows, drown in guitar, drum machines, synths, trumpets, and violins. I will live in Canada for five years where people stand for their national anthem before sporting events. They will do this even if they're in bars. I will awkwardly stand with them, being neither Canadian nor a fan of hockey. I will think of "Negaraku" every time I do this.

I will, however, never play the euphonium ever again.

But now, I am fifteen and it is the first day of school and it's too early to be awake or make band noises. The MC has given us the signal and our conductor raises his wand. The tip of it goes hazy in the heat that will come for our throats every single Monday.

Rolling snares start us off from the back and then the trumpets come in with their opening salvo, like the lifting of the curtains. In the song "Negaraku" you will hear a French melody called "La Rosalie."

I press a valve or two down, press my lips tight against each other, and bring the mouthpiece close. By the third note, I realise on the first day of school in my last year here that over the past few months of holidays, neglecting to practice, I have forgotten the notes.

Shake it Off

Lisa Mangini

On August 18th, 2014, I wrote an email that changed my life. After checking to make sure the last of my vacation time had been approved, and after six years and two months of service, I wrote a resignation letter from the corporate job I landed straight after college.

The job I lined up next? A string of part-time contracts as an adjunct instructor that I cobbled together into something resembling full-time employment. I had had enough of the mindless tedium working for an enormous company on projects I didn't care about: I was committing myself to a life of the mind.

August 18th, by some strange accident, was also the day that Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off" debuted.

I would be lying if I said I blasted it out my windows, twisting my hips behind the steering wheel, triumphant in my rare decisiveness on a risky choice, with this catchy tune as my personal pep rally. That did not happen that afternoon. Instead, I sat in traffic, listening to it with a sneer: *so corny, how insipid.*

As it grew deeper into the fall, I settled into my new life: no class on Fridays, sleeping in until 10 three days a week! But also, unending exhaustion: I was teaching seven courses, each with a mountain of work to review and evaluate. What I didn't foresee was that the life of the mind is also the life of the heart, poring over essays on racism and wealth inequality and poems by students reflecting on their own childhood abuse. I had already been teaching occasional courses for a few years, and knew well the emotional component that came with it—in no small part, it's what attracted me to this work—but found myself now overwhelmed by an abundance of it. To be alongside 115 (mostly) young people exploring and sharing their world with me was nothing short of profound—but was not an experience I could disrobe from and fold away for later, like editing hundred-page contracts or enduring the most contentious of conference calls. I would teach as late as 9:30 some nights, and would finally drag myself home for a dinner of reheated takeout at 10. There were moments where I would look around from the kitchen table and wonder what I had done to my life before returning my attention to a stack of portfolios, often until the clock on the microwave read one or two in the morning.

I had wanted to live my dream of a more fulfilling, meaningful life, but I seemed to have overshot the goal: days so overstuffed it was hard to have a self at all. I became a sort of backward, cowardly Sisyphus, trying to outpace a boulder of meaning chasing me down an infinite hill.

Being in the car produced the worst of this feeling, a kind of amplified version of the collective social analyses and second-hand heartaches that was inescapable, echoing back from all that safety glass. Because the campuses I worked for were well distributed from each other, it meant I was driving close to 500 miles a week. No stranger to long commutes, in the past I had relished this time spent with NPR, audiobooks, or perhaps some nice post-rock or experimental Icelandic band. But now that my entire waking world was consumed by thinking, I couldn't muster the energy for all that added stimulation. Months and months before the idea to quit my desk job, I bought tickets to see Neutral Milk Hotel—and later sold them via Facebook post, with the excuse I had to teach the next morning. "DUDE, just get a sub!" someone reasoned. But somehow a pilgrimage to



Taylor Swift D.L.X.

Taylor Swift

"Shake It Off"

1989

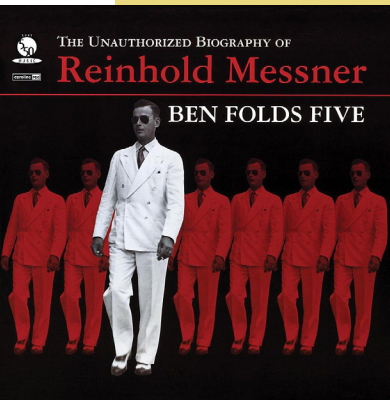
10/2014

Big Machine

Vermont to listen live to a musical allegory of Anne Frank's life no longer seemed worth the effort: it felt too much like work to seem like something I'd do for fun.

As I tried to find more ways to carve out space for my brain to rest, I listened to more and more Top 40 radio stations. And, as you might've guessed, they were playing a lot of Taylor Swift. Nothing could wipe my brain into Tabula Rasa for three minutes and thirty-nine seconds like "Shake It Off:" the snare-and-hihat combo tapping into something primordial, the comically bad Cassio keyboard/bent trombone sound effect in place of a real horn section, the oozing simplicity and energy of 160 bpm like any self-respecting dance hit deserves. This is the magic of pop music: the escapism it promises. As opposed to looking inward, it leads you not exactly "outward," but to some otherworldly fantasy, where the worst possible threat is a clique of people who don't like you, or seeing an ex dance with someone else. The result was like a tidy and instantaneous spell of deep drunkenness: the DJ would return with his announcements, and I would snap out of the trance, realizing I couldn't remember a single detail from the last few minutes. Did I dance, seated, from the waist up? Did I sing along, tapping in time on the steering wheel? All I could be sure was that I couldn't have been thinking about lesson planning, the handful of students I was desperately worried about, or if I'd get invited back to teach again come spring.

Soon after the full album of 1989 was released, I slinked through my local Target, acting so twitchy and weird I'm surprised no one accused me of shoplifting. I bought the expanded deluxe edition, which I stored all evidence of clandestinely in my glove box. I played that disc almost perpetually until May, when I got a different, more manageable teaching job, and the magic of blissful blankness was not so necessary. If anyone would be well-suited to making music that could serve as a lead bib to the radiation of everyday stress and pain, it of course would have to be the conventionally beautiful daughter of two highly devoted and successful financiers. I know, I can't help myself even now: tangled in analysis, letting a landslide of meaning chase me down the slope, daring it to crush me. Still, "Shake It Off" allowed me to do exactly as its title promised to all of reality, if only for a few brief moments when I needed it, to return to my senses better balanced with the space to take in the world again, and the dozens of essays stacked on my kitchen table.



Ben Folds Five

"Don't Change Your Plans"

The Unauthorized Biography of Reinhold Messner

04/1999

550 Music - Epic

Don't Change Your Plans

Levi Andrew Noe

Driving under a canopy of redwoods through snaking mountain roads, Kristine turned the volume up until the speakers crackled. A low, droning hum—a violin?—swelled slowly into a soft crash with Ben Folds' signature, bouncy, upbeat piano verse. Kristine and I would wait, perched on a cliff of anticipation for that first line. Most of the time we would be early, coming in a bar too soon and laughing at our mistake even though we had sung along to "Don't Change Your Plans" a dozen times. But no matter how off-key and out of tempo we would always catch up and sing/shout: "Sometimes I get the feeling that I won't be on this planet for very long. I really like it here, I'm quite attached to it, I hope I'm wrong."

If songs were prophecy, Ben Folds would be Nostradamus. Kristine was not long for this planet. But we were immortal then, and even if some harbinger of the future had showed me the police report, or her casket, I wouldn't have believed it.

"All I know is I gotta be where my heart says I ought to be." The refrain came in and we would belt it out with the windows down, on our way to Santa Cruz. Kristine's long brown hair would float around her like she was underwater. Her sharp, searching coffee eyes never seemed to notice her wild locks, she just stayed focused on the road and the euphony.

We were living at a yoga community, Mount Madonna, taking part in a work, trade program. We'd go into Santa Cruz, about an hour and a half away, for milkshakes and fries when the yogic vegetarian diet got old. I was supposed to be going back to college, but I took the semester off because I was having an early-twenties existential crisis. Kristine was there to stare down her life's biggest questions and see who blinked first. We were both looking for answers in the ancient school of yoga, under the tutelage of yogis, philosophers and devotees of Sri Baba Hari Das, the silent monk.

Babaji, as his followers affectionately called him, had taken a vow of silence in 1952. We didn't know how he would take to our raucous singing, so we tended to be a good way from Mount Madonna before turning on our theme song. Babaji's silence was permeable, a real visceral thing that hovered around him like a holy force field. Sure, he seemed pretty enlightened (like I was any kind of judge) and silence had given him some perks, as he wrote: "First, to conserve life energy. Second, to silence the mind. And third, to develop non-attachment to desires." But I was in no place for lifelong vows and austerities. I just thought that it was sad that Babaji couldn't sing along with us. I bet he really would have enjoyed it.

The bridge came in and we made trumpet sounds with our mouths. Kristine laughed so hard she almost swerved off the mountain. "All I really want to say, you're the reason I want to stay." We sang to ourselves and to each other.

"You have made me smile again, in fact I might be sore from it. It's been awhile." I had come on this pilgrimage fleeing depression, purposelessness, and a black hole in the center of my being. Kristine was tighter lipped about her past, but she had battles with herself; you could see it in the distances her eyes would retreat to. None of that was present as long as this song was playing and we were coming down the mountain into seas of strawberry fields.

Sometimes you want memory to be untouched, pristine, crystal clear. Sometimes memory serves better polished, revised. I chose to leave Kristine in her bliss at Mount Madonna. The Kristine that I would meet two years later, when she offered me a job tending her marijuana farm was another person who took another path. Somewhere, the Kristine I keep in memory is still singing along. "I know we've been together many times before I'll see you on the other side."

Life's music is rarely as fluently composed as a pop song, and who would want it to be? If I had gone to her funeral, it would have been too late to sing the coda. But on that road between the mountains and the coast, we got to finish the song, crooning out the windows to the sweet, soupy California sky.

"I love you, goodbye."



Madonna

“Holiday” & “Burning Up”

Madonna

07/1983

Warner Bros. Records

Mixed Messages

René Ostberg

The first love poem I ever gave a guy I stole word for word from Madonna. The “poem” was the lyrics to “Burning Up,” an intensely lusty number off her first album, and the guy was a boy at my high school whom I thought looked like Sting.

His name was Craig, and like the woman whose song I gave him, he had a reputation.

Back in the 8th grade, when I started crushing on him, he’d been a jock verging on burnout, or maybe a burnout verging on jock. Thirteen is that kind of liminal age when you can easily embody two personas, no matter how contradictory, like a honey-sweet A-side with a dirty-horny B-side spinning away underneath. If you’re a boy, that is. If you’re a girl, still inexperienced and unsure of yourself, yet already developed, already drawing the kind of attention better suited to a woman twice your age, it’s not so easy. People will say you’re giving off mixed messages. They’ll call it “attention seeking” or “showing off.”

Craig was popular and I wasn’t. He was on the football and wrestling teams and I wasn’t on anything. He reportedly hung out in other kids’ basements after school to drink and smoke. After school I went to more school, to CCD, aka Catholic education for kids whose parents couldn’t afford parochial tuitions. Craig had spiked blond hair and acne, was twice the size of most the other boys, and wore a near-daily attire of black concert tees advertising one metal band or another. Metallica, Slayer, Iron Maiden...bands I never listened to or got near in my musical taste. Bands I probably wouldn’t have even known about if it weren’t for their appearance across the muscles of Craig’s chest.

My thing was pop music, like top 40 radio hits and heavy rotation MTV faves. I liked songs you could dance to. Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Prince, and yes, Madonna, whom I took a special interest in for a completely inconsequential and self-centered reason. We share an unusual name. Madonna is my middle name and my mother’s first name, and I had never known anyone else called Madonna, other than the Virgin Mary—which, in an era of classrooms crammed with Jennifer Lynns and Julie Annes, only made the name even more extremely weird and uncool.

Until “Holiday” came along.

I was 11 when I first heard it, on the radio one winter Sunday while listening to Casey Kasem’s countdown. Not listening actually, but dancing. Alone, in the room I shared with my sister A, four years older than me but the closest to me in age of my five siblings. We’d been roomies since I was born, sometimes even sharing a bed in the very full houses we’d grown up in, first on the northwest side of Chicago and then in a suburb known for nothing but a don’t-cough-or-you’ll-miss-it mention in *The Blues Brothers*.

I remember hearing Casey’s introduction to “Holiday” and thinking I misheard the singer’s name. Once the song started, I fell immediately for its peppy beat and message of celebration and togetherness. I was a misfit kid, a bookish loner who got bullied at school for my weight and glasses and crooked tetracycline-stained teeth, and my outsider experience made me a sucker for any song that pleaded for people to come together despite their differences, even for “just one day out of life.” Dancing, like books and music, was an escape for me, from the crowded physical spaces of home and the perpetual sense of social awkwardness and ugliness I felt at school. Dancing was where I could pretend I

was someone else, someone graceful and beautiful and cool. All it took for transformation was a good song.

After the song's fadeout on the countdown, Casey repeated its title and the singer's name and where she came from: Detroit, meaning the Midwest. Same as me, I thought. And in the easily impressed way of young misfit girls, that was all it took. I was a fan.

It wasn't long before I got to see this doppelganger of mine, on *American Bandstand*, lip syncing and skipping around to that same great song from Casey's countdown. If I'd been under the notion she and I had much in common, her appearance on *Bandstand* quickly put an end to that. Her look was streetwise, not suburban schoolgirlish. She wore all black, lots of makeup, and fabulously messy hair. Her skippy-kid dance moves didn't seem hard, but when I tried them later in my room it proved a challenge keeping up that energy for a whole song. She may not have been impressive vocally (live or on record), but there was something magnetic about her, something almost feral in her facial expressions that jarred with her song's utopian lyrics but fit perfectly with her disco-punk-gypsy getup.

Then there was the confidence—sexual, professional, just all-around. To this day, I'll maintain that's what rubs people about Madonna, what explains the perpetual trashing she's gotten since 1983—her audacious, undeniable, gender-role-busting self-belief. After her performance, as Dick Clark tried to interview her over the screaming kids in the studio, she couldn't stop smiling and giggling at her success and sudden popularity. When Dick Clark asks her if she was scared to go out on her own as a performer, she answers, "Not really. I think I've always had a lot of confidence in myself." Then she lays it right out for us. "What are your dreams, what's left?" Clark asks her. "To rule the world," she says, capping it off with another giggle.

"Look at this girl," one of my older siblings (a baby boomer to my Gen X) said dismissively, making disparaging comments about her bared bellybutton and visible bra straps. Like, who did she think she was? Going on TV, enjoying herself, dressing slutty, dancing around, plotting world domination.

I don't think it's possible for me to understate the significance of that *Bandstand* performance, the seed-planting, what it was like as a suburban Midwestern Catholic girl to see this other suburban Midwestern Catholic girl who'd not only escaped to something bigger and better but was demanding more. Without apology.

My sister soon got Madonna's first album, but I got more use out of it, dancing to it in the basement every week. Madonna may have been too local for A's taste anyway. She was mostly a Brit-band kind of girl. When she hit her teens, she'd begun covering the walls of our room with Star Hits tear-outs of Duran Duran, Howard Jones, and Culture Club. They took the place of my Muppets poster and her small B&W cut-outs of Matt Dillon from the Chicago newspapers' weekend movies section. On our closet door hung a huge poster of that blonded-up post-punk trio The Police, A's favorite. We fought over this space—I wanted it for an MJ poster featuring the King of Pop in white slacks and a yellow cardigan and matching bowtie. When A didn't relent, I took her stick deodorant and defaced Sting and Co's faces with it. As it turned out, deodorant scrapes right off poster paper (who knew?) and for years I had to contend with falling asleep under the sexy-intellectual gaze of The Police's lead singer night after night. Subconsciously, I must have started seeking that same gaze among the boys at my school. Because one night, when I was just turned 13, it struck me while staring back into Sting's eyes: with that blond spiky 'do and those cheekbones and muscles, he kinda sorta looked like that one tall guy at school. Metallica guy. Craig.

It was too bad Craig was all wrong for me. As in cool, popular, and rebellious where I was shy, self-conscious, and unknown. We had no classes together, nothing in common socially, and I was sure he didn't know I was alive. He said as much when someone squealed my crush on him. "I don't know who she is," he said, according to the girls who told him. Later, presumably after someone pointed me out to him, he told our one mutual friend, "She's too nice." And I couldn't decide which was worse—being invisible or being innocent.

Something had to change and that something had to be me. I wanted so badly for it to be me.

The truth was my life had become overwhelmed by changes. After turning 13, I got my first period, having already developed physically—breasts, hips, height, the works—beginning around 10 or 11. My older siblings started getting married off. And most life-changing of all, my grandmother had had a stroke and had come to live with us. She was given the room I shared with A, and all our music mag pics were taken down and replaced with pictures and statues of the Holy Family and various Catholic saints—Madonna for madonnas, you might say. A moved into a room formerly occupied by one of our brothers, and I moved into a tiny tandem room off hers, about the size of a large walk-in closet. After school, I had to be home to help look after my grandmother with my siblings, as our parents worked full-time.

There comes a time in every young girl's life when she senses things aren't under her control, that there are rules she's supposed to abide by that she didn't make and expectations she has to live up to that she can't possibly meet and taboos she shouldn't break that she suspects wouldn't even be on the radar if she were a boy. Most girls react to this realization head-on, and many by trying to take control over the one thing that all these rules and expectations and taboos seem to apply to—her body. I was no different. If I couldn't stop change from overwhelming my life and overtaking the space I'd tried to carve out for myself, I could at least try and make it work for me.

So I lost weight. A lot. I did it my way and the textbook teen girl way—dancing for hours to records in the basement after school and eating as little as a scoop of cottage cheese for dinner and a milk carton for lunch every day. It was only the beginning.

After graduating junior high, I spent the summer getting ready for high school reflecting on possibilities, on the dream of having a completely different look, a completely different social life—really, any social life. Meanwhile, A was going away to college, giving me her room and everything in it she left behind. Her last couple years of high school, she'd begun replacing her music mags with fashion rags, bookmarking spreads of stylish women whose looks she wanted to copy and elegant rooms whose décor she wanted to surround herself in. She'd always had a fashionable touch that I lacked. Studying her leftover, well-thumbed through copies of *Vogue* and *Mademoiselle*, I knew such transformation was hopeless for me, even newly skinny as I was. I was too hungry for high fashion—hungry to be noticed, to be loved, to stop being so invisible and innocent.

Who else could I turn for a role model but to Madonna, by now the queen of everything, not just a pop star but a cultural tornado-exploding-supernova. I didn't know if Craig liked her. I mean, looking back, reminiscing on all his death metal tees, probably not. But I don't think it even occurred to me. The point is I liked her.

So freshman year of high school saw a new me—dressed in extra-small tank tops I converted into ultra-short miniskirts (I'd pull the neck part over my hips and tuck the straps in at the sides) and visible bra straps and, yes, even rosaries worn as necklaces. Did Craig notice? Because I know my grandmother did. She complained about it to my mother,

who was either too distracted by her new role as caretaker to her mother to notice her youngest child's increasingly provocative attire or had raised enough kids by now to know a phase when she saw one. The only thing my mother objected to was the rosaries. "Those aren't *jewelry*," she informed me one morning as I was heading out of the house for the bus. And like the good Catholic girl I still was underneath, I obeyed and put the rosaries back on my grandmother's bedstand where I'd borrowed them.

If Craig wasn't impressed by my new look, maybe a good old-fashioned note would do the trick. But what to say to a pot-smoking, Slayer-loving, teenage Sting look-alike on the football team who I'd been obsessing about for a year now? I didn't trust my own words, didn't think I could put my schoolgirl feelings and hormonal yearnings into anything eloquent enough to convince him of the urgency of my love and lust for him. That was where music saved the day. I mean, he liked music. I liked music. What could go wrong?

After hitting on my epiphany, I spent a couple afternoons poring over all the songs in my record collection, reading all the lyrics on the liner sleeves, trying to determine the perfect song to snare Craig's attention and devotion. At some point, I don't know when—but I wish I did, to better determine just what I was thinking—I settled on "Burning Up." It was from Madonna's first album, same as "Holiday," already an oldie in the wake of two more albums she'd released. Unlike "Holiday," it hadn't been a hit, but in some ways it had solidified Madonna's hypersexual reputation more than any other song from her early career. The most notorious of the lyrics went:

*Do you wanna see me down on my knees?
Or bending over backwards, now would you be pleased?
Unlike the others I'd do anything
I'm not the same, I have no shame
I'm on fire!*

Over time, serious music critics would suggest that the song's love interest was really a metaphor for fame or power. The video seems to back this up, showing Madonna writhing around as if in sexual agony on a street intercut with some dude driving her way—until the last shot sees Madonna behind the wheel of the car, sans dude and smiling.

Metaphor or no, I took the lyrics literally (especially the line "But you don't even know I'm alive"), and diligently copied down the lyrics (where Madonna pants in the song, I remember I wrote "heavy breathing"), and got a friend to pass off this surefire love tactic to Craig in the hall one day. "This is from René," I told her to say. "Cool, thanks," Craig reportedly said, shoving the note in his pocket.

I don't know what I was expecting in return. A request for a date? A note with some favorite lyrics of his own? To be taken seriously? I mean, really? It got back to me eventually that Craig told our one mutual friend he started laughing when he read my note—to his credit, he also told our friend not to tell me that. She did anyway, because she thought I should know.

Regardless of whether Craig noticed me, others definitely had. I'd been frequently teased by boys, but now girls were talking about me too, making fun of me, even the nice girls and other misfit girls. And even before I'd lost weight, even before the new clothing choices, around the time I'd begun gaining inches in height and curves, I'd started to get a certain kind of attention. One boy at school would lift up my skirt as I walked down the hallways. At the library I'd been followed into the stacks and groped by a man. These were just a couple incidents I'd experienced. I didn't know what to do when these things happened,

other than run away and then blame myself for “leading guys on” or tell myself maybe I should be flattered.

Looking back, I refuse to say I was confused. That I didn’t know what I was doing, like why I’d picked an embarrassingly horny song to give to a boy and why I started dressing like a girl in a music video, why I’d veered so far (so it seemed) from the innocent girl who just wanted to dance her cares away in her bedroom on a Sunday morning. On the one hand, I tell myself I compromised my true self for a boy’s attention, a ploy that didn’t even work. On the other hand, I know I was trying to take control and ownership of the changes overwhelming my life and the expectations and rules overwhelming any girl. I was trying to take a cue from my name doppelgänger—Madonna, the Michigan girl with an uncanny ability for taking every rumor, criticism, or slut-shaming insult thrown her way and wielding it to her advantage, to power.

Within another year or two, life would throw more changes my way. By 15, my father had been hospitalized with a heart problem, my grandmother died, and I became an aunt for the first time. As for Craig, I finally had a class with him and picked up on some crude remarks he made, and some rumors that he’d hurt someone after school one day. I forgot him. I started to put weight back on and dressing in loose, dark layers. Began reading poetry and Irish and French history and listening to The Cure and New Order. I made pen pals with a boy on the south side of Chicago who sent me rap lyrics and detailed his graffiti-writing exploits to me. We started spending all night talking on the phone together, when everyone else in our houses was asleep. I was depressed and curious and artistic and still unconfident, but cared less whether people noticed, whether it was my job to endlessly please the world as a girl was supposed to do.

There’s a temptation now to disown the girl I was at 13, to say “I don’t know her.” I’d do as much with Madonna in the years to come, pretending I no longer liked her or her music, denying to myself the leaps her best songs made my heart do and the moves her beats once made my body do. But some things are just undeniable, like the person you were when you were on your way to learning how to be yourself, or a girl’s desire to prove she’s the one in control of her life, or an infectious song beckoning everyone to forget about the bad times and put their troubles down, for just one day out of life. To this day, nothing does it for me, nothing connects me to the better moments of my girlhood, like “Holiday.”

When I was in my 30s, I ran into Craig again, in a bar in Chicago. I was attending a book swap event, and he was a bouncer, checking IDs as all us bookish grown-up former misfit types entered the bar. We recognized each other right away, though he had to read my ID to remember my name. He didn’t look like Sting so much anymore. And I didn’t even recall the note I’d given him, or the girl I’d been, until thinking about my run-in with my old crush later that night. Once the memory surfaced, the lusty lyrics to “Burning Up” churning through my brain, I was mortified. And then I laughed, liked Craig himself did, like Madonna after promising she was going to the rule the world on *American Bandstand*.



Explosions in the Sky

“Time Stops”

How Strange, Innocence

01/2000

Sad Loud America

On Discovering Explosions in the Sky During My Freshman Year of College

Stephen Briseño

If you're going the speed limit, the drive from Fort Worth to Huntsville will take you a tad over three hours. The day I moved down to Huntsville to attend Sam Houston State University, it took my parents close to seven.

My brother, Matthew, and I sang for nearly that whole three hours, my two suitcases sitting in the trunk. My Seagull acoustic guitar resting in its case in the backseat of my Pontiac. There was a sprinkling of conversation between us, about what my life would be like once school started, how things would change, how they already had. We mainly let the songs speak for us though, the two of us alternating DJ duties.

Mom and Dad, who were hauling my mattress, nightstand, and dresser in the bed of the Chevy, claimed they needed to stop for food. For gas. For a stretch. A gift for my roommate. A second stretch. The tarp needed adjusting after a brief rainshower. I think the silence between them might have been too much. Any lyrics they sang would've been a little overwhelming considering they were dropping off their eldest child at college.

See, I'm from a Hispanic family. My mom and two of her sisters live within a three block radius from each other. Her sisters and brothers still own my grandparents' house, even though they've been gone for almost ten years. That house has been the scene for all sorts of family parties, despite the fact that it has only a single bathroom. At this point, I am the only person on either side of the family whose address doesn't have "Fort Worth" in it. Mom and Dad weren't exactly thrilled when I showed them the acceptance letter. But there we were, six months later, standing in the parking lot of Cornerstone Apartments with my roommate, Simeon.

Home was the furthest thing from my mind. The northside of Fort Worth is probably like any other small town in America. It's a little corner of it where things seem narrow, confined, and yet you know that somewhere beyond Friday night football games and walking around the mall and dealing with teen drama, there is a much bigger world out there. Sure, I had traded one small town for another—that didn't matter. To me Huntsville was a new world to be explored.

I was uncharacteristically cold, distant, even with my brother and sister choking back tears as they hugged me goodbye. I said little besides "I love y'all," and "see you for Thanksgiving." I was starting fresh in a new city, ready for the possibilities life had to offer.

I credit Tyler for changing my life that first year at Sam Houston.

Tyler was one of my first new friends, a drummer with knobby dreadlocks, and overwhelmingly kind and enthusiastic. Back in those days, he drove a striped maroon GMC

Sierra minivan, always had a strange indie band playing through his stereo, and never stopped talking about music.

One evening, while hanging out at his rent house, Tyler had a CD playing in his boombox. I paid attention to the music, drawn in by the sound of the guitars. It had that big, distorted post-rock sound—one that I was increasingly drawn to with my growing interest in Mogwai and that strange Icelandic band who sang in a made-up language, Sigur Rós. Remember, I was from small town Texas and iTunes wasn't really a thing yet. Music discoveries pre-internet broke through like revelations through shows and word-of-mouth.

One thing that stood out about this CD that Tyler was playing was how, while I kept waiting for a singer to chime in with a verse, one never did. I thought it was just one of those one-off instrumental songs that some bands put in leading up to the next track. I usually enjoyed those. And for this song, I felt like singing would ruin it. It was pure. Any idea or emotion that could be expressed in lyrics would have paled compared to what the instruments captured.

I loved it.

"What is this? Who are we listening to?"

Tyler smirked. "Bro, it's this band from Austin. They are sick! Just instrumental all the way through."

Without asking, Tyler went to his computer, opened up Real Audio, and burned it onto a CD-R. From a cup on his desk he snagged a Sharpie, scribbled on it the following: "Explosions in the Sky—First Album." He placed it in a thin, bright translucent green jewel case, and handed it to me.

The album he gave me was Explosions in the Sky's debut album, appropriately titled *How Strange, Innocence*. And I promptly forgot about it. For weeks, it was smooshed amongst my other CDs, junk mail, class notebooks, and greasy Taco Bell wrappers in the front seat of my car. It eventually migrated to the back seat, where it must've fallen to the floor, and slid underneath the driver's seat, waiting like the ring Bilbo finds in Gollum's cave, for just the right moment.

Those first few months of school, my mom made it a habit of calling me every morning on her way to work while I walked to my classes in Academic Building 4. After a while, I screened her calls, let them go to voicemail. In between classes and studying and making new friends, I'd forget to call back. The 201 miles that separated me from my old life and old friends began to blur and I settled into life up until the holidays.

When Thanksgiving came, it was nice to see my family, my brother and sister, eat good food. There was one question that came up frequently from my *tias* and *tios*, most likely prompted from my mom: "When are you moving home?" The answer was always the same, "I don't know yet. I just started so it'll be at least a few years." I avoided vocalizing the truth: *I'm never moving back*.

My dad had a tradition of cleaning my car for me after he filled up my gas tank. Resting in the passenger seat among my other CDs was the green jewel case with Tyler's scribble.

My set routine on these three hour trips to and from Fort Worth usually began with something upbeat while I drove through the city, bleeding into something more

introspective once the cities gave way to the fields and open road of east Texas. I always ended up entertaining that strange, nagging feeling of *what-am-I-going-to-do-with-my-life* that comes alive in your early twenties. That green jewel case eventually got the better of my curiosity, remembering the sound and feeling it invoked. Just outside Midlothian, Texas on 287, I took out Cursive's *The Ugly Organ* and popped in *How Strange, Innocence*.

The album opens with a repeating, droning static, giving way to a punctuated melody played on the bass. A counter melody follows, played high up on a jangly electric guitar. Their sound was rock as I knew it, but it was far more than that. The album ended and I hit repeat, starting from the top. After my second listen, I would repeat certain songs.

Some songs you remember because of a certain group of people, a particular event, someone you used to love. Others you remember because of how accurately it captures a truth. When the sixth track, "Time Stops," would start, I found myself hitting the back button over and over. What I immediately noticed is how the lead guitar is just slightly out of tune, but the song is all the stronger for it. For the next four minutes, a haunting, airy tune spreads out sans drums, happily going nowhere. But still there's this anticipation stewing. The band fades out at the 4:45 mark, and a final note lingers for about a second before a new driving melody abruptly takes over. It's a melody with somewhere to go and something to say, the antithesis of the four minutes that came before it.

Eventually, the drums come in like a riot unhinged, all directed at the snares and cymbals. I imagine drummer Chris Hrasky screaming at the top of his lungs while crashing out old demons. For the next three minutes, that new melody soars with both a deep acknowledgement and rejection of nostalgia. At almost ten minutes, the song fades to an end, never resolving. The riot just continues, but only softer. I've come to accept this song as a perfect metaphor for life, a soundtrack of unexplored landscapes.

When I pulled up to my apartment in Huntsville, I listened to "Time Stops" one final time with a fresh understanding of things, how life can exist with a calm regularity before a completely new melody invades. That melody can be abrupt, but welcomed, and nothing without that first half that came before it. At that moment I understood my parents a little better. If Mom and Dad had had *How Strange, Innocence* when they dropped me off, they probably would've listened to track six over and over too. It's only now, 16 years later, that I'm able to articulate that even just a little bit.

For the last 11 years, I've taught middle school English; the start of school is a regular part of my life. I've come to terms that I'm at the age where discovering new music seems like an obnoxious chore. I'm a resigned old man that only finds validity in the music he grew up listening to; some feelings can't be expressed any other way.

My only daughter started kindergarten recently, and that fact has painted all those fresh starts that school years offer with a different hue. The changing of seasons. A parent watching a child venture on their own down new hallways and classrooms and cities. That pain of letting go. The equal pain of embracing the sudden shift of a new melody. All of it hurts a little bit more. Before my daughter went to her seat, I knelt beside her, lingered for a little longer than I should have, whispered: "I love you and I'm so proud of you."

After dropping her off that first day, I opened up Spotify, pressed play on "Time Stops," closed my classroom door, and wept a little at what I've tried to say, but still can't fully capture.



David Bowie

“Teenage Wildlife”

Scary Monsters
(and Super Creeps)

09/1980

RCA Records

Teenage Wildlife

Jessica Berger

In high school, I believed that David Bowie wasn't human, that he was one of the otherworldly beings or personas he'd long adapted. An alien, an aristocratic vampire, a goblin king, an immortal. Had there been a time before him? I didn't know of one. Would there be a time after him? Surely, I thought, that was not possible. I would tell my friends as much, try to explain to them what it was that drew me to him, what it was that resonated with me like no rock star, no public figure, no person, no spiritual presence ever had. I would cut out pictures to glue to magnets that could decorate my locker and on weekends my friends would watch *Labyrinth*, innocently, with bags of Doritos and jokes about “the bulge,” only to return to English class on Monday morning and pass the opening verses of “Magic Dance” back and forth at the most inappropriate moments. They entertained this, treated it like a quirk, one of those temporary fixations we all seemed to go through in those days. But where other people had their *Moulin Rouge!*, their post-punk band of choice, their cardboard stand-up of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Bowie was something other.

If you'd asked me then, I don't know that I could tell you what it was that Bowie signified. I was in love with him in some way, certainly, it's easy to fall in love with an image when you're fifteen, sixteen, especially when that image comes packaged as an idea, as a possibility for something you didn't know was possible. So, I was in love with Bowie. I'm still maybe a little in love with Bowie, and at that time—and still, who are we kidding?—my celebrity crushes and fixations were few and far between, and never on who they should have been. When others bought in on Justin Timberlake, baby Heath Ledger, and all the boys who existed as stickers in the newest issue of *Cosmo Girl*, I fell hard for the dandys and androgynes; yeah, there was something about Tim Curry in *Rocky Horror*, and there was Ewan McGregor in, well, anything, and there was Hugh Grant's stupid floppy hair, or Stuart Townsend and every actor who had ever played a vampire, but mostly, there was Bowie in all his incarnations.

“Look at him,” I would say, as if what it was that spoke to me would transfer, automatically, to them by flipping through the liner notes of *Hunky Dory* or *Heroes*. It was the way he held that cigarette, the mythology constructed around his two-toned eyes, the straight line of his hips, the way he could be a sphinx, be a man, be a woman, be nothing that we knew. It was the histrionics of his voice, the way it growled in one moment, broke into a primal wail in another. It was his teeth, the old, jagged ones; the newer ones he flashed, leaving love bites in the air, carving out space with one hand raised in the “Jump They Say” video viewed, glitchily, on a dial-up connection. It was because no one could wear a suit like that. No one could wear boots like that. No one could look as good in a mugshot. It was the language he used, the life he gave to worlds that I had been told, for so long, were not cool. Here were my rocket ships, my space-boys, my lunar landscapes and dystopian governments rolled out in the shape of rock and roll, in the shape of fashion—punctuated with electric guitars and come-ons and glitter. It was the appeal of his nouns: Moondust and stardust. Blackstars and saviour machines. Ray guns and diamond dogs and ladies with grinning souls. It was the ironic romance of these words, the posturing simultaneously erudite and juvenile. It was every cryptic scene I wanted to talk through in detail: the remembering standing by the wall, the bullets above our heads, the kissing as though nothing could fall, the telling you who you are, the nailing to my car. I was in love with Bowie as an image, but even more so with his words, with the way he could pass

meaning back and forth between the way he chose to appear and the way he spoke, the looping projection of persona and story, the way one created the other and vice versa with almost no need for an original print.

My writing, my dream life, my quietly-suffered crushes and crippling inability to connect—person-to-person, teenage girl-to-teenage boy—became writ large into small apocalypses, mutations, the fantasy of stopping time, of being the last girl on earth, of a moment where there was just me, just some kind of us—not Bowie, but some boy, some far more mundane being—able to become what we were not, just for one day, and untethered from contexts and concrete meaning, they spoke to me of a possibility that felt like a type of bodilessness, of the ability to decide just how I was and make it so, to will some imagined version of myself into being. I was never the type of kid who wrote love poems. I didn't have it in me to cry tears that weren't the result of some kind of a rage, of a temper tantrum frustration with my inability to complete a task. I've always been a person just slightly divorced from my physical presence, just a little detached from the situation, and in Bowie I saw someone who seemed to have found a way to process the world, to reflect emotion and speak to its properties without falling, always, into the traps and clichés and behaviors I didn't understand. I listened to "Teenage Wildlife" and felt like the group of one, sure, but also like I already knew the answers it provided. It's a silly thing to say, that I understood as a teenager that I did not think like other people. This is a thought that many teenagers have, so I can't insist to you that it was so.

Whatever that means, what I knew in high school was that the world seemed to be coursing through David Bowie. He was open to it, had fallen towards it, had sold it. He was the soundtrack, sure, but also the connective tissue never more than two degrees from a direct connection to every cultural touchstone I could unearth, everything I fell in love with—people, bands, paintings, films, television shows, philosophies, genres, hairstyles. He was already there, he'd already been there.

"Look at him," I would say to my friends, to my parents, to my little sister, "listen to the song." In high school. In college. Into my adult life. I have done the thing so many have. I have played these songs to feel more like myself, to understand more of myself, to try and indirectly communicate, to make others see what it is I sometimes feel and what, I think, is not a real emotion. Here are these worlds in a noisy, rambling cacophonous progression of chords, here is the desperate want to be loved, while at the same time we turn away from everything. Here we are floating high above the world, so human yet so distant, singing all those songs of darkness and dismay, of characters driven by ego and crippling fear. Here I am. Here is this person who somehow, as if by magic, seems to speak in a language, in sounds, in syllables and images I understand, that I so rarely question, that seem to mean almost against reason. If you asked me to interpret what it is I pull from a song like "We are the Dead" or "Blackout" I'm not sure that I could. I can only describe what these works do to me in gut punches and spikes of serotonin, in recited memories and spoken interpretations of pictures in my head.

You cannot communicate this to the friends who don't already understand, but when you're fifteen, sixteen, you will try. I have tried. All there is to do is listen to "Heroes" or "Teenage Wildlife" or "Rock and Roll Suicide" or "Win" and feel them like you feel little else, like you are listening to the one voice who understands something of the freakish nature you have never been able to put into words. We all say this. When we find each other later on in life it is because Bowie is a channel, a conduit that links those who otherwise struggle with connection. We are the awkward kids: the misfits, rebels, punks, freaks, and weirdos. We are the anxious, the trapped, the ones bigger than our bodies if only we could prove it to you. We are the 21st-century dandies, the would-be pop idols, the ones with souls like old

Hollywood starlets and drag queens and super villains and dead poets. We are the ones who linger in our flaws, who pour salt on our wounds, who paint our lids and mouths with greasepaints and lacquers and pixie dust, who relish the idea of our own displacement. We are those who grew up sure that we were not supposed to be here, sure that we had come from somewhere else. And we learn to transform. We perform practiced versions of ourselves. We are fifteen, sixteen, and we have never really grown up, we know that people don't, not really, that we are all pose-striking kids with plastic souls, embracing the artificiality of everything. We know that art doesn't have to be direct or clear or sincere for it speak to us on real terms. It is possible to be at once a product of the brain and the heart, to display the ribcages of blatant construction and the less visible properties that whispered their reasons.

Here he was, here we are. In high school, everything I uncovered in trips to the library, on internet searches, in conversation with older kids, seemed to be instructing me to look, to listen, and there are so many reasons. My reason is that this: that he seemed to be something like me, that he was everything I wanted to say and wanted and somehow, yes, wanted to be. At fifteen, sixteen, I could look at you and tell you this song is how I feel in a crowd. This is how I interpret what you're telling me. This is comfort, inspiration, an assertion of value in everything—the wrapped up abbreviated whole of culture, of art, of rock and roll, and literature—just as it is a simple pop song. There are too many words.

In high school, I believed that David Bowie would live forever, and part of me held on to that even as lines that had never been there began to appear on his face. Even as we saw, time and again, that he was fallible, that he was human, that he could misstep, hurt, and was capable of the type of change and transformation we all succumb to. Through all of this, a part of me suspected it was an act. I clung to a naïve suspicion, a hope that one day he just might reveal himself to be a stranger, something that would connect the world to a strange magic in the way that I already had been.

AIR PLAYGROUND LOVE

Sung by Gordon Tacks



Air

"Playground Love"

The Virgin Suicides

02/2000

Record Makers ·
Source · Virgin

Playground Love

Scout Bolton

**Note, names have been changed*

I remember the first time I saw Marshmallow Fluff for sale, in its hyperreal, bubble-shiny jar in the food court, red, screw-on lid like a bright, special puck, and beneath, a kind of glowing, sticky cloud-food I had always imagined was hiding inside the candy apples of Willy Wonka's invention room, Gene Wilder passing me the jar and a spoon and smiling through his brilliant eyes—you're here, you don't have to leave, this is yours.

We'd gone to the food hall at Selfridges, I'd never been in a place so brazen about the wealth it hoped to attract. It was the imported foods section, we were in America now, and there was this whole row of them, the row above with all the American cereals I'd only ever seen in the films I grew up with, and filling the row below were thick, glass bottles of technicolour sugar drinks of the kinds of exciting flavours we're supposed to turn our noses up at on this side of the pond.

Caspar said I could get anything when he saw the pupils in my wild eyes widen over toward the little French corner where I saw dusted, tiny truffles and pastries brushed with real gold leaf—people eat *gold*, I said, and Caspar cooed right back to me: not by the *bullion*, darling. But it was the Marshmallow Fluff—good Lord, I couldn't wait to tell everyone I'd been to the place where you could buy real Chanel perfume, real Jimmy Choos, and the sticky, shiny insides of marshmallows, all in the same store. I spoke about it all the way to Caspar's car because he'd bought me a jar and I didn't know for how long I was expected to wait before eating it.

"Do you have a spoon in your car?" I asked him.

"I shouldn't have thought so," he replied. "Just scoop it out with your fingers," was his suggestion. Fiddling with his car keys.

"I can't, I'd never stop washing my hands. I'm not obsessive compulsive or anything; I just don't like sticky things."

"I'm not bothered by them," he said. "I'll feed you."

As soon as we climbed in and I felt the cool leather hit the back of my thighs, Caspar thumbed into the silvery, paper seal and with his two dominant fingers on his pale white hand, dug out a cloud of Marshmallow Fluff, and fed it through my lips and onto my tongue; let me bite most of it off of him and even tell him I wasn't done when he tried to pull his hand away. Every time I caught a gasp between laughs on that journey home, Caspar took his eyes off the road very briefly to spoon the fluff into my mouth, and that was when he first said, "I love you."

Before long it was time to meet Caspar's friends. The night Caspar first took me home, I'd met a few of them already, but I don't think they'd noticed me creeping like a ghost between his bedroom, the living room, and the bathroom, and during such antisocial hours it's hard for anyone to really notice anything—we were all awake, and that's always for a reason. All I remember of Caspar's friends that night was they were dressed well and

glittering, laughing loud or drowsing out, elegant and languid in the sultry dusk of an early spring morning. One of them locked eyes with me as I swam like silk into the kitchen for juice. He was a spry, rawboned boy whose eyes brimmed over with this deep mood of unknown contempt. In that moment he seemed to hate me, so I resolved to hate him in return. I'd never hated someone so incredibly beautiful before, let alone so immediately, but I really did, suddenly that morning, before letting myself back into Caspar's room, where he lay stone-still in sleep, rather swiftly, his soft tongue hiding in his cool sedative head. But I knew it was there.

In the fridge were bottles of Italian beer, bottled and corked fizzy wine that Caspar called "shampoo", several lemons, a couple of pomegranates, a few limes. "There's bottles of Stoli in the freezer, and some martini glasses," he said.

"Won't it freeze?" I asked. "Also, what's Stoli?"

"It's vodka, darling," he chuckled. "And no, of course it won't freeze. Didn't they teach you anything at school? Vodka has enough alcohol in it that the freezing temperature gets lowered quite a bit. It will freeze, but not in my freezer."

"And the fruit?"

"Garnishes," he said, *obviously*. I suddenly felt weird that I'd asked. Of course they were. People don't just sit and eat lemons. Do they? No, they *obviously* don't. I wasn't even going to bother asking why he'd put glasses in the freezer, too.

I asked Caspar who was coming and he said only a couple of people, and I wondered why there was so much booze for just the four of us, but as my time with Caspar progressed I came to understand the necessity of an overstocked booze supply and its ability to make people feel at ease. "There's Katherine," he said. "She's my ex but from like, ten years ago? And then there's Plum."

"That's a weird name," I said, and squinted whilst saying it, like the light had got in. "How old is she with a name like that?"

"Oh no, Plum's a he. An old nickname, I forget how he got it," said Caspar, rectifying my mistake. "Another ex I'm afraid, but again, from like, *aeons* ago. You're gonna love him, I think. He's..." and then he laughed. "He may tease you, but he does that with everybody. I haven't really told him much about you."

I went to the bathroom to pencil my eyeliner back on, creating shadowy, dark half-moons on my young skin and waiting alone for something to happen, and it did—I heard someone else come into Caspar's flat. A new voice. I stood with my back to the bathroom door against the old *Wizard of Oz* poster and waited to fall into it. I never did, so I opened the door into Caspar's vivid evening instead. And there he fucking was.

"This is Plum," said Caspar, patting the head of that gaunt lad I'd seen the night I'd first gone back. I know Caspar said some more stuff, made some rather more succinct introductions, but all I remember was him eventually sauntering off into the kitchen to prepare something gorgeous, leaving me to speak with Plum, and all else dropped around him, all the furniture and framed posters on the wall and the bookshelf seemed to blend into grey, peripheral mush, and all I could focus on was this smarmy aesthete with straight-across shoulders, poised like a ballerino all smug and self-important. I had nothing to say.

"I don't like you," he said, searing through the awkward silence, "at all."

"That's okay, Plum," I spat. "I'm not too fucking keen on you either."

"Shut up," he said. "I don't know you and I don't want to know you."

And that was the first time I met Plum; the night that Katherine never showed up.

It's weird to me that Caspar and I had been together as long as we had the night we broke up. How we'd made it through four months I'm not sure, but I think Plum had something to do with it. I took so much cocaine that night I hoped I'd become jump-started and new, that I'd take that final bump that'd bring me to the pinnacle for one fine second, and from there I would fall apart and sprout new limbs, better ones, burn out my heart and watch a glowing new one form in its place like gold. Four months before that night, I'd never taken cocaine before. I don't really remember what single event that night had broke us, only Plum sitting by me in the spare room, with his clammy fingers at my wrists, asking dumb questions, like "where d'you live?" and "what's your middle name?" and "do you take medication for anything?"

Plum's chest would feel and even sound hollow as my tired head butted against it, him saying, "Stay awake. Come on, silly, stay awake." I told him to fuck off and then I puked on his shoes, and whatever Plum did or said between leaving to clean himself up and coming right back with a carton of orange juice I never asked for, ended things with me and Caspar.

If only I could remember what I'd done or said to Caspar that it ended without him telling me; that the night we broke up I don't recall seeing or speaking with him at all; that the next morning it was Plum who used Caspar's car to drive me to McDonald's and then back home to school to sit my Science GCSE, wafting a second cup of Coke under my nose when he could hear the straw-suck noise of me draining the first one.

We listened to *The Virgin Suicides* on the motorway and on repeat when we hit my town, where I laced Plum through the suburbs with half-garbled misdirections, nodding and groaning through a fierce, dull seasickness. On the third repeat, when "Playground Love" clicked on again, starting with its haunted woodblock metronome before swooshing into pale pink cotton and witching-hour blue and velvet strings, I cried.

"Do you need to throw up again?" asked Plum. "Your eyes are all red, is it coming up again?"

"No, I'm just a bit—it's like..." I barely made it through the sentence before bursting into loud, heaving sobs that caused a strange, never-before-seen stillness and silence in Plum, who was normally ready with a withering quip whenever anyone displayed any kind of big feeling, though I guess he'd never seen me have any before, which in itself was a curious thing.

Plum pulled over into the backstreet of a cul-de-sac and as the car jerked to a stop, from under the seat rolled a half-eaten tub of Durkee-Mower's Marshmallow Fluff, and I cried even harder.

"Why are you crying now?" asked Plum, picking up the jar and inspecting it for clues. "Did something on here make you cry?"

"Caspar gave me that the first time he said he loved me," I whispered, because I thought to say it aloud and hear my own voice say it might break something.

"And you're sad it's over?" said Plum, almost dismissively.

I was acutely aware of the weight of my skull and the brain it held as my neck momentarily lapsed and my head lolled forward a bit so my chin touched my chest, before yanking my head back again as if to seem in control of what had just happened. I tried to explain to Plum how it was actually kind of cute how Caspar had spoon-fed me the fluff with his two fingers, like a baby bird, my young beak yapping open and closed again, how I'd chirruped and giggled about it all day, but Plum didn't share my view.

"He's a fucking animal," he snapped, and glanced at my vomit-stained school tie, which seemed to offend him into caring. "And you're not going to school like this."

We drove to Crown Point and smoked cigarettes for hours where Plum said he'd forge a sick-note for me to give to my tutor but I told him the school wouldn't call home and even if they did, my mother wouldn't care.

For five more years we sat on that hill, looking over the town as it belched out its mill-smoke heavenward, and we two joined in with our Lucky Strike breath; as regeneration shaped the landscape along with my school, that was quietly knocked down into dust the year I turned twenty. It felt like neither me nor Plum ever aged in that time, though I did grow plumper and Plum must have looked ill, or gotten thinner, or prematurely aged, but I never noticed, and that was always my problem. No, we were only ever sixteen and twenty-five, sitting on that scruffy grassland, gossiping and squabbling and learning each other's language. And it was a week before the leukaemia killed him that I said, "I really hated you the first time I saw you," and he said, "Me too, it was hate at first sight."

"I never told you that before," I said, like it was a profound admission, some revelation that demanded reverence.

"You told me years ago, and you've told me loads since," he said, as I watched my screwed-up hands, and put my confession back into my pocket.

But we never spoke about Caspar ever again, not after that first day, even though we listened to *The Virgin Suicides* a lot, almost traditionally, and every time we basked in the nostalgia of it, how I'd been just a schoolgirl when we met and he still a fucking waster deep into his twenties; it was as if he and I were always this unlikely knockabout duo who formed an instant bond that never faded, never wavered. Yet we both knew that it just wasn't true, and the lie of Caspar's absence in our stories created a blackhole of unspoken resentment in us both which—because of loyalty—was never allowed to surface. That terrible animal, that playground lover, that savage predator and his horrid, sticky fingers, which bitterness could never allow us to admit had spun a silky string between the two of us, a gossamer and tin-can lifeline to and from our mouths and ears, that only cancer could break.

indelible in the hippocampus

C. Kubasta

It was either Town X or Town Y, both just shy of an hour from home. It was either “Rump Shaker” or “O.P.P.” It was one of those single cassette tapes—we bought those then—stuck in the car’s stereo, and it played over and over and over, while I was in the passenger seat looking out the rolled-up window while I was huddled against the black vinyl upholstered door handle while I was momentarily grateful for the stick shift he got caught on while I was doing whatever I was able to do with my hands / the nails I’d grown / the small fists I made / what voice I had while I took to the floor, knees up & curled, fitting myself tight into the wheel well, my back hot & heating from the down vent

it hadn’t yet snowed

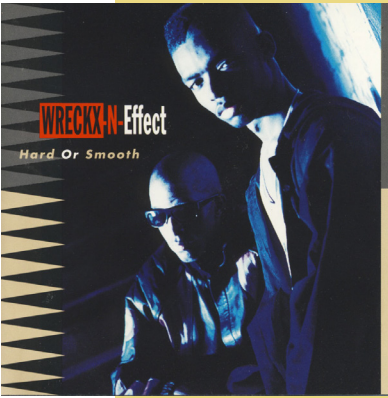
various interpretations of “O.P.P.” make this more or less relevant; all I remember of “Rump Shaker” is the video

this boy was very white, in his Midwestern muscle car

this boy said, *Jesus—*, he said it was *too much work*

I’ve become one of those single cassette tapes lately, playing on repeat: at cigarette breaks, around the bonfire, every time I hear doubt

I remember central details too, but the peripherals have disappeared: Town X or Town Y, his full name. But I know we were in the parking lot of a grocery store after hours, and he parked behind a dumpster that blocked the view from anyone driving by; I remember *after*, standing in his perfectly-normal kitchen, waiting for my ride home



Wreckx-n-Effect

“Rump Shaker”

Hard or Smooth

11/1992

MCA Records



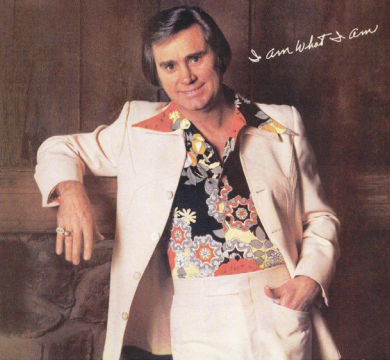
Naughty By Nature

“O.P.P.”

Naughty by Nature

09/1991

Tommy Boy



George Jones

"He Stopped Loving Her Today"

I Am What I Am

09/1980

Epic

Rust Belt Blues

Lauren Parker

The winter before my parents' divorce was final, I was 16, and my father was taking it badly. He'd gone from hostile and absent to desperate, and we'd spend evenings isolated in his battered Chevy Tahoe. The soundtrack of his grief was a song by George Jones. Some people's dads are obsessed with b-sides and obscure tracks, but my dad was cliché and jumped at the chance to play "He Stopped Loving Her Today," one of George Jones' most famous hits, over and over, hitting the back button on the CD deck as the last couple notes faded out. "Help me get your mom back," he said, as the cab of the Chevy filled up with mournful lines like, "He kept her picture on his wall, went half-crazy now and then, He still loved her through it all, hoping she'd come back again." I didn't say anything; things went best if I didn't say anything. I sat in his truck, bouncing over the ragged pavement, my ears full of George's story, hoping we wouldn't be gone for too many hours this time.

I don't envy a country man's muse. It has terrible payoff. You're only important when you're gone. "This is the best country song ever written," he'd say, and then sing "She said 'you'll forget in time,'" his notes flattening on the *you'll*. Then he'd fall silent for the remaining 3 minutes and 17 seconds. I'd been encouraging my mother to leave since I was 12 and had gone from sympathetic to glacial—dwelling on my discomfort, so deep and sharp I couldn't predict where it ended. He was never as interested in me as when he was about losing my mother. I'd scoot closer to the window, the seat belt digging into the side of my cheek, trying to imagine living in the rooms of the lit farmhouses we'd pass. I wondered how others coped with being the woman in the song who hasn't left yet.

Like most country songs, "He Stopped Loving Her Today" is a tale of a woman leaving a man; his parting words are that he will love her until he dies. It lacks other country themes: trucks, dogs, Budweiser, but it does have six chords and the truth. My childhood was spackled together with dismissive platitudes: *it is what it is*, and *I am what I am*. It's hard to figure out who you are in the shadow of so much certainty, reaching out from under my father's darkness to get enough light to grow.

There are bars in this town where you'd encounter a fist to the face for shitting on George Jones. "He Stopped Loving Her Today" is his biggest hit after almost a decade of a failing career. Frayed and cracked from years of blue-collar alcoholism enabled by top-shelf money, George's voice wasn't what it once was. Misshapen and rough, the notes cut their way out of his throat. It shot up the charts on debut, and reemerged the week of his death to hit number 21. The whole album volleys between shameful resignation and throwing up his hands, telling you what you see is what you get. To this day, that song sneaks up on me, moving through the world like one of my father's moods.

There are women who don't make it into country songs. The most important part of "He Stopped Loving Her Today" is what's been left out. It's the cavernous vacancies of the story, the ownership, the responsibility. Country, for all its painstaking honesty, never tells us why women leave. Just that a man stuck it out until the very end, saving letters and keeping pictures, mixing bitterness with his bitters, picking at wounds until they swell and warm with infection. They don't write country songs about me. No one writes about their 16-year-old daughter who just wants them to do something to make loving them worth it.

My father's relationship with George Jones is better than his relationship with me. It's easy to love people who don't need anything from you. It's easy to love an old drunk with a

guitar. It's easy to love a voice carrying through a sound system. I'm hard to love. My father poured over the same fights, kept pushing repeat—I wasn't the same every time, my needs didn't fit into meter, chorus. Our fights looped in my head, stuck, like a groove in the record.

My dad holds vigil for a wife he made up, telling stories edited where he is the hero. My father treasures the past, asking about friends from years ago, hanging onto broken furniture, outdated technology, and rusty farm equipment. His voice holds the clipped Midwestern consonants and drawn out vowels of his father, but he holds onto hurts with the same reverence as joy. My list of transgressions became too long: not wearing a dress in my graduation pictures, not picking up every time he called, not being able to do math in my head, not asking him for help. My father being in touch with his emotions made him more articulate of all the things I didn't live up to.

George Jones died in 2013. I was living in the mountains of New Hampshire and I hadn't spoken to my father in a full year. For 24 hours I could not listen to a single radio station without hearing George's gravely lilt crooning and all I could think was *motherfucker, I loved him and he didn't do anything to keep me.*

The day after my college graduation, my father took me out for ice cream and asked me to unpack everything he did that hurt me. I rolled out the pain, cataloging actions and reactions that made me feel unsafe, and he punctuated every one with, "Well I'm your dad." He nods in time, but can't carry the tune of my hurts. He's done his part, lived up to the brutality of feeling, played out the role of misunderstood lonesome and will be buried a hero. He's a country dad, and his story is the saddest because to him, I'm the one that left. I can't speak for honkytonk angels, but it's hard to abandon what wasn't there.

I listen to George Jones in the luxury of silence, quiet, something my father could never give me. This is my own kind of masochist drive through the backroads of my fraught teenage years, dredging my own riverbed to find pieces of us within the notes. If I see myself in the song it means that maybe he won't stop loving me until they carry him away. Another promise kept by a country man. But the love of country men is hollow, a white flag.

I love my father. Love encourages you to do things you shouldn't. It's why we hunt it. We want permission to give people as much of ourselves as we can. We want to withhold and take someone for granted and then give them a song. We can hide in the vulnerability of art. I can't change what can't be changed, but I'm still gonna try, and so I try with George. Because if I hear my father in those notes then maybe I can keep a country promise.

At the end of the song, the lost love returns to attend this man's funeral. After she had "preyed upon his mind" she returns to suffer the judgement of the singer. I am gearing up to be that woman, sorting through mementos and strange altars to a relationship that never was, underlining in red, every single "I love you." Because he doesn't have love letters, or artifacts for me. Maybe pictures taken by my grandmother, but he never thought to keep those things. I'm the projection of the childhood he didn't have, and I was supposed to live for him. I don't know if I prey upon his mind, if he is still listening to that song, still repeating those fights, or if he's finally over me for good.



bauhaus
THE SKY'S GONE OUT

Bauhaus

"All We Ever Wanted
Was Everything"

The Sky's Gone Out

10/1982

A&M Records

All We Ever Wanted Was Everything—for Russ 1966-1990—

L Mari Harris

You all can probably guess how this story ends.

So I'll start in the middle:

High school, outside the band room, you ran screaming
and skipping past, ripping the pep club's Homecoming
signs from the walls, cackling,
FUCK YOU, QUEENS!,
and then you disappeared out the double doors,
the afternoon heat blinding me, silencing me.

Who was *that*? *What* was that?

Who was *you*, Russ. *What* was rolling
hills—up and down, loving and
hating—switching faster than either of us could understand.

You wanted to be in a tribe, a family of men,
Uber males, you called them,
like the warm brothers of Berlin.

But I'm your tribe. I will tend to you.

You're not a brother, you countered, looking me
square in the eye.

My wheels don't turn right, and you pointed to your head.
Mushrooms, acid, vodka in a Tylenol bottle,
taming the synapses for an hour or a day.
I'd take those moments, hold them close, try to piece
it all together.

Was it because you said your mom was the town whore,
so many *uncles* in and out you'd long ago lost count?

Or was it because of the school janitor
who lived with his paraplegic dad in a trailer on the edge of town
you hinted molested you until you were eleven and hair started sprouting—
like you had aged out or something.

You left for Minneapolis the day we graduated,
gas money collected from selling all of your albums
(but not the Bauhaus—never the Bauhaus).

You'd call me, breathless with stories of married lawyers
And sales VPs, \$200 dinners with wines you couldn't pronounce,
then, *Gotta go! He's here!*

How could I stop you?
Like a car doing sixty hitting a concrete divider?
Or like a mama grebe sheltering her baby under her wing?
Neither way worked. I was too far
away to lock you in a room and just
love you.

Now I will tell you all the end.

You took the bus back home
and checked yourself into the hospital.
Pneumonia and toxoplasmosis.
Toxo-what? Isn't that a fucking cat disease?,
I asked from behind the mask the nurse made me put on.
Meow, and your hand curled into a claw at me.

You ended up again at your mom's those last weeks,
same nasty t-shirt and sweats every day until
I made you throw them out.

Where's your mom? Why isn't she taking care of you?

She left me long ago.

The stories slipped out—dirty crack houses, blow
jobs in the weeds, dark after-hours clubs where
anything went for a few bucks in the curtained
make-shift cubicles, answering ads
to pay that month's rent—there was
no rich boyfriend picking you up in his Mercedes.

Then back in another white hospital room, no flowers allowed,
cannula in your nose, butterfly IV in your hand.

Did I do it all wrong? Or just some of it? I don't know what to apologize for.

Thin, brown spotted skin over brittle bone, the words
rattling in your throat—

They all turned on me.

Sighing low like a sad giving in, your hand
relaxed and drooped in mine.

I looked up to see you staring me
dead in the eye.

On Figuring Myself Out, and Mac Miller

Prem Sylvester

Depression is a fragmenter. Those of us struck by it do not remain whole, but shatter into grains of our former selves, too numerous to pick up.

In 2013, my final year of school, I'd begun to finally find my way out of this bramble of being-but-not-living, after several bruised years of stumbling around. I hadn't been a regular at school in months, and I was hoping to find my way back into life's jog. This was supposed to be the time I picked up my fragments and set the course for what would be, at the very least, my near future. But high school is a confusing time, even for those whose ideas of the self were firmer than mine were.

For a truth is often lost in the vagaries of depression. Piecing together an identity, an image of the self, in the aftermath of your worst days is just as maddening as the depression itself. It's a puzzle. There's many paths to take, with only a few torches to help find your way. But the one that shone the brightest for me—the one that comforted me with its warm glow—was music.

I had a dependable list of names to pick from when I needed rescuing from my waves of sorrow, names that I still turn to today. But there were fewer artists who could help me clear the consequent fog in my mind.

Mac Miller was one such artist—he who helped me hold on to my identity in this unmoored time, through his existential ponderings.

Watching Movies with the Sound Off, Mac's second studio album, remains one of my favourite pieces of his compelling discography. And "I Am Who Am (Killin' Time)," coming in almost exactly halfway through the album, ties together an array of ideas revolving around identity in under 5 minutes. It remains one of my favourite Mac songs, one that soundtracked many of my walks to and from school.

The straightforward appeal of the song is evident—the elegance of the production begins subdued by static, before bursting into a hauntingly beautiful instrumental. Crystalline vocals swirl in the background around light keys and clean drums, culminating in the gorgeous hook ("No earthly vehicle can contain this drive"). Mac Miller's measured flow and enunciation makes for easy listening. "I Am Who Am" is, on all counts, a good song. But its listenability is what drew me into really picking up on what the song was *about*—and that's when it became great.

The core of "I Am Who Am" becomes clear in its opening lines:

Look, I'm posing a question

How many been empty and holding aggression?

Close to depression

Open your eyes and just focus a second

Just like that, I was welcome into this journey of quiet resilience.



Mac Miller

"I Am Who Am
(Killin' Time)"

*Watching Movies with
the Sound Off*

06/2013

Rostrum Records

I was still a mess at school. I would burst into tears over seemingly small jibes, which only led to more ridicule of my (lack of) manliness, physical appearance, and such. I was finding it hard to reconnect with my friends. I was growing increasingly disillusioned with the idea of a recovery. But here was a man, just a few years older than me, reaching out. And it meant the world.

I learnt to steady myself. In the months to come, "I Am Who Am" turned into a sort of meditative tool for me. A line or two would float into my conscious memory from the recesses of my mind, sometimes the whole song would play in my head. It was magnetic, deliberate in its pace—and I was glad for the contemplative trance it could put me in. Music may not be a cure for life's ills, but it is a soothing balm.

I was still teetering on the edge of the fall, but was realizing that the only way to stay steady was to shape my being as a counterweight to the worst of my depression. The question that stayed at the forefront of my mind in that tumultuous year, then, was the question of who I was to be. Would I ever be free of the constraints of my mental health? Would I have the career I wanted? Would I find love? Did I believe in a god? Was there going to be something more to my life than...this? Was life worth living?

Mac Miller was asking these questions too. Why am I famous? Why am I obsessed with women? Who am I living this life for? Why is the world so cold?

God loves me, what if he does, what does it mean?

What does any of this mean?

I didn't know. I didn't have the exact same questions Mac had—mine were grounded in my own reality—but in the midst of these crises of faith, in a higher power and myself, a singular lyric rang clear in my head:

The mind is like religion, can't agree on who's its savior

The truth was that there were no easy answers to the questions either Mac or I were asking. We could ask these questions for the rest of our lives, and keep finding new answers. And that was okay.

It's a gift, our time to be alive

I spent the remainder of my final year of high school questioning everything. At the end of the year, I was still changing. The fragments of my identity hadn't quite been put together yet, but I'd found the recipe for the glue in Mac's music. His restless quest of exploring the human condition through his music showed me that all we needed to do was keep asking—that our constant evolution of self depended on our curiosity, terrifying as it might be. He showed me that I could find a quiet confidence in my insecurities, my anxieties, my rudderless struggle to be someone. The confidence to just...be.

Mac Miller may just have saved my life. On some of my loneliest days, he showed me that the secret to living—really living—was to confront what I thought was my fate and wrest my essence from it.

I've come a long way since the downs of high school. My mornings, more often than not, begin with me looking forward to living the life I'd shaped for myself.

I was in bed on a hazy Saturday morning in September this year, scrolling down the notifications on my phone, when I saw the headline saying Mac Miller was dead. I spent the rest of the morning weeping.

I did not expect Mac's passing on to hit me as hard as it did. But much like the emotions of his music, the reality of his legacy revealed itself to me with a slightly sad smile, piercing the part of my heart that his music had calmed so often. I was once again that lost teenager from half a decade ago, taking slow walks to the mantra of "Fight to the death, 'til there's nobody left." But my tears now weren't because I was that same depressed kid looking for a way out through his music—they were because I'd learned to dodge my demons, and Mac...maybe he hadn't.

So many questions.

I'm still stitching together the shreds of a life I might easily have lost. I'm often still floundering. I'm still wondering about life. But I know, when I put on "I Am Who Am," that I'll never stop wondering.

That's a promise. To myself, and to Mac.



Radiohead

“Videotape”

In Rainbows

10/2007

Self-released · Xurbia
Xendless · XL · TBD

An Education

Marina Blitshteyn

we were studying dystopias that fall when he told me he had feelings for me. it was on gchat in november way past both our bedtimes. he told me without telling me, something to the effect of 'don't be coy with me' or 'don't play dumb', an assumption of intelligence i liked at the time but now disgusts me.

he told me to meet him in his office the next day and i thought i was being pranked or monitored on google somehow. i was as afraid of surveillance as getting a bad grade, a low-grade hum that's followed me into adulthood after the grading stopped.

panicked and thrilled i went to bed that night expecting a disaster.

it was the month after in rainbows came out and i was writing a poem for each new track. i brought a packet to his office hours, unfinished but sprawling on the page, the work of a young writer aggrandizing herself, compensating. i stopped at 'all i need', the thought of some 'you' being all i need too elusive for me even then. he launched into a half-hearted commentary on my poems, trained as he was in rhetoric, but i could tell he barely read them. i stopped him with a sense of control he was giving to me, a borrowed power i delighted in at the time. i said we don't have to talk about them today, i just wanted to show you. he was relieved and wanted to talk about life instead. that might've been the day he called me by his wife's name. i knew instantly what it meant, like i knew what kind of album this would be when i first heard it—a game changer, an event, a shared language of youth worship, political anxiety, and radiohead.

we brought our two histories with us, our different memories of a single band, but this album was ours, exclusively, in rainbows: a utopia/dystopia of our making. it sang to us as we messaged back and forth our favorite lines. 'go slowly to me'. 'today has been the most perfect day i've ever seen.' he taught me how to read the sadness in them, that the speaker has been disconnected from the day, he's only seen it. he sent me lou reed's 'perfect day'. i sent him b-side tracks from other incarnations of my fandom.

he loved that i was soviet and asked to see some photos of my city. he was a self-proclaimed marxist supported by his father's capitalist wealth. his father had cheated and so had mine. we shared a distrust of marriage but a naive dumb faith in affairs of the heart. he told me he loved me and i loved him. he told me every other time that he can't do this and i said ok. he told me he would leave his wife and i said ok. he told me he loved my work and i loved it.

in his classes i felt hypervisible, a tease, a threat. i felt sure that i had power over him, the man responsible for teaching me. i was indolent and showed up late. he got nervous and didn't call on me. we had lover's spats after class with our faces. our tones grew harsh. then he kneeled on the ground before me in his office. he rested his head in my lap and i felt like a mother. a virgin mary he'd never outgrow. a gendered sainthood i'd been outrunning.

i resented him then and resent him still for muddying ideas with my body, for never showing his poet friend my work. i regret staying up at night loving his validation of my male knowledge. i was starving for it and he fed me. i wanted to be a writer and he said he made me what i am. i wrote him a whole book of longing then he said he didn't want me anymore.

now as the season cools in the northeast i wait for the snow to slant across a window like it did that semester, soundtracked to videotape. red blue green, 'data melancholy'. this is my way of saying goodbye. until that blessed disc 2, a life after death. it's coded. to be able to say to someone 'you are my center when i spin away' and mean it. we meant it once. and i'm grateful for that. it was an education. more than that it was the start of an affair with a sound that hasn't left me. "we should write thom a thank you note" you said, almost 10 years ago to the day. this is one for the good days.



Bruce Springsteen

“Backstreets”

Born to Run

08/1975

Columbia

The Heroes We Thought We Had to Be

Adam McCulloch

Bruce Springsteen helped me break into the local reservoir. In my hometown of Adelaide, Australia, there were few of the usual Springsteen set-pieces: boardwalks, '69 Chevys, Independence Days, promised lands, girlfriends named Mary. The reservoir was all I had. That, and my buddy, Rick.

Rick was a high school ring-in during graduating year and stood out like any newly-arrived six foot four Norwegian would. At seventeen years old, he more closely resembled a substitute teacher, his hawkish profile topped with an already receding widow's peak of wavy red hair. His apparent maturity meant he was the go-to guy to buy liquor, which made him an especially useful friend. But despite a summer abundant in pre-mixed rum-and-Cokes we had serious trouble enjoying ourselves. Our graduation results were due any day. I had lost enthusiasm for academia in the final stretch before exams and Rick had arrived too late to fully acclimatize to the curriculum. Our fate would arrive in the mail and we knew it wouldn't be good.

Like all Springsteen's young male protagonists, I was seventeen and eager to stick it to the man in my own meager, suburban way. I was longing to break out of Adelaide, my version of small-town U.S.A., and the reservoir seemed like an apt test of courage. Nobody I knew had ever actually seen it. It was protected by a ten-foot tall perimeter fence topped with barbed-wire. Beyond that was a wide dirt road patrolled by some form of police, then two miles of forest surrounding a vast lake which, in hindsight, was very likely a federal facility.

Being a man meant breaking rules. Rock 'n Roll told us the rules were arbitrary, optional, and easily ignored in the pursuit of living our best lives: only once they were broken could we survive the stultifying conformity of adulthood, which seemed to us as oppressive as the summer heat. It was a scorching-hot Tuesday when Rick and I loitered near the No *Trespassing* sign at the reservoir and waited for a gap in traffic. The cool, wet bulk of our illicitly obtained six-packs shifted in our bags. Whoosh: a gap! We shimmied up the fence and Rick slung his precious leather jacket over the barbed wire. We tumbled over the edge and sprinted for the cover of the pines. We were in.

In that era, my homeland birthed no shortage of musical rebels: AC/DC, INXS, and a band called Skyhooks whose song "Why Don't You All Get Fucked" must surely remain the most plainly-spoken ode to youthful rebellion. Still, in an era when Springsteen's anthems and barn-raisers were his most popular tracks, none spoke as eloquently to me as his ballads of struggling misfits: blue-collar gear-heads who fought father-figures to convince some girl to leave "A town full of losers." I had none of that. I lived at home with loving middle-class parents and drove a gutless Toyota my father had paid for. Worst of all, I was a virgin. Without recognizing it or deserving it, I inhabited the desperate melancholy of Springsteen's protagonists, with all their inarticulate pain. In the purgatory before adulthood the world was indifferent to guys like Rick and me, and surely that made us heroes of some kind.

We ran into the woods until the scabble of our shoes on the rutted clay was muted by a thick carpet of pine needles. Rick scanned the horizon then offered his palm. He was the only person I had ever met who high-fived. I offered a limp clap in return, a gesture which seemed especially ostentatious in the cathedral-quiet of the pines. Rick tore the silver thread from a fresh packet of cigarettes and handed me one. He expertly smoked a pack a day, pinching them between thumb and forefinger like a pencil.

It was a hundred degrees already and the sap and smoke formed a cloying fug as we crept under pine boughs. I had visions of hurling myself bodily into the water a-la "Thunder Road" or "The River" or "Spirit in the Night," or any number of songs. The ripples from my thrashing limbs would carry my impotent rage across the lake and make something beautiful of it.

We followed a tangle of brambles down a shallow ravine and tried to keep track of where we'd come. My parents thought I was at Rick's playing eight-ball, but the room was too small for the table and I kept backing the sawn-off cue into the dry-wall. I was eager to master the game, which struck me as an excellent emblem of misspent youth, but I was mercilessly thrashed every time. Rick had been taught by his cousin, whom he revered as something of a legendary pool-shark. Back in Norway they had been inseparable, and I got the impression that I was being coached to fill a role I wasn't good enough to play.

We soon came upon a brutal easement cut through the forest to prevent the power-lines being fouled by trees. Neglected, the razed earth had grown thick with wildflowers. We sat in silence, caught our breath and drank the first of our booze. The scene was unexpectedly beautiful, but the blooms reminded me of funerals, and I knew Rick was thinking the same thing. His pool-shark cousin had recently hanged himself, but Rick insisted on keeping up the delusion the death had been an accident. I had asked him about it once and the result was the only fight we ever had. We sat and smoked in companionable silence and thought of ourselves as grownups.

Leaving the field of flowers, we stumbled upon a road and brazenly took it. I was sure we would hear a car well before we could be seen, and anyway I had a secret weapon: Rick, of course. My friend had a certain reputation for ballsiness, although in retrospect it was closer to recklessness. Once, he had caught a fish at the local pier and managed to swap it at Burger King for a Whopper and large fries, so I was relying on him to talk his way out of trouble.

Soon there was a glimmer of water through the trees, and when we rounded a bend the reservoir lay before us. I had imagined clear water lapping at a grassy bank, but ten years of drought and a blazing hot Australian summer had drained the lake of any beauty. The water had been gulped down by a thirsty city, leaving twenty scummy bath rings of cracked mud above the dregs of a lake. We tested our footing, but the gentle slope at the forest edge dropped precipitously eighty yards out where the water was, the slick embankment a death trap.

We lost our nerve, retreating to the first regiment of pines and draining the rest of the booze. A mile away, on the other side of the bank, was the remains of an ad-hoc town for a period movie that no one ever saw. We talked about girls, or, more specifically, the lack of them. We had never had girlfriends and not losing our virginity in high-school seemed like a bigger failure than our poor grades. I conducted myself as a stoic loner but deep down, I ached for love. I yearned to be vulnerable and knew I had no chance of measuring up to what I thought being a man required. How could I "Blow that Camaro off my back and drive that pretty girl away" when my car was a Toyota and I had never been in a real fist fight? Once, in primary school, I'd revealed this fact to another kid—we were nine years-

old at most. He was adamant that a fight would improve my character and insisted on arranging it. Fortunately, my combatant (a friend) burst into tears and no punches were ever thrown, but the disgrace of being bullied into raising my fist at him pains me to this day. At the reservoir Rick lay back on the bed of pine needles, drunk and tired. Then he started singing, in his horrible, off-key voice.

"It's time for the good times / Forget about the bad times, ooh yeah."

For all his Springsteen swagger, Rick had the biggest collection of Madonna records I ever saw. His voice sounded like it had cracked once and never been put back together properly. Before he could launch into the next line of Madonna's "Holiday," the sun glinted off the windscreen of an SUV cruising the fake town's Main Street. Rick abruptly cut off singing. We scrambled to tie our mud-caked shoes and fled back the way we came. For all our big talk, when The Man actually showed up, our swagger was as empty as that lake behind us. We were daytime rebels: always home in time for dinner.

Being a man also meant breaking up. The next week our results arrived in the mail. We had both achieved almost identical grades but, on the new bell-curve of academia, Rick's preference for humanities had seen him graded down, whereas I had been graded up. I passed, he failed, and we split the Springsteen dream between us. Rick took the hard work and getting out, taking a job as a mud-logger for a mining company up north. I went to university in Adelaide and ended up with both a girl and a car, a 1954 Ford Zephyr convertible—the closest thing to a '69 Chevy I could afford. I convinced myself the friendship that Rick and I shared had never been designed to last beyond the convenience of adolescence. Our distance seemed natural, a correct manly extension of our silences. The reservoir was already smaller in my mind and our adventure nothing more than childish hijinks.

Then, in my third year of university, I got a message: Rick had been killed in a car accident. After that, my love of Springsteen faded. Real loss was much less romantic and much more complicated than it had seemed back at the reservoir. I was still stuck in that small town and Rick had got out, but there was nothing heroic about it. Nothing worth writing a song about.

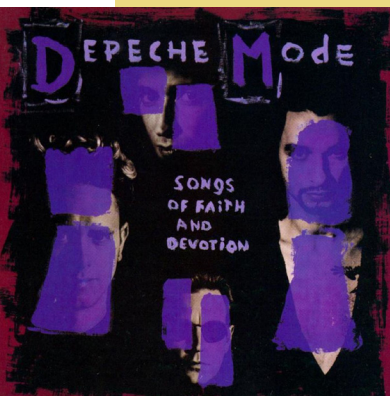
Years later, I did get out. I convinced another girl to leave another town for another promised land. We got married and left Australia altogether and, 20 years later, ended up in New York in the exact neighborhood where Springsteen played some of his first live gigs, at the beatnik hangout Café Wha? Gradually, I rediscovered The Boss and his stories, but they seemed subtly different to me now. There was a subtext I hadn't been able to see when Rick and I thought cigarettes and trespassing were substitutes for a personality.

For all his talk of getting out, Springsteen was born in New Jersey and still lives in New Jersey. In his memoir, *Born to Run*, he admits that, as a kid he was a "mild-mannered loser" whose nickname was "Blinky" for his eye tic caused by anxiety over his abusive father. When he bought his first guitar he "Skulked home with it, not wanting the neighbors to know [his] vain and unrealistic ambitions." For all his musical obsession with hot-rods, he didn't have his driver's license until his mid-20s. Most revealing, perhaps, he claims that "one of the greatest days of [his] teenage years" was when his forty-five-year-old father, now friendless because of a toxic mix of jealousy and macho insecurity, spilled his heart out to young Springsteen: "It shocked me, made me feel uncomfortable and strangely wonderful. He showed himself to me, mess that he was."

And yet, his memoir speaks glowingly of performative masculinity: fists-fights among childhood friends to prove who was tougher; bar-room brawls presented as a metaphor for the sturm und drang of adolescence; distant, brooding father-figures too hardened to feel love; men who initiated friendship with a brief act of cruelty as if it somehow increased the value of the friendship itself. It's characters like these who also made it into his songs. They were culled in part from real life but, I suspect, these flawed everymen also simply made for better stories. The real Springsteen has spent his life struggling with guilt, loneliness, and chronic depression; trying with all his might to be better than the characters he created. His songs swing between these contradictory visions of himself: one, a hard-living tough guy doomed to destroy himself; the other a sensitive loner crushed by the weight of lost chances and failed love. He wanted us to believe he was the first guy, but I always suspected he was closer to the second.

I could have really used that version of Springsteen at the reservoir: the sensitive guy who felt everything too deeply. I would have braved barbed-wire and followed him through the labyrinth of pines and clawed my way back from the water's edge if I could have stood at the field of flowers with that guy. The real him would have known what to say—something heartfelt, something true. He might have told me that Thunder Road leads nowhere, it's just a story we tell ourselves to make us believe there's only one way to be a man. Of course, I wouldn't have listened. And Rick wouldn't have listened, and neither would his cousin who killed himself, and neither would all the other boys, standing dumbfounded at the crossroads of adulthood, staring at the false ultimatum we'd been given. We were learning to walk like the heroes we thought we had to be, but we were deaf to the small voice, hidden beneath the lyrics, that whispered: "You don't have to be broken."

But I'm here, Bruce, and I'm finally listening. So now what do we do?



Depeche Mode

"One Caress"

*Songs of Faith and
Devotion*

03/1993

Sire

When this world is trying its hardest

K Weber

That lunch period a few days after my best friend said in science class that someone would surprise me was when it did and felt like two people in a room with our throats in lumps and a vending machine in the corner. I was a junior but fresh from summer and autumn's first tongues, but still shying from the light.

I didn't know you and then there's your arm, extended in front of everyone; twitching flannel with unbuttoned sleeves. There's your hand with a poem. I unfolded your words to discover thick forests and tunnels that might lead me into darkness. I was suddenly introduced to something evocative that put breath on my spine.

You saw something deeper just by passing me in the clover-shaped hallway. You wrote down my hair and voice and how I fascinated you. You were 15 running track and I was 16 weird and velvet. This beginning felt stark, intense like Depeche Mode should be playing in the background. Almost Christmas. Nervous when our hands met. Hand sweat. All evenings spent on the phone.

Hanging out: your waterbed or my television but always music. My first love. My first long radio conversation. Never static. Comfortable silences. Secrets. Sliding icy sidewalks in concert t-shirts and knit caps on snow days. Every road, every avenue a skating rink. We were together long enough to trade scents and a few homemade cassettes. We made it through Tori Amos's "Winter."

We both wrote constantly, humorously, romantically, inspired. Every day a dream day. I'd listen to The The and realize my life felt like it was being held by the hand and removed from my "Lonely Planet" as I slowly discovered an atmosphere that lured me closer to "Dogs of Lust." You brought me Dr. Pepper before homeroom. We passed notes and free verse and song lyrics to get us through classes.

I learned too much in those few months. Michael Stipe and Neneh Cherry made a song about sex education? You'd watch me practice with color guard in the small gym after school. Small of back so wet. I'd watch you run with other boys with long hair drenched and humid. You saw

me in my thermal underwear. I wanted my arms dangling around your skinny waist before hugging you on tip-toe, everywhere.

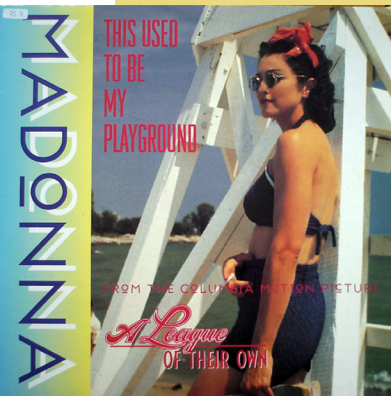
Your wide shoulders. You will always be my first mixtape. Just one caress from you was a fresh thrill. I was stunned with strange sensation the first time I heard "Leather." I enjoyed the laughter of the antics of "Maria's Wedding." The first song was a wooden song that could take or break me. I have always had bark like silver birch. You peeled all my best layers to appreciate what was worn underneath.

I remember the longest hug when our moms left us alone as our time zone spun into 1994 and some John Hughes movie lit up the dim living room as we didn't pay attention to it. That slow dance hardly swayed, made me dizzy. I locked my knees and held onto you for years that night. But our Ohio was a hole with a heart shape where our hometown throbbed red temporarily on a map.

Cincinnati shows and local bands. Frost so thick it hummed like drum's skin. We would never have the same last name, but they were almost anagrams. Then everything began to melt down to warped sound as spring bragged about newness. I started my first job. I was in love again with the excitement of being in love again. Firsts. Curious to know things beyond a world that was leaving me unimpressed, I guess.

I went to prom with someone else but spent all night at the after-party with you and then the carnival was over. I met someone with a strong jaw at a festival. He liked Nine Inch Nails and the plaid pattern of my overalls as I giggled and kicked my blue tights and Converse nervously in the dirt. Seemed so easy to fall for someone else then, in a length of time equal to a finger-snap. My first chance to break a good heart.

I've pressed rewind on your first tape and in my mind a million times.



Madonna

“This Used to Be My Playground”

This Used to Be My Playground

06/1992

Sire · Warner Bros.

An Unexpected Education

Juliette van der Molen

I was always the good girl that never got caught. At least, that was what I thought until one early August morning in 1992. Like a real nerd I was ending my summer vacation by heading out to compete in some mock debate rounds to prepare for the fall season. My senior year held a lot of promise. I was president of the literary society and editor of the magazine connected to it. I was a copy editor and reporter for our school newspaper. I had held my position in honor societies and studied hard. Passionate about competitive speech and debate, I'd done a lot of work in the previous three years to secure my spot on the team. It was a miracle considering that I cried in junior high when my father made me take my first speech class. I'd been terrified. Things had changed.

My partner and I were tipped to be the team to beat, not just in our division but in the state. We were national bound, no matter that Nationals was being held in not so exciting Fargo, North Dakota that year. I could already feel victory brushing close enough to be within our grasp. I might even be able to snag a trophy and placement in Original Oratory, one of my prized individual events.

Getting ready that morning, I looked around at the cramped room I shared with my sister. I hated that my parents had divorced the previous year. I hated especially that we'd had to move out of my childhood home and into a little apartment. My side of the room was full of music posters and a shelf full of trophies draped in medals. I slipped my feet into a pair of black and white spectators, perfectly paired with a short, pleated polka dot skirt that I'd bought on sale with tips that I shoved in my apron from the pie pantry I worked in after school.

I lived just inside the district line, barely on the “right” side of the tracks, and I had to work to even afford the bus trips on some of our overnights. Already I was saving for Nationals, shoving every dollar I could scrounge up into a tin that sat nestled on my trophy shelf. Next year, I'd go to college. I was going to be a journalist, and Missouri had one of the best universities in the country for that. When I pulled the edges of my white blazer to fasten the buttons something didn't feel quite right. I smoothed a hand over my hips and stomach, I looked in the mirror; nothing appeared to be amiss. And yet, when I fastened it the button hole pulled. I readjusted and tried again. Why would my breasts grow and not the rest of my body?

Then, I began to count backwards. My mind whirled like a panicked merry-go-round. I shook my head. It couldn't be. My hands shook as I peeled off the jacket and looked up at the trophies winking their wings and lifted arms in the dull morning light. My sister slept soundlessly on the bed behind me.

Please, god, no.

But I knew the truth, long before the two lines appeared on a plastic stick. I was pregnant.

Ironic that my first album, which appeared under the Christmas tree years before, had been Madonna's *Like A Virgin*. I was hooked on her from the beginning. Listening to her made me feel powerful in some kind of in-your-face-girl-power camaraderie kind of way. She was courageous and out there, doing her thing and didn't give a damn what anyone thought. The thing I couldn't imagine then, but that I know now, is how many ways

Madonna would re-invent herself. In that moment, I wanted a re-invention in the worst way. I wanted to die.

Instead, I did what I was raised to do. I sucked it up. I took my medicine and took responsibility for my actions. This meant that I was going to have to marry the boy that got me pregnant. This meant that shopping for school clothes was tainted with the thought that I needed to find clothes that I could expand into. This meant that I was having my child and being responsible.

My first day of senior year I caught myself humming to Madonna with my WalkMan, but this wasn't the hot sexy Madonna I'd grown to love. This was something more soulful and serious. I spun the dial to my combo lock as her voice slipped into my ear and squeezed around my heart.

*This used to be my playground
This used to be my childhood dream...*

I unloaded my backpack into the locker. People were high-fiving in the hall behind me, laughing and goofing around—*It's senior year, man!* I didn't turn around; pretending was hard and I just wasn't ready. For now, my pregnancy didn't show, but it was just a matter of time. The father was a year older than me and already off to university, a National Merit Scholar, rushing a fraternity house. Yeah, we were the good kids that never got caught. I stood staring into the back of my locker. I hadn't brought any decorations, none of my little pictures, and especially not a mirror. This didn't feel like a celebration, it felt like a ticking time bomb. Madonna was breaking my heart with her truth. If I'd heard this song before "Like a Virgin" would it have made a difference? Hadn't she warned me with "Papa Don't Preach?" Maybe this was her "I told you so" song.

*...And before you know
You're feeling old
And your heart is breaking...*

Already I had met with my guidance counselor and been advised that I had enough credits to graduate mid-semester. My hard work taking sleepy zero hour classes leaned into my favor, but not in the way I would have liked. I loved school. From the minute I stepped on the school bus my first day I was hooked. Even Mason Cleary smashing gum into my hair that my mom had to cut out after that first bus ride home hadn't deterred me. Being at school was like going to the library all day long and I couldn't get enough of it. I didn't want to graduate mid-semester. I wanted to stay with my class.

My mom tried to tell me that things were better than when she was in school. History was repeating itself. I tried to imagine my mother, my age, hiding her pregnancy beneath bulky sweatshirts and playing basketball, running track and whatever else she did. I didn't get those jock genes from either of my parents. My dad, the good-looking popular guy, pretty much had it made. In fact, he was away at a baseball tournament the day my mother went into labor. Back then, in the seventies, this wasn't something anyone wanted to recognize. My mother watched while my father walked across the stage to get his diploma shortly after I was born. She wasn't allowed to walk with her graduating class. *Shameful.*

I would get to walk with my class, but they couldn't accommodate me as I got bigger. In a few months I wouldn't fit into desks properly, and more than that, they thought it would be disruptive to have me in class—in my condition. I understood. Back then, I thought this was a fitting punishment for my transgression, the first of many I was sure were headed my way. The fact that I was facing it alone without the father by my side was frightening.

My family might support me at home, but that didn't help me in the hallways of my high school. Telling teachers and explaining things to them was mortifying. The look of shock and disappointment on their faces made me want to run and hide. More punishment. More consequences. They spoke to me like I was a fragile, breakable thing. None of them wanted to believe.

Madonna kept reminding me that I needed to move on, that this was my new reality.

Don't hold on to the past

Well that's too much to ask...

I hid it for as long as I could, until the day a photo from my ultrasound fell out of my folder and onto the floor of my parenting classroom. Ironic. There, of all places. When Danny reached down to pick it up he squinted at it hard.

"Holy shit, this is for real. Your name is on this." he breathed.

Danny was one of the preppy cool kids. He was still popping his collar even though it was on the edge of being uncool. His friends didn't mind. He had money and a house in the right neighborhood, at least his parents did, and that was enough to keep his status. I was just a breath on the right side of the school district line that landed me with all the rich kids. I wasn't a rich kid. I wasn't even middle class, especially not after the divorce.

"Give it back, please." I pleaded quietly.

The last thing I needed was Danny making some douche announcement to the whole class because he thought it would be funny. He was a clown and he liked to make fun of people. He surprised me when he handed it back to me and shook his head.

"Didn't know you were one of those girls," he said. "I mean, like one of the druggie girls."

I wanted to shove him. I knew damn well that at the big parties he had while his parents were away there were girls and guys hooking up and doing drugs. They'd been lucky not to get caught or to have an accident. It could have happened to any of us. But, it hadn't. I never was one of them and I'd fought that by being smart. I dipped in and out of cliques and learned to be a chameleon. A lot of people knew me, but I didn't have a lot of close friends. I held myself together tight and coiled up all of my anger and sadness until it squeezed around my heart and silenced my retort. While Danny wasn't going to say anything in class, the whispering and the looks started soon enough. I was a cheesy after school special, a cautionary tale. More punishment. More consequences.

Before I could get too large to be a nuisance I was sent home on a personalized learning plan. I wanted to continue my advanced placement and college prep courses. I was going to graduate with college credits. I wasn't giving up and quitting. I worked three jobs until my feet were so swollen I couldn't manage anymore. I took school tests under the supervision of my kind French teacher, who visited me every day and made me feel like I was worth more than punishments and consequences. She also happened to be the advisor for the literary society. She brought me drafts to read and let me mark them and organize them. She made me feel like I was part of something bigger than my big mistake.

It's a cliché that life can change in an instant, and it's not necessarily true. Sometimes it changes painfully slow. The life growing inside of me was changing everything one month at a time. In my limited perspective, that felt like an eternal nine months. Events unfolded and consequences unfurled until I felt powerless to stop them. I was old before I knew what it really meant to be old.

The thing I didn't know about Madonna then that might have helped me, is how many times she would reinvent herself. Over the years, I've watched in amazement as the kaleidoscope that is "her" tilts and changes in the light. Some stages are short lived and fierce. Other moments linger longer and stretch out for a period of growth. I'll categorize this under: things I wish I could tell my younger self.

Well then there's hope yet

I can see your face

In our secret place

You're not just a memory

Say goodbye to yesterday (the dream)

Those are words I'll never say (I'll never say)

My dreams may not have been realized exactly as I thought they would back then, but they've been realized. I am no longer ashamed about the path I took. I look back at myself as a young girl, saying goodbye to her childhood, and I see strength and determination. I might have made different decisions if I had a wiser, broader perspective, but then again, I might not. My mother was right: it was better for me than it was for her. I have a picture of myself holding my son before I shifted my tassel. I walked across the stage with my graduating class in the same cap and gown as everyone else.

The resilience of the human spirit is incredible. In my year of punishments and consequences, I developed skills that have brought me where I am now. For me there's a whole new playground to discover and I relish the adventure.

Today, I'm a woman re-invented and if there's a song for that, you can be sure Madonna sings it.



No Doubt

"Just a Girl"

Tragic Kingdom

10/1995

Trauma Records

Just a Girl

Elizabeth Ditty

Take this pink ribbon off my eyes, I'm exposed and it's no big surprise

The familiar notes of the No Doubt song trill from my minivan's speakers, and I reach for the dial to turn it up. As I prepare to rock out to this suburban-punk-pop anthem of my adolescence, I think about the songs my mom used to sing along to on the radio, always tuned to the Oldies station back then. John Denver. Barry Manilow. The Carpenters. I wonder if she ever shout-sang anything.

I'm driving my five-year-old son to zoo camp, as the days of summer dwindle toward a brand-new chapter called kindergarten. My daughter sits across the aisle in her own car seat, two years old, wishing she too were going to zoo camp, and kindergarten, even though she has no idea what either of those things is, beyond the fact that her brother gets to go and she doesn't.

My memories of my mother's singing juxtapose with the future-memories of my children's mother's singing and create an odd feeling that probably only has a name in another language. What do you call a memory that will belong to someone else?

Don't you think I know exactly where I stand? This world is forcing me to hold your hand

I'm doing my best to find the path to the sky tram, so my daughter can see a baby giraffe, since she's slept with not one but two giraffe rattles since she was old enough to grasp things, and everyone looks like they understand where they're going better than I do. I've taken the day off from work to join the stay-at-home moms counting down the days until they get a few more hours to breathe easier between chaotic bookends. I'm not sure any of us ever breathe that easy, but it's a nice thought. In any case, I'm not sure how I got where I am, nor do I have any idea where I'm going, and I am forced to admit to myself that I have no clue where the sky tram is. I think to myself, not for the first time and not in the first place, "I wish they had better signage here." It might make a nice epitaph someday.

The moment that I step outside, so many reasons for me to run and hide

A few weeks later, my son finds out who his teacher is, and I try to remember the details of her classroom, but only one thing really comes to mind. During kindergarten roundup, while my son sprinted through the hallways like he already owned the place, I counted windows. They're in every classroom and every door. My heart was in my throat the whole time because I know none of them are bulletproof. Now, it's settled back into my gut and seems to have made camp there, below its old home, and the illusion of breathing easier has dissipated for good.

I can't do the little things I hold so dear, 'cause it's all those little things that I fear

My son and his preschool buddies all go to different schools now. In another time, goodbye would have been forever, but now I'm Facebook friends with the other mothers. So he's run off to play, and the other mother closes the door, and I drive away leaving a sliver of my heart bleeding on the doorstep of her home. Three hours to myself. I return ten minutes early, and only because I stopped for gas.

Oh, I've had it up to here! Oh, am I making myself clear?

I read an article the other day about how yelling permanently damages children, giving rise to anxiety disorders and confidence issues. It feels like a direct rebuke, possibly written by my own mother under a pseudonym to throw me off track. "You yell at him so much," she once told me. I kept my mouth shut but thought, "Do you remember raising me?" The article didn't say how much yelling was required to obliterate a child's heart. Nor does it advise me on this: If I can't yell, what do I do with all this rage? I make a note to grab a bottle of wine on my way home.

What's my destiny? What I've succumbed to is making me numb

Since 2016, I've been trying to come up with a way explain to my children what "grab 'em by the pussy" means. You know, in case it ever comes up. I can guarantee you, no parenting book or scholarly article has an answer for that either. These days I mostly find myself pondering the logistics. How does one even accomplish such a thing? Last I checked, there's no handle down there.

Guess I'm some kind of freak 'cause they all sit and stare with their eyes

"She dares to be different," my fifth-grade teacher told my parents, after she'd scrawled "eccentric" on my report card. I'm not sure she meant it as a good thing, but my parents seemed amused, as if it wasn't anything they didn't already know. In any case, I've never lived it down.

When my daughter started preschool, just after she turned two, one of the teachers, well-meaning, pulled me aside and said, "We've been working with her on not saying 'no.'"

And I laughed and replied, "She might be getting mixed messages then, because I've been encouraging her to say 'no,' and with gusto."

I worry about what might be scrawled on their report cards someday, and how much of it might be my fault.

Your rule of thumb makes me worry some

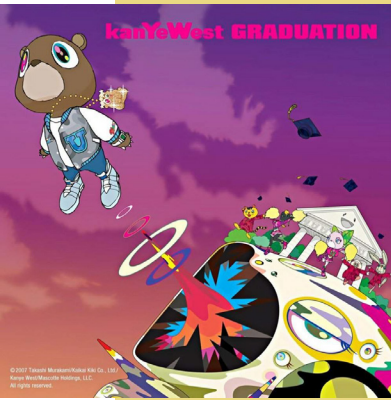
Anyway, I pray to a god of this increasingly clockwork universe to please let their teachers be kind. Because I don't have much patience anymore. There's too much work to do. I recall my suburban-girl rebellion fondly, the height of which culminated in a shouting match over a spaghetti strap tank top. I think about how my parents had it pretty good. And I think about how a bunch of old men are trying to revoke what I thought were irrevocable rights—my rights, my daughter's rights. (Oh, there's that rage again.)

I think about how we have to fix everything that went wrong before my kids are old enough to see how far we fell and how hard we hit the ground. I think about how we'll fail, and about how we have to try anyway. And if that isn't parenting, I don't know what is. It feels like attempting the world's greatest cover-up on a daily basis. Maybe a couple of bottles then.

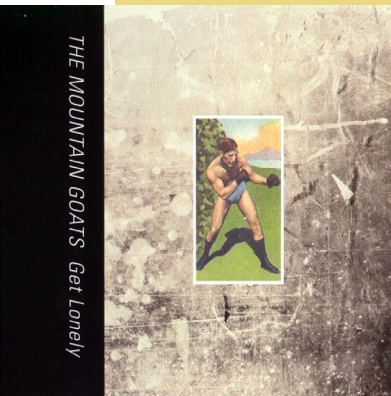
Oh I'm just a girl, my apologies

The song rails toward its end. I turn the radio back down. My kids both stare out their respective windows, unfazed by my behavior. This is normal to them. This is who and what their mother is. What else would she be? Indeed. What else?

Oh, I've had it up to here!



Kanye West
 “Stronger”
Graduation
 09/2007
 Def Jam · Roc-A-Fella



THE MOUNTAIN GOATS Get Lonely

The Mountain Goats
 “Wild Sage”
Get Lonely
 08/2006
 4AD

...and other artists

See You in September

After “Wild Sage” by The Mountain Goats

Katie Darby Mullins

—of course, now school starts in August,
 And I don't sing of summer love,
 I tuck a cane between my seat and the door
 “Just in case”—because last year
 I was on a walker, last year
 All I could do was listen to “Swim”
 By Jack's Mannequin and pray that air
 Would eventually fill my lungs again
 In a way that wasn't so exhausting,
 I wasn't sure who Katie-post-stroke was—

—it used to be Kanye, you know? Every
 Year, I started with “Stronger,” built my own
 Legend-of-Katie-Darby-Mullins and created
 A persona to act out on the classroom,
 Someone who never needed notes
 Or forgot a word and stuttered until
 Stroke-rattled, her brain gave up, someone
 Who never broke their tailbone in front
 Of an entire classroom. Someone who didn't need
 A student to help take care of her. No,
 I was “you should be honored by my lateness.”
 I was “there's a thousand 'you's, there's only one of me”—

—I loved sucking that power in like
 A cigarette, heady and knees-weak, ready
 To be back in the classroom, the only
 Performance that never gave me stage fright—

—until it did. *See you in September, or lose you...*
 I was talking to myself. No voice is harsher
 Than me to me, the brain to the shell,
 Both now cracked in different ways.
 Once, I had a Mountain Goats lyric
 In permanent marker on a desk that said
 “It's gonna take you people years
 To recover from all of the damage”
 And I thought that's who I was, an unnatural
 Disaster, something like a tornado

In fifty minute bits, able to give small
Parts of myself and shield anything
Too vulnerable. I don't know how
To do that anymore—

—how to tell only

Appropriate stories, what to omit to make
Students more comfortable. I know some
Have seen me at my worst, one even saw
My shoulder fall out of socket, and I can't
Get my mouth to form the apology
I want to give them. They saw moments
I wish they hadn't, when I wasn't
Really ready to see them, but I had to:
That's what you do in September. One student,
As uncomfortable with fear as I am,
Focused, fought with me to bring
My brain back to classroom-ready
Whether my body ever made it there—

—Or not. And better, he pretended—

Maybe he really believed—
Everything would be all right, and we could
Fix this if we just tried hard enough.

Do it. Harder.

Better.

Faster.

Stronger.

—it's not Kanye anymore. The girl
Who bought that CD, I see her in pictures
And sometimes, I think, *sweetheart*,
You have no idea, and other times I hate
Her, and I am allowed to hate her. My ghost
Arm that can only feel pain, my eye
That won't fully open or close—

—Sometimes I think she caused it, those sleepless
Nights, causing a competition
Between brain and body and there are no winners
And there were never going to be
Winners—

— but I can change

The radio dial, change the message

So that I don't have to be powerful like a plague
To step into the classroom.
My new permanent marker line—
It's Mountain Goats, too, but not unyielding.
A friend embroidered it for me and I touch
The raised red stitches to try—

Try to burn these words into my whole body,
The part of my brain that stays awake,
The hand that still has enough sensation
To figure out the phrase. And every
Time I think the line "somedays I think I'd feel better
If I tried harder/ Most days
I know that's not true," I try
To make a vow to myself, no different
Than standing at an altar—

—because I know I am trying
As hard as I can, but the voice
Says "never enough." Says "show them
The blood." Says "It's gonna take you people years."
I think of my husband, who said "in sickness"
Before he said "in health;"
But I also think of my classroom, my other
World, my records and mini-guitar strewn
Around my ADA compliant office,
And I know that the student I worried
Most, the one I owe the biggest
Apology—wouldn't accept it and doesn't think
He's done anything special.

Permit me one more line from "Wild Sage,"
Not just the one about trying. Let me
Scratch into my disobedient pupil
What I think what my husband
And student saw all summer—

"And I stare at the scrape on the heel
Of my hand / Til it doesn't sting so much / And
Until the blood's dry." It was slow
Watching me move through those stages,
And it has to have scared them. But—
"When somebody asks if I'm OK, I don't know what to say"—

—they never made me pretend
To feel any less broken or scared than I was.

There is danger in the summer moon above?
Always. But never like the girl in the song,
Never that I might run away or disappear,
Abandon my family and beautiful life,
That I wouldn't show up, no matter what,
The glorious day school finally went back.

—For me, that summer moon
Was a bomb, and I had to figure out
Which wires to cut and what to connect
Because I love my school life,
My students who care about people and empathy, who are
Learning to tell better stories—
Learning the summer moon,
The loves they find and abandon,
The guitars they play or leave to collect dust,
They are learning *while we're away*
Don't forget to write,
And that, by some magic and hard
Work, I'll see them in September
For as long as they'll have me,
Even if that means dragging my braced
Body to the library on a cane—
Even if that means, occasionally,
One will still slip and show fear against his will—

—I am learning slowly that concern
Is its own type of love, that
Harder, better, stronger, faster, that's a lie
And that these moments, where fear
Flickers across their face and then
Is back in the deck like a street magician's card
Trick: those moments made me fall
In love with school in the first place:
Those brilliant connections.
Waiting to see what happened on summer vacation,
And then, learning that I am a puzzle—
I don't know what to say. I'll see you when the summer's through.
And thank God, the summer
Always ends, the bell always rings

And I can start with a new song any time.

Contributors

Jody Kennedy's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Juked*, *DIAGRAM*, *Tin House Online*, *Electric Literature*, and *CutBank Online*, among others. She lives in Provence, France. More at <https://jodyskennedy.wordpress.com/>.

Rachel Tanner is an Alabamian writer whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bad Pony Mag*, *Longleaf Review*, *8 Poems*, and elsewhere. Her micro-chap, *Something Like That*, is available from Ghost City Press. She tweets @rickit.

Joel Mak is a writer and teacher from Australia. Some of his work has been published in *Tongues*, *Cuttings*, *carte blanche*, and *Writer's Edit*. He has also written about music for *Montreal Rampage* and *Aphramag*.

Lisa Mangini is the author of a full-length collection of poetry, as well as four chapbooks of poetry and prose. Her most recent collection, *Ambivalent Nymph*, explores wedding traditions through etymology alongside love poems. Lisa holds an MFA from Southern Connecticut State University, and is the Founding Editor of *Paper Nautilus*. She teaches composition and creative writing at Penn State, and lives in Central Pennsylvania, with her husband and cat. lisamangini.wordpress.com/

Levi Andrew Noe was born and raised in Denver, CO. He is a writer, wanderer, yogi, entrepreneur, and amateur oneironaut. His flash fiction collection *Rain Check* was published in August 2016 from Truth Serum Press. His flash fiction, short stories, creative non-fiction and works of poetry can be found in *Connotation Press*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Bartleby Snopes* and *Literary Orphans*, among many others. Levi is the editor in chief and founder of the podcast *Rocky Mountain Revival Audio Art Journal*.

René Ostberg is from Chicago and currently lives outside the city. Her writing has appeared at *Hobart*, *Cease*, *Cows*, the *Brevity* blog, *Literary Orphans*, *Tiny Donkey*, and other places. Her website is www.reneostberg.com.

Stephen Briseño's writing first appeared in *Memoir Mixtapes*. Since then, his poems have appeared in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *L'Éphémère Review*, *formercactus*, *Barren Magazine*, and *Rabid Oak*. He lives in San Antonio with his wife and daughter, teaches middle school English, and drinks far too much coffee. Follow him on Twitter: @stephen_briseno.

Jessica Berger is a Chicago-based writer, PhD, and fiction editor of both *Grimoire Magazine* and *Always Crashing Magazine*. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Ninth Letter*, *Barrelhouse*, *Pank*, *trnsfr*, *Gamut*, *The Spectacle*, *Maudlin House*, *Dream Pop*, *Nat. Brut*, and elsewhere.

Scout Bolton is a poet, psychology student and features writer living in the North of England with their husband and tiny son. They are the author of two full collections of poetry: *Softcore Cloudstep* (79Rat Press, 2013) and *Wild Heather* (Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2016), and currently working on a novel about a person who eats the same sandwich every day for two months. They've never been so exhausted, or so content.

C. Kubasta writes poetry, fiction & hybrid forms. Her most recent books are the poetry collection *Of Covenants* (Whitepoint Press), the novella *Girling* (Brain Mill), and the just-released novel *This Business of the Flesh* (Apprentice House). For each major publication, she gets a new tattoo; someday she hopes to be completely sleeved—a labyrinth of signifiers. Follow her @CKubastathePoet.

Lauren Parker is a writer based in Oakland. She is a graduate of Hiram College's Creative Writing program. She has written for *The Toast*, *The Tusk*, *Ravishly*, *The Bold Italic*, *Harlot Magazine*, *Hoodline*, and *plain china*. She's the winner of the Summer of Love essay contest in the *Daily Californian*, the Vachel Lindsay poetry prize, and a was featured in Bennington College's Best Undergraduate Writing series in 2012. Follow her on Twitter @laurenink.

L Mari Harris lives in Nebraska, where cattle outnumber people 4 to 1. She's ok with that. Follow her @LMariHarris.

Prem Sylvester writes about any ideas his brain catches a whiff of and decides it's qualified to opine on. Sometimes people read these things. He hopes to have his words leave their traces in the minds of those who do.

Marina Blitshteyn is mostly a poet and the author of *Two Hunters*, forthcoming from Argos Books with a CLMP Face-Out grant. Prior chapbooks include *Russian for Lovers*, *skills*, and *Nothing Personal*. She is working on a book about Radiohead.

Adam McCulloch is an award-winning fiction writer and NATJA award-winning journalist whose work has appeared in *Travel + Leisure*, *The Australian*, *Men's Health*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Lonely Planet* among others. His poetry and fiction has been published by *Easy Street* and anthologies by *Coffin Bell* and *Electric Literature*. He recently won the First Pages Prize at the Stockholm Writers Festival for his unfinished novel *The Silver Trail*.

K Weber writes poems, creates layers of sound, makes arts with dots, and has a decent record collection in Dayton, Ohio. She has self-published four books of poetry online since 2003 that are each offered in a PDF layout version and an audiobook. Free. More of this at <http://kweberandherwords.wordpress.com>.

Juliette van der Molen is a writer and poet living in the Greater NYC area. She writes completely unladylike erotica and other sundry things. Her work has also appeared in *Rose Quartz Journal*, *Burning House Press*, *Memoir Mixtapes*, *Zathom* and several publications on *Medium*. You can find more of her writing at *Medium* and connect with her on Twitter @j_vandermolen. Her debut chapbook, *Death Library: The Exquisite Corpse Collection*, was published in August 2018 by *Moonchild Magazine*.

Elizabeth Ditty lives in Kansas City, where she is attempting to raise two children with good hearts and strong minds with the help of their father and Daniel Tiger. More of her creative nonfiction work can be found in Issue 12 of *L'Éphémère Review*, and her set of children's stories, *My Sister the Werewolf*, is available in the *Bedtime Stories* app. Her family often debates whether she loves coffee or wine more, as if she could ever choose between them.

Katie Darby Mullins teaches creative writing at the University of Evansville. In addition to being nominated for the Pushcart Prize twice, Best of the Net three times, and being the associate editor of metrical poetry journal *Measure*, she's been published or has work forthcoming in journals like *The Rumpus*, *Iron Horse*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *BOAAT Press*, *Harpur Palate*, *Prime Number*, *Big Lucks*, *Pithead Chapel*. She was a semifinalist in the *Ropewalk Press Fiction Chapbook* competition and in the *Casey Shay Press poetry chapbook* competition.

fin.

Visit us at
memoirmixtapes.com

