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Vol. 5  
Freestyle



# Memoir Mixtapes

Vol. 5: Freestyle

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Special thanks to our reader, Benjamin Selesnick

# Letters from the Editors



Welcome to Memoir Mixtapes Vol. 5: Freestyle. Whether you've been reading MM since Vol.1, or this is your first time visiting our site, we're so happy you're here.

Since we started Memoir Mixtapes, one of the most common questions we've been asked—volume after volume—came from readers who were eager to be a part of the project. These potential contributors had a musically-inspired story to share, but it didn't quite fit the current theme. We didn't want to miss out on those pieces, so this time around, we decided to put our themed issues on hold to give those writers their chance to bring those stories to the world.

While it was quite a bit more challenging here on our end to make final selections without a prompt tying each piece together, in the end, it was totally worth mixing things up a bit. We've got some stunning pieces to share with you all, and I'm really proud that we get to provide these personal essays and poems a home in Memoir Mixtapes. It is, as always, such an honor.

A special shout-out goes to Memoir Mixtapes' new reader, Benjamin Selesnick, who approached us via email to offer his services to the project. His help and insight has been absolutely invaluable, and it couldn't have come at a better time. We look forward to working on more Volumes with Benj's keen eye in our corner.

Now, get to it! And consider sending us your work for Vol.6!

XO  
Samantha Lamph/Len  
CREATOR & CO-CURATOR



Hello again, everyone. (And "hey" to new readers!)

This Volume is a little different from our usual publications. As Sam already mentioned, we hear "I have something I want to write for Memoir Mixtapes, but it doesn't fit the prompt!" pretty regularly.

Like, a lot.

And so, after hearing those words enough we decided that we'd OPEN THE FUCKING PIT UP lol.

Our contributors, free of a prompt, were able to spread their wings wider this time, and the result is some truly unique work that, once again, I'm incredibly proud to publish. The writers featured here have mined deep of the human / music connection, and we're pleased to provide you with a Volume that paints a vivid picture of how music weaves its way throughout our individual journeys in life.

I'd like to offer special thanks to our new reader, Benjamin Selesnick, who cold-called us out of the blue to offer his reading and support services at a time when Sam and I didn't even realize how badly we needed the help. Benj has able to help us out immeasurably by keeping things moving in the background, along with providing his valuable perspective on our contributions—something for which I know we're both truly grateful. We're lucky to have him on the team.

Without further ado, I invite you to dive into Memoir Mixtapes Vol. 5: Freestyle. It's a good one.

Kevin D. Woodall  
CO-CURATOR / EDITOR

# Tracklist

---

TR 01.	My Uncle David Derails My Fourteen-Year-Old Mind Stephen Briseño "Airbag" // Radiohead	1
TR 02.	Nothing but Everything Scott F. Parker "Say Yes" // Elliott Smith	3
TR 03.	Cherry Bomb Amanda Earl "Cherry Bomb" // The Runaways	7
TR 04.	White Rabbit Dorothy Rice "The Sound of Silence" // Simon & Garfunkel	8
TR 05.	"These Will Be the Best Years of Your Life" M. Stone "Bullet With Butterfly Wings" // Smashing Pumpkins	12
TR 06.	Guera, Where You Going? Kelly Shire "Qué Onda Guero" // Beck	13
TR 07.	Jungle Gabrielle Gilbert "Jungle" // Drake	17
TR 08.	Marble Floors and Human Connections Emmeline Clein Various Songs // Rich Gang	18
TR 09.	double Matthew Yates "To Care (Like You)" // James Blake	21
TR 010.	Tape Deck Rachel Peach Leonard "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" // Marvin Gaye & Tammi Terrell	22
TR 011.	creep Fullamusu Bangura "Creep" // TLC	24
TR 012.	Hank Williams is Sacred Alex DiFrancesco Various Songs // Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds / "Angeline" // PJ Harvey / and Other Artists	25
TR 013.	Saint Anthony and the Ten Thousand Things Jessie Lynn McMains "Left and Leaving" // The Weakerthans	32
TR 014.	The Disintegration Loops James Smart "d1p 1.1" // William Bazinski	34

TR 015.	Feel This Real Forever E. Kristin Anderson Various Songs // Foo Fighters	42
TR 016.	Self Portrait as The Cure's <i>Disintegration</i> Sarah Nichols Various Songs // The Cure	44
TR 017.	Lullabies to Paralyze (after Queens of the Stone Age) Stacia M. Fleegal Various Songs // Queens of the Stone Age	46
TR 018.	The Hardest Part of the Cast is to Reel It In: How to Be Angry (and How Do You Stop?) Katie Darby Mullins Various Songs // Everclear	47
TR 019.	Listening to Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car" Bunkong Tuon "Fast Car" // Tracy Chapman	52
TR 020.	You Know We'll Have a Good Time Then Hannah Cohen "Cat's in the Cradle" // Harry Chapin	53
TR 021.	Sunday Mornings Randy Bates "Run For Your Life" / "Good Day Sunshine" // The Beatles	55
TR 022.	mi corazón quiere cantar así Ashley Miranda "Bidi Bidi Bom Bom" // Selena	57
TR 023.	On "Why Worry" by Dire Straits Cory Funk "Why Worry" // Dire Straits	58
	Contributors	60

OK COMPUTER  
RADIOHEAD



Radiohead

"Airbag"

OK Computer

06/1997

Parlophone / Capitol

# My Uncle David Derails My Fourteen-Year-Old Mind Introducing Me to Radiohead

Stephen Briseño

*"In a deep, deep sleep/Of the innocent/I am born again."*

--Radiohead, "Airbag"

After it has blossomed into  
its full potential, the airbag  
falls limp next to crumpled steel and plastic.  
Too exhausted to exhale again,  
it is cut out and cast aside.  
A cancered lung.

I imagine that my face  
now resembles  
this collapsed sack,  
wind sufficiently knocked out.

See, you never warn me,  
never mutter  
*Prepare yourself*  
like an oracle prophesying nearby doom.

Instead you teeter on the edge  
of the couch next to me  
hands on your knees,  
eyelids sealed,  
head bowed  
priestlike towards an altar of sound.

In preface, you say:  
*Listen any other way  
and you'll get distracted.  
Honor the music;  
yield  
an attentive ear.*

You press play.  
Sleigh bells slice over  
low, pulsing cello  
(I had no idea that they could be played  
outside of Christmas time)  
A voice peels in, and

for the first time I am aware  
of an eruption,  
of the holy sensation  
of being born again.



Elliott Smith  
"Say Yes"  
Either/Or  
02/1997  
Kill Rock Stars

# Nothing but Everything

Scott F. Parker

We moved out to Minneapolis from Portland not knowing Dinkytown from Edina and ended up in Uptown only because it was Google's answer to our search "Where to live in Twin Cities." Sandy and I were engaged, she was starting graduate school, and my fate—it felt like a fate at that point—was to pursue writing wherever it would lead me. We didn't know much about the future we were aimed at when we loaded up the U-Haul and trucked across the northern U. S. states, a nervous optimism filling the cab.

Pulling up to the old ivy-covered brick building we'd signed a lease on sight-unseen, we looked through the windshield as rain was coming down steadily in the unseasonably cool June that reminded me of nothing more than the moderate spring we had left behind in Oregon. Here, instead of the bipolar Midwest climate I feared, was another cozy Willamette Valley day. Looking down the green, tree-lined sidewalks through pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly neighborhoods, and thinking of the coffee shops and independent bookstores we'd passed a few blocks back, everything reminded me of home. We thanked the internet gods for getting this one right for us and unloaded the U-Haul, then we walked down the street to Urban Bean Coffee, one of the nearby cafes. We ordered coffees, sat our tired bodies down, breathed out great sighs of satisfaction, and cheered to the unknown. And right about then I heard the familiar finger-strumming opening of Elliott Smith's "Needle in the Hay" come over the speakers. Sandy recognized it too and gave me a knowing little smile. Serendipity.

The omen proved fortuitous. Returning to Urban Bean over the next few months with the frequency allowed by unemployment, I discovered Elliott Smith a regular presence. Whoever made the playlist at Urban Bean played Smith as much as they played anyone and more than local favorites like The Hold Steady and Dessa. Looking around more carefully, the presence of Smith's sound started making a kind of cohesive sense. The place seemed modeled quite intentionally after Portland, where Smith lived for many years and is enthusiastically claimed: the hipster quirks, the emphasis on locally sourced items, the birds painted on the cafe walls. It was familiar, and as I sat down to write, Smith's searching laments felt like just the right soundtrack. It was due to Smith, in part, that I was sitting there trying to come up with the right arrangements of words, trying to make art.

Ten years earlier, in high school, I drove a decade-plus-old, poop-brown, domestic station wagon. The car was, if nothing else, half mine and up to the task of hauling packs of teenagers from one aimless Portland destination to another. Memories from this period play to the sounds of Nas' *It Was Written*, Outkast's *ATLiens*, E-40's *Hall of Game*, and loads of 2Pac. Rap was the music of the time and I was of my era. I turned the bass up louder than I liked it and drove recklessly because that's what it meant to be in high school those days. I liked the way rap music made me feel and I liked the way I imagined it made me come across to my peers. I had been more or less successful by all the teenage standards that mattered at the time: I was athletic, fairly popular, and smart without being bookish—things just kind of went my way without much trouble. One friend even teasingly referred to me as Golden Boy, a name that stuck far too long for my liking. I had plenty of shortcomings, to be sure, and wasn't cool enough to fully ignore the changing winds of high school norms or powerful enough to redirect them myself; I made conscious efforts to retain what status I had, and those efforts were rewarded enough



that I could adopt their ends as my values. What I mean is there was no great need for me to be overly reflective. And yet.

There had been a brief middle school hiatus into the grunge movement that swept down I-5 from Seattle, but after Kurt Cobain's death my friends and I gradually returned to hip hop, which even when we were least sure how to negotiate racially, we felt deep down was *the* music that mattered. I for one lacked the cultural wherewithal to think in these terms, but there was something vital about rap music that I didn't feel from the Goo Goo Dolls and other popular bands whose songs I enjoyed just fine when they came on the radio. Rap was alive in a way that rock wasn't. It told stories I wanted to hear, presented values I aspired to live by (and seductions I knew to eschew), and it brought me into the world. I listened to The Beatles and Cat Stevens occasionally, but out of nostalgia more than anything else—rap was to my generation what The Beatles and Cat Stevens had been to my parents'.

But in 1997 something happened. I was driving around with my cousin Steve and he said, "I think you'll like this," and put in a CD. The sound it produced was sad and sweet, and the lyric—"I'm in love with the world through the eyes of a girl"—felt like the first one I'd ever really heard. It was Elliott Smith's "Say Yes," I was sixteen, and he was right. I borrowed the CD, which ended up being the soundtrack to *Good Will Hunting*, and played it on repeat as I drove around Portland in the days when gas was cheap and the afternoons long. Of all the songs, by artists as varied as The Dandy Warhols and Al Green, it was Smith's I kept returning to. "Angeles," "Between the Bars," "Say Yes"—there was something about these songs. The singing was pretty and the melodies catchy, but there was something else too, something I didn't quite understand, a mood that seemed to emanate from my stock speakers and live in the air I breathed in the little bubble of my car; it was a kind of sadness that permeated, a sadness that, once I could hear it in songs, I began to recognize in myself—there was a directness to Smith's singing that both provoked and soothed that vulnerable part of me. It was an unusual and slow awakening in me to the power of music, of art. Prior, music had been simply music: something that sounded good in the background to the events of my life. Even the rap music I appreciated, I appreciated from the distance of a foreigner. What Elliott Smith did for me was to make music personal. He wrote and sang from a perspective that was distinctly mine, and in so doing enabled music to move to the forefront of my consciousness, and a song itself to be an actual event in my life. He made me feel stuff I felt like I needed to feel and his music became a private space I could hide in when I wanted to get away.

There's a certain subset of high school memories in which it is perpetually a dark and rainy Portland winter, my love is unrequited, and I'm unsure that I'll ever get anywhere on the project of figuring out who I really am. I wonder if others get confused wondering who they are, decide mostly they don't, then wonder if anyone *really* is who they seem to be. I get into my station wagon (sometimes with the girl I think I love or the one who thinks she loves me—who are never one and the same) and am comforted in some unknown way by Smith, who I'm pretty sure both wonders who he really is and in his wondering is sincerely the person he seems to be. There's an integrity to his music—and, I assume, his self—that I greatly respect, even if I can't precisely locate it in the lyrics. I play these concerns up for the girl in the passenger seat to moderate success, but the problems of authenticity and essentialism are serious to me, and they linger after I drop the girl off at home and drive the streets alone looking for nothing but everything. It's late now and still raining, and I'm thinking maybe only artists know what it's like to be someone else.

The things I didn't know these years could make up an entire other person, and in fact sort of have made up the me I've become. One thing I didn't know was that music wasn't always just another mass media-driven commodity. Another was that musicians are people. Or that they have homes besides the TV or the radio, lives that take place beyond their records. Elliott Smith, I learned from Peter, a friend at school, lived in Portland. Slowly, as the significance of this fact took hold in my consciousness, my conception of an artist began to expand from someone who communicated something of importance for my benefit to someone who emerged from a specific context and produced work for his or her own purposes. If Smith lived in Portland, then he drove the same streets I drove, visited the same parks, probably spent time at Powell's, and could be the guy I passed on the street downtown. (Later, a college roommate would tell me he'd carpooled to elementary school with Smith's half-sister. Even later, my mother mentioned that she'd worked with his father.) Music suddenly penetrated normal life. It wasn't merely commodity, merely background noise or disembodied meaning. It was a medium through which one person could communicate with another—and this meant, too obvious almost to say, that Smith was a person like I was a person, and he was offering something I needed, and he was out there living in and drawing from the world right outside my window. It was a hopeful insight. And on its heels followed a sense of wonder at the further possibilities of life. Reality started to spread out in unknown dimensions, and the Golden Boy successes I had achieved so easily ceased to matter much to me. I wanted more, even if I didn't know yet exactly more of what.

Not long after, Peter took me to my first concert to see Elliott Smith at LaLuna, an all-ages venue that was the epicenter of the thriving Portland music scene. Here was the world I'd suspected was out there waiting for me. The audience comprised teens and twenty- and thirty-somethings who just looked like they knew what was what. They were tattooed and pierced and swaggered with the freedom that came from the knowledge that this was their proper spot in the universe. There was a grittiness, but a happiness as well. The air of excitement was due to creativity as much as to celebrity, and the intoxication to inspiration as much as chemicals. They felt—and quickly I felt too—part of something bigger, something significant that we might look back on one day and be proud of. It was a mysterious kind of scene to me, one that I didn't feel like I could participate in fully, dressed as I was in the preppy clothes of my safely conventional high school wardrobe. My ties to good grades, bright white smiles, and being an achieving sort of kid bought me no credibility at LaLuna, among a crowd that accepted me without actually affirming what my appearance represented. They were split between a hip and cynical knowingness and a sincere and kind ethos that I thought flowed through Smith's work. It was Smith, I confirmed, who was at the center of things. The respect for him and the pride in his music was palpable. Others may have known and appreciated the opening band, which I've long forgotten, but I was waiting on Smith and when he took the stage the attention in the room telescoped. Everyone converged forward, took silent, and listened to Smith's every mumble. We as an audience were all in that room together with Smith, all sharing a sincere artistic moment. It was a new experience for me.

I never fit very neatly into the LaLuna scene, but in the year that followed I returned again and again whenever Smith played. I'd go with Peter sometimes, and sometimes with those girls who things kept going never-quite-right with, and listen to the music and feel it, really feel it. Before long, though, it was time for college and LaLuna closed down and I left Smith behind in Portland (or actually Brooklyn, where he'd moved by then). I spent my college years reading philosophy, my interest in art and writing yet to reach any kind of fruition whereby it might become a possibility for me. Smith, too, had studied philosophy in college, later naming his best album after Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. But for who knows what reasons I stopped listening to Smith's records.

Meanwhile Smith was undergoing a troubled period in his life marked by heavy drinking, drug use, and depression. He was institutionalized after an intervention by some of his friends during the *Either/Or* tour. As the cliché of the troubled artist anticipates, the desperation and depression of Smith's lyrics were enacted in his life. Smith hated this cliché, perhaps moreso because he knew he was prone to it. There's a way of reading his songs as a struggle to find and declaim beauty in an ugly or painful world. The early aughts revealed just how close Smith was to the kind of suffering his lyrics evince and that his music belies. As Charlie, the host of Elliott Smith's official website ([sweetadeline.net](http://sweetadeline.net)), writes, "It is as if the music points the way to a redemption that the words-the rational mind-could never possibly grasp: a universe that is loving, forgiving, and endlessly compassionate." I didn't know this at the time, didn't know that he'd attempted suicide during this period, about which he said to one interviewer: "Yeah, I jumped off a cliff [his fall was broken by a tree], but let's talk about something else."

I didn't know this, and yet when my cousin killed himself in the spring of 2003 it was to Smith's music I turned for solace. I walked around Eugene, Oregon, that spring and summer listening to *Either/Or* and *XO* in my headphones, finding comfort and catharsis in his effort to make beauty out of pain. That fall, when I learned of Smith's suicide, it came as the bitter fulfillment of a promise I'd hoped but never expected would be forgotten. The songs he wrote, like the songs Kurt Cobain wrote, ticked like time bombs. Of course, I thought. Of course. I returned again to his songs, tracked down *Figure 8*, his latest album, went up to Portland and visited the impromptu memorial his fans made on Division St. , where he'd once lived and once mentioned in song.

Somehow that was a long time ago now and somehow the world needs beauty, real human beauty, as much as ever. Here I am, still in Minnesota, still writing, still wondering how to proceed, still returning to Elliott Smith looking for clues. It's obvious now that his music opened a certain kind of future for me, a richer future, to be sure, but one that comes at a price. There's no returning to the naive innocence of my youth before art started to reach in and squeeze my insides, before I understood the proximity of beauty and pain. I can't go back. Nor would I want to.



The Runaways

“Cherry Bomb”

The Runaways

06/1976

Mercury

# Cherry Bomb

Amanda Earl

*Hello world, I'm your wild girl*

in grade 7 I was more like the Creature  
with the red stars and her Frankenstein platforms  
Wore her bell bottom black velvet pants  
Toronto on Avenue Road we sat on the roof

Visited her in my thoughts didn't sing but could have  
on the Dark Side of the Moon left to my  
basement with my turntable  
un fruit sauvage not even in my  
dreams most afternoons I wasn't  
knocking that cop's tooth out, drunk  
on my first Crown Royal and Coke mixed  
at 13 when the song came out

Would have fucked too, joined a cult  
with Maureen, an older guy in a tree  
showed it to me, there was nothing to see,  
I squinted, let the 16 year old grope  
my flat chest beneath my Star Wars tee,  
Was a self-conscious gawky  
monster with unwashed hair  
and acne

We lifted some gloss, got banned from the  
K-Mart, honey, but M's father beat her  
mine French kissed me  
Always on guard, I stopped sleeping

Susie and I had a band with no instruments  
fragile kids drumming on boxes and playing  
air guitar in a Mississauga townhouse The Runaways  
weren't on the radio just Dylan's Lay Lady Lay  
and Lightfoot's Sundown creepy old guys the kind  
we ran from and still do to this day



Simon & Garfunkel  
"The Sound of Silence"  
*Wednesday Morning,  
3 A. M.*  
10/1964  
Columbia

# White Rabbit

Dorothy Rice

In 1968, I was fourteen, a high school freshman in idyllic Mill Valley, a small town across the bay from San Francisco. The campus featured 1930s-era stucco and towering redwoods. Mount Tamalpais was its backdrop. The lumpy mountain top resembled a reclining maiden, her long hair cascading down the mountainside, the tip of her dainty nose and breasts wreathed in morning fog that rolled in off the Pacific and receded in time for lunch on the front lawn.

Mr. Lawrence was my freshman English teacher; he taught choir and Madrigal singers too. I secretly envied the kids in the school's Madrigal ensemble—the Renaissance Faire gowns the girls got to wear, rich velvet with gold piping, their hair done up in fancy braids laced with ribbons.

We called Mr. Lawrence the White Rabbit, an allusion to the Jefferson Airplane song (*one pill makes you larger, one pill makes you small*). He was soft and white, and his translucent skin turned pink when he was flustered.

In an attempt to seduce us into appreciating poetic language, Mr. Lawrence brought contemporary song lyrics to class, mimeographed in smudgy, purplish ink. He read us the lyrics to Simon & Garfunkel's "The Boxer" and "The Sound of Silence," in his lisping, rabbit voice.

"This is poetry, too," he would say, all bushy-tailed and bright-eyed, as if he was being very clever indeed, tricking us with relevance." Do any of the lines speak to you? What do they say?"

*Fools, said I, You do not know  
Silence like a cancer grows*

Those two lines, from the "The Sound of Silence," didn't speak to me; they screamed. I harbored a secret, a big one. But I didn't raise my hand. I was afraid I'd give myself away.

My favorite part of class was when Mr. Lawrence put one of his warped albums on the record player, a contraption that opened out from a mesh suitcase with a brass clasp. As Simon & Garfunkel's ethereal harmonies filled the classroom, it was hard to maintain my mask of indifference, hard to pretend I wasn't moved, that I didn't feel the truth packed into those songs. I kept my head down and plucked at the patches and embroidery on my Levi 501 jeans.

Yet the music, the words, thrummed in my ears. They echoed and lingered. Some got stuck.

*The vision that was planted in my brain, still remains*

I struggled to hold back tears. Losing it in English class, because of Mr. Lawrence and his records, would not be cool.

Sophomore year, I took choir with the White Rabbit. That was a stretch for me. I wasn't a joiner. Group activities—all those clubs and sports that got your photograph in the yearbook—scared me. But choir was a prerequisite for Madrigals. I believed that could be

my one thing, so I crooned my heart out in beginning choir. The mingling voices, being part of that powerful sound, made my heart swell.

A public recital for friends and family was planned at the end of the term. We would wear matching blue blazers with gold buttons. After that, I could audition for Madrigals. And after *that*, maybe I'd be invited to be the front singer for a rock band or I could even start my own group.

I still had my secret. It had hardened by now, becoming a familiar stone in my belly. My secret had a name: Ron.

Walking home from school one afternoon, he'd pulled onto the shoulder alongside the football field and offered me a ride. I'd seen him before, cruising in his black Mustang. He was going my way that day, he was sort of familiar, he looked like a guy in a band, and there were guitar cases in the back seat. I got in the car.

Ron was older. Old enough that he was on his own. Old enough that his cut cheeks were shaded with dark stubble.

Long story short, he didn't stop the car at my street or the one after that. He drove to the windswept Marin County coast, parked beside a sheer cliff, pressed my face into his lap and held me there, gasping for breath, gagging, until he was done.

I didn't tell anyone. I figured they'd say it was my fault for getting into the car.

I never told anyone about all the other times either.

Before letting me out of the car that first time, Ron asked for my phone number. I thought it was a power trip or a trick, my ticket to safety. For the rest of high school, he'd call, every week or two, then pick me up and drive down some deserted road for a repeat performance. That was it. Half an hour, pick up to drop off.

So, back to Mr. Lawrence and beginning choir. Among my fantasies while singing "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore" and all the rest was that I would blossom into this amazing singer. I'd be discovered, big-time, like my-face-on-the-cover-of-Rolling-Stone famous. Ron would beg me to be his for-real girlfriend, but it would be too late. I'd be with some legit rock star, jetting off to London.

The weekend of the big end-of-semester choir recital arrived. Ron had called the night before. He gave me an address, said it was his house and told me to come see him after school. This was huge. In all the time I'd known him, we'd never been seen in public together, never been anywhere but the front seat of his car. It almost felt like a real date. Maybe I'd tell him about the choir performance. Maybe he'd come. Maybe things would be different between us.

The address Ron gave me was a few streets behind the high school. I walked there, carrying a blue choir jacket over one arm, on its wire hanger, covered in a plastic dry cleaner bag. I wore my favorite dress, a clingy lavender mini, with a psychedelic pattern and a soft ruffle around the neckline. My mother called it "a real butt scraper." She'd picked it out, said it showed off my legs, which, according to her, were my best asset. I'd done my hair up in rags the night before so it was a mass of thick sausage curls, held back from my face with a flowered ribbon, my sexy Little-Bo-Peep look.

Through the overhang of tree branches, sun spots sprinkled the pavement. A light wind fluttered the front of my dress, the short skirt around my bare thighs.

I knocked at the door.

Ron pulled me into a bedroom he said was his. The closet was bare, except for two silk kimonos on hangers. He hung my choir jacket on the rod.

"This one's yours," he said, sliding one of the kimonos off its hanger.

"Mine?"

"Take your clothes off, put it on."

"Mine, mine?"

"Why wouldn't it be."

I didn't want to put the kimono on. It didn't feel right. He was acting funny. Like for some reason it mattered to him that I wear the kimono when I was already wearing my favorite dress in the world. Besides, what we did had never required me taking any clothes off. The pretense of the kimono, that he'd actually thought I would believe he'd bought it for me, made me feel cheap, underestimated. What we had wasn't much, but I'd never felt like he outright lied to me. I'd done that part myself.

"Let's go outside," he said, giving up on the kimonos. He led the way down a hallway, through the kitchen and out the back door.

The yard was narrow, with one big tree at the back and a bare mattress in the middle of a weedy lawn. He pulled me down onto the mattress and leaned back on his elbows. My dress inched up so my fancy, patterned panties showed. I kicked off my shoes.

He undid his pants. I stared up at the house. Dark windows glared down on us.

"It's cool," he said. "We're alone."

He tugged at my dress, lifted it over my head. The breeze grazed my bare nipples. I'd wanted him to see my body, to touch my body. I'd wondered why he never had. But he was acting so weird, self-conscious and shifty. I curled onto my side so my back was to the house. He tugged me back around rearranged my limbs as if I were a mannequin.

I sensed movement in one of the upper story windows.

"Relax," he said, grasping my wrists. "We're alone. I swear."

But I'd seen it. A dark shadow, there then gone. I pulled away, wriggled back into my dress, snatched my leather clogs from the grass and ran for the back door. Ron sprinted in front of me. There was a window in the top half of the back door. Ron tried to block it with his body, but I saw the other guy standing there.

"You freaked her out, man," Ron said, yelling at this stranger. "You fucking blew it."

I pushed past Ron, through the door and through the kitchen. For a moment, the three of us were close in a narrow hallway. The other guy was a head taller than Ron. He leered down at me, blood-shot eyes, long, fright-show blonde hair, low-slung jeans, dog tags on a chain on his bare chest. Maybe Ron had looked that hungry the first time, all the other times too, but I hadn't seen it. His eyes were so black and he'd had more practice. This guy was different, scary different. He lurched towards me.

"Leave her alone," Ron said. "Seriously man, it's over."

I ran to the bedroom for my things. The tall one followed. I felt his breath. Smelt his sour sweat. He laughed, wild-eyed, and snatched at my arms. He didn't follow me out the front door, only watched, cackling, as I stumbled down the street, hugging my pack and shoes, dragging the choir jacket in the dust. At the bottom of the hill, I stopped to pick gravel from the soles of my feet.

It had been a set up. Ron didn't really live there. Maybe he'd been bragging about what a dumb fuck I was, about this high school chick who would do anything he wanted, all he had to do was call. His friend wanted to watch. Maybe he'd planned to join us on the mattress, or film the show. And there I was in my ribbons and curls, my favorite party dress.

The choir performance that night was in a big church with stained glass windows, the church where my older sister would soon be married. Mr. Lawrence arranged us in rows up on the altar. Being one of the tallest, I was in the back row. Before the program started, he came up behind me. I figured he was going to say something about how well I'd done in class that semester, maybe, I hoped, suggest I try out for Madrigals. He cleared his throat. His cheeks and throat were splotchy and pink. Pre-performance jitters, I figured. He leaned close and whispered.

"How about you just mouth the words tonight. You know, lip sync. Can you do that for me?"

Before he said that, I'd thought I had a good voice, no, a great voice. Before that afternoon on the mattress, I'd thought Ron sort of liked me, not that he loved me or anything, but that I was at least a real person, not just some stupid chick.

*Hello darkness, my old friend  
I've come to talk with you again*

----

My future did not include becoming a Madrigal singer or fronting a rock band, but there were plenty of other things. That was all a long time ago. Close to fifty years. I'm fine, more than fine.

Mr. Lawrence was a decent teacher. He tried and seemed to care. Perhaps he believed he was doing me a kindness, sparing me public embarrassment. Back in high school, I was a loner, one of the quiet ones. Ron was a predator. Isolation, loneliness, and fantasies of rock star boyfriends, any boyfriend really, made me vulnerable, easy prey.

*Fools, said I, You do not know  
Silence like a cancer grows*

True words, then and now. Secrecy is the perfect growth medium for guilt, fear, and shame. Truth is the antidote. It robs the predators of their most potent tools.

*Hear my words that I might teach you  
Take my arms that I might reach you*





Smashing Pumpkins

"Bullet With Butterfly Wings"

*Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*

10/1995

Virgin

# "These Will Be the Best Years of Your Life"

M. Stone

At fourteen I wore  
ugly and weird like prize ribbons. Conformity

became a filthy word.  
I fought and lost, sported a busted lip and bloody nose.

Detention, then suspension.  
A teacher claimed that fury made my face unrecognizable.

How could I explain the solace I found in a fist?

----

A sleazy guidance counselor  
demanded to know why I seemed withdrawn.

I didn't tell him what I saw  
every day: coaches assigned the task of keeping order

turned away when sophomores  
circled a scrawny freshman and yanked his shorts down,

and a football player known  
for making rape jokes grabbed his girlfriend's wrist,

squeezing delicate bones until she cried stop.

----

At sixteen I was set free,  
sent to community college for my senior year

and a place opened for me  
in that calm, in the presence of new friends.

When I later visited  
a beloved high school teacher whose classroom

once offered refuge,  
she smiled and exclaimed *you are radiant;*

*you have thrived.*

# Guera, Where You Going?

Kelly Shire

*¿Qué onda güero?*

*What's up, white boy?*

Do you know the way to Santa Fe Springs? Bordered to the west by the San Gabriel riverbed and its namesake freeway, and to the south by ever-congested Interstate 5, it's a Southern California city of heavy industry and commerce, with strip malls and neighborhoods and new condos thrown into the mix. The condos are mostly built over old oil fields; as a child I'd stare out the back windows while our car drove down Telegraph Avenue, lulled by the slow dip and rise of the derricks. In high school, a friend and I drove south from our neighboring town one night to pose for her camera beneath the sulfurous glow of refinery lights; edgy in our black clothes up against a chain link fence, the oil plant and its massive tanks looming in the background.

*¿Qué onda güero?*

In the early '90s I answered a newspaper ad for a receptionist job at a small distribution company. I rode the bus from my parents' house, where I still lived, then walked another half mile to a shabby industrial park in an area dense with tilt-up warehouses, loading bays, and auto body shops. I'd worked front offices before, including another in Santa Fe Springs with tinted front windows, carpeted floors, and a dedicated break-room. But I'd felt more myself at the desk job prior to that one, in a gritty auto shop alongside mechanics and delivery trucks, where the high ceilings echoed with a boom box tuned to a classic rock station, where the grimy unisex bathroom was decorated with an X-rated poster of the seven dwarfs doing nasty things to Snow White.

I worked these jobs for nine months, a year or so, before quitting. I was 20, 21, 22. I had no idea what exactly I wanted: new clothes from Contempo Casuals, cash for cigarettes, bus fare, books, music, enough savings to buy a used car. Romance and/or sexual intrigue. Not at all in that order.

-----

Gil's company was housed in what was basically a narrow, deep garage: like all the businesses in the lot, it was fronted by a regular, solid wood door, beside a corrugated metal door that rolled upward with a heavy pulley chain. Inside the dark warehouse were towering stacks of inventory, metal racks, industrial spools, and filing cabinets. At the very rear was Gil's office, and another unisex bathroom.

After a brief interview, I got the job, and after a few days of training with Gil's daughter, was left alone at the cramped desk area near the front door. I performed the usual clerical tasks: answering and transferring phone calls, filing quotes, typing invoices into the computer, learning the ropes and rhythms of the company. Gil's was a business that sold all manner of packaging supplies to companies with products needing to be tied down or otherwise secured for shipment: industrial-strength staples, bubble wrap, heavy gauge sheet wrap, and plastic or metal strapping, sold on gigantic rolls that could only be lifted by forklift.

I also learned how to navigate Gil's personality. A Mexican-American born and raised in East L. A. and Boyle Heights, Gil was a short, bantam-like man in his short-sleeved dress



Beck

"Qué Onda Güero"

Guero

03/2005

Interscope

shirts and black dress shoes. Old acne scars pocked his brown skin; a black, thick mustache sat atop a mouth frequently frowning in displeasure, irritation, or suspicion. Though he rarely rolled into work before ten, his would nonetheless be the first call I answered each morning, making sure all of his employees were there on time: the two salesmen, José, who spoke no English and worked in the rear yard hammering repairs on the wooden pallets Gil bought and resold, and especially Lonny, the cute delivery driver who was chronically tardy.

If Gil was in a good mood, he'd joke and ask how many big orders I'd taken; in a bad mood, I listened to him sip his coffee between growling who was there? What were they doing, horsing around, eh? Why did I let the phone ring three rings before I picked up? (Most likely because I was on the other line, but sometimes because I was standing outside, smoking and flirting with Lonny.)

*See the vegetable man  
in the vegetable van  
With a horn that's honking like a mariachi band  
In the middle of the street people gather around*

Mid-morning, after the initial burst of the business day, the food truck pulled into the lot, making its rounds up and down the street. Sometimes its horn blasted out the first notes of *La Cucaracha*, sometimes a few strains of *Dixie*. This was long before trendy food trucks: it was a roach coach, pure and simple. I could order a fat breakfast burrito with huevos y chorizo, or a plate of cold and watery ceviche. But most days I had no interest in fresh food. I bought Hostess fruit pies or donuts, plunging my hand into the packed ice to fish out a pint of chocolate milk. Most days I was high-strung, meal-skipping, rattly with a varying combination of low blood sugar, nicotine, and boredom.

I tossed my hair, pulled dollars from my coin purse, aware of being watched, by the cooks in the truck, by the workers from neighboring businesses in their blue uniform shirts, by the overweight mechanic from the auto shop a couple driveways over, the one who'd plop into our front office chair badgering me for dates: *you think you're too good for me, huh?* He was encouraged by Tom, the shop's owner, who sometimes gave me a ride as I walked the last half-mile to work, dropping me off with a wink and a promise that I owed him a ride someday, too.

*T. J. cowboys hang around  
Sleeping in the street with a Burger King Crown  
Mas cerveza  
Til the rooster crows*

"You're not Mexican!" Gil protested. It was a Friday just after five, time to celebrate the weekend. With his handful of employees lingering in the warehouse after closing time, Gil had brought out the case of cold Miller Lite he'd had Lonny buy earlier in the day. He sipped his beer, dark eyes assessing me from over the rim.

But I was, I asserted. A solid half. I told him my mother's maiden name, trotted out my maternal grandma's Spanish birth name, long since shortened to its English version. Gil squinted at me skeptically. "Any *español?*" he asked, and I shook my head, *muy poquito*, but I had a good accent. From his wallet he took a Virgen de Guadalupe prayer card and passed it to me. "Alright, alright," he said, convinced, after I'd read a few lines aloud. "But I thought that you were Irish, with your name," he grumbled, tucking the card back into

his wallet. What he meant, I knew by now, was he'd believed he was classing up the joint by hiring a 100% white girl.

"*¡Ella dice es Mexicana!*" he shouted over to José, who laughed and shook his head, refusing to look over at me as he sipped his beer.

On this and similar Fridays, I'd smoke and joke with the other salesmen, but never took Gil's proffered can of Miller; I didn't like beer then, ordered bourbon & Cokes if I went out. ("Rotgut," Gil scolded.) Which was just as well—I was twenty-two, and one of the only women working in that gritty industrial park, in that industrial part of town full of alleys and empty lots and dark warehouses as the sun dipped lower into the Southern California sky on a warm Friday evening.

*¿Qué onda güero?*

*Güero, where you going?*

Every day I made the same commute, rode the bus, walked twice each day past an old, abandoned cemetery on a corner lot, the only picturesque spot in the neighborhood. I sat at my front desk, facing out at the wide driveway that ran past the front door. Most days the door was propped open onto a view of trucks, cars, and hazy sunshine; in the brief winter I closed the door and plugged in a space heater against the chill of the drafty warehouse.

A couple of years passed this way, Monday through Friday, 8-5, with an alleged hour for my lunch break. Alleged, because I didn't have a car and couldn't go anywhere; the nearest greasy spoon diner was over a mile away. During lunch I'd stay at my desk and read a book, or stand just outside the door to smoke, keeping an ear out for the phones, or printing another order for Lonny to take out on delivery. But Gil still deducted the hour from my paycheck, insisted I insert my manila-colored card into the army-green time clock, its metal punch sending a jolt all the way up my arm every time: clock out, clock in, clock out again at five.

*¿Qué onda güero?*

*¿A donde vayas?*

*Yeah now I'm going to LACC, man*

*I'm taking a ceramics class*

Gil pretended to be happy for me when I finally bought a used Sentra, but stared me down beneath his bushy eyebrows when I drove away for my allotted hour each afternoon; grumbled that I didn't always need to leave my desk. But I did, of course, all those months and years of unpaid working lunches tallying up in my head, along with all the days of Gil in foul moods, barking orders, making lewd comments about me in Spanish to José and the other drivers after he'd finally fired tardy Lonny, all while I managed his front office mostly alone. There had also been birthday presents picked out by his wife, free pastrami sandwiches and styrofoam leftovers brought back from the salesmen's long liquid lunches, rides home on rainy days, and cash advances when I was broke before pay day.

Inevitably, I turned in my resignation, realized I needed, wanted, more school. I scored a cushy part-time job in Pasadena, helping keep the books for old California agricultural money. It was another insular, family-run business, but now I was treated to private box seats at Santa Anita racetrack, lunches at Cal Tech's Athenaeum or the exclusive Jonathan Club in downtown L. A. I draped heavy white napkins across my lap, noting the

slow drip of water outside the silver water pitcher, the subdued conversations across the tables.

I was moving up in the world, incrementally improving my lot paycheck by paycheck, credit by credit at the community college. Gone were the mornings of bus stops and food trucks, the afternoons of Gil yelling *¡que putos!* in the warehouse, or his old *tio* staggering into the office for a nip of the tequila kept in a file cabinet: *"Eh, chica, did you know that I'm a painter? When you going to let me paint you?"*

*I remember, I'd smile, hearing my voice tip into a shadow of a lilt, echoing his East L. A. accent. Just tell me when. You know where to find me.*

IF YOU'RE  
READING  
THIS IT'S  
TOO LATE



Drake

"Jungle"

*If You're Reading This  
It's Too Late*

02/2015

Cash Money Records

# Jungle

Gabrielle Gilbert

"I'm not suffering  
It's just annoying"

*Julian Talamantez Brolaski*

Infantile in the sense of clinging

to good, to goodness, to the tub out behind your father's house, every time your brother apologized for you and I found a tree to lean on, trees to burn down and download, video games, drooling, to photos and fingers and sounds made louder, to colors, colors and friends who sat on their couch for a year, friends who didn't, who fucked in military beds and called us, tried to call us, to catch up, to be babies, adults, to be trying, to be invincible, cleaning out back in the morning sticky glass and wet mattress, tents collapse on us in the night, the night(s) you looked at the moon with me, sentiment only, reserved for only, the longest of car rides and to good, to goodbye, like forgetting, like friends, talking, for now only, not to retrace but to live again, in the sense, familiar

"Are we still good  
Are we still good?"

*Drake*

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*This piece was initially featured in Gabrielle's previously published chapbook Change of Engagement(Dancing Girl Press).*



Rich Gang

Various Songs

Rich Gang Tha Tour Pt. 1

09/2014

Cash Money Records

# Marble Floors and Human Connections

Emmeline Clein

*Who you pulling up with Rich Homie? Young Thugger*

*I'm talkin bout that's my mofuckin brother*

-Pull Up, Rich Gang: Tha Tour Part One

Rich Gang's 2014 mixtape *Rich Gang: Tha Tour Pt. 1* is the fervent, insistent joy of the come up and human connection distilled to a fine cognac, or codeine. This shit takes you somewhere else, and in 2014 it got me through some lonely months of an interminable winter.

During the fall of 2014 and the early months of 2015, the public friendship of Rich Homie Quan and Young Thug produced sonically lavish, exuberant music, before their brotherhood dissolved along with their musical partnership. Their mixtape was released in September 2014, followed by a few tour dates and a mysterious feud that precluded any release of the promised follow-up tapes.

Recently, Gucci Mane offered the two rappers \$1 million to reunite and make new music, ostensibly because he, like many fans, including myself, does not know if he will ever hear two voices that sound more melodically destined for shared greatness. The tweet that made the offer, Rich Homie Quan's enthusiastic response on Instagram, and Young Thug's cryptic rejection, brought the brief era of Rich Gang's 2014 reign back to the forefront of music news. A YSL and champagne drenched Rich Gang reunion might be the only cultural content able to bring diamond-studded, gold-leaf rimmed and auto-tuned joy back into a rap mainstream that in 2018 is dominated by depressed, Xanax-addled teenagers. The fact that a new collaboration appears to be a pipe dream reminded me to be grateful for those twenty tracks of ecstatic, absurdist lyrics dripping in irreverent humor, for the few months of a friendship riding a high.

In the same roughly eight month period that Rich Gang peaked and dove, I fostered an unrequited crush on one of my best friends, another close friend stopped speaking to me for reasons that remain opaque, and I blacked out more often than I would like to admit. I was living in Scotland during this year, a place I moved to because I was not sure who I was, and I thought living in a three street town that seemed to be falling off a crag into the ocean would help me figure it out.

I stumbled through the specific fog of a new place with that tape. The twenty tracks pumped me up when I already felt good (*she don't yield at stop signs lil shawty on goo*) and refracted my self-indulgent, depressive slumps through the mixtape's prism of unadulterated appreciation of life, basically calling me out on my shit. There is nothing like the poetry of *I'm every little kids' idol, got more verses than the bible/the lifestyle I live here priceless/pull up on yo ass like a diaper (what)?* to remind you that life is supposed to be fun, and you are probably being overdramatic. I played Flava and Givenchey at parties, Imma Ride and Everything I Got on buses through the Scottish countryside.

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One of my first nights in Scotland, I kissed a boy with a slightly strange accent. I would eventually know the sharp edges and choked off valleys of his voice in the deepest recesses of my mind, but I would never end up sleeping with him. I walked home tipsy, tilting, in the chilly pink Scottish dawn through the foreign fields of tall grass that led to my soulless university housing. Dawn there bites bare skin, tastes a little too salty, sobers you up fast, forces you to get familiar with your regrets before you even fall asleep.

A couple months later, he is crying in the spitting rain. The waves are crashing loudly two blocks away, I am shivering. I am in a skintight metallic dress, his suit is slightly too big for him and rapidly getting ruined. I just watched him shove my friend, his girlfriend, against a wall at a very fancy party and dragged him outside, where I should be abandoning him for acting like a sexist asshole. His face crumples, and I can't. My conscience fizzles up, sparks, tastes like rock candy. Champagne slinks through the crevices of my skull. I walk him home. My heels and my breath catch in the cobblestones, so I walk barefoot in the rain.

I cry over him outside the library during finals. We almost kiss on a sweaty, blurry, dance floor, and against cold, stained formica in the kitchen of his crumbling house. He tells me his life story, yells at me for doing drugs in his house. He makes out with my visiting friend in front of me at a house party, and she makes out with his friend in an attempt to access more drugs. Night bleeds into morning, we make up and bring champagne to the North Sea, run into the frigid water at dawn.

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One of the only times that year that I see a girl who used to be my best friend, we go clubbing in Barcelona. Dawn there is bright orange and blue and overlaid with neon, is not its own time period but is an extension of the night, hot and thick, sweet in a way that sticks to you and the stranger dancing next to you. All the clubs are somewhat outdoors, and we are never too far from a palm tree. She barely speaks to me, preferring her other friends until they abandon her for the VIP section. We act like the friends we once were in our faraway New York dorm room in the cab, in stupid hotel robes in the morning. We go to very ancient churches and less ancient churches in a hungover stupor, eat patatas bravas that burn our tongues. We hug goodbye to a pulsating beat, her face blinks in and out of my vision in the strobe lights. I scream happy birthday, I don't know if she hears me.

Losing a friend via an extended ghosting is a deeply inexplicable sensation. You can't publicly complain to other friends about it beyond an amorphous point after which you become clingy, or pathetic, or seemingly obsessed. Romantic breakups inspire outpourings of support, the immediate construction of a human fortress of sympathy in your DMs and over drinks. Platonic breakups, especially when slow, and subtle and not the result of easily identifiable drama, are stinging tears behind your eyes for months, checking your phone for a text you won't receive as a vaguely manic tic, the bitter, cloying knowledge that your personality just wasn't enough.

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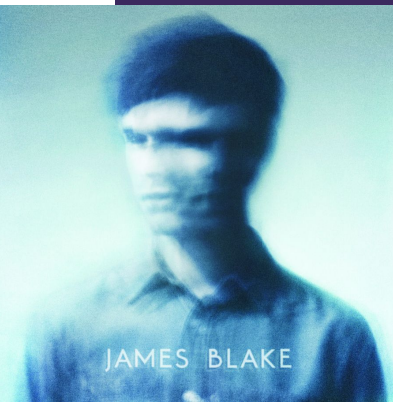
The lyrics on *Rich Gang Tha Tour Pt. 1* are absurdism at its apotheosis, friendship and luxury metastasizing into a lifestyle of twenty tracks that slide into one another, espousing brotherhood on the outro and having a fucking good time on the hook. It is genuinely impossible to maintain a depressive mood to the tune of "War Ready". I dare you not to smile while listening to the lines *you don't want no beef no spaghetti/premium*



*gas no unleaded/ain't tryna preach like a reverend...baby I'm the hot dog you can be the relish.*  
This is simultaneously abstract art and a roll your windows down good time.

By March of 2015, Young Thug was calling his former brother “Bitch Homie Quan” in concert, their joint tour was canceled, and a true follow-up album seemed not to be forthcoming. Quan’s admirably mature response been—“He’s my brother for life man”—epitomizes the optimistic, cherish-the-moment ethos of their music. I don’t know if I took as high a high road with the demise of my two pseudo-relationships, but I know the public artistry and drama of this one helped me remember that petty fights don’t have to devalue a relationship that once was, and also that nothing really matters but the joke inevitably laced in the underside of every drama.

The brief few months of Young Thug and Rich Homie Quan’s social and artistic partnership is crystallized in the angsty hearts of every rap fan who was or felt like a teenager in 2014. I know my problems are privileged as fuck, not remotely comparable to the struggles either of these artists created their art in response to. That isn’t the point, though. The point is marble floors, gold toilets, chandeliers, appreciating absurdism and the necessity of getting a little too fucked up sometimes, recognizing that just because a relationship of any type ends doesn’t render its brief glinting high of connection any less important. This is about the human experience, top floor lifestyle.



JAMES BLAKE

James Blake

“To Care (Like You)”

*James Blake*

02/2011

ATLAS

# double

Matthew Yates

*“I wish I could have known  
how easy it  
was to care like you”*

– James Blake

for every tooth i lose  
    biting your retreat,  
i swallow enough blood  
    to fuel my double,  
who will eat my shame  
    & smile like a person  
    & leave this room  
    & keep my word

& if my double were to walk  
like me but care like you,  
would you recognize their  
eyes as too alert to be mine?  
their smile as too familiar to be true?

for every bone i break  
    chasing my defeat,  
i extract enough marrow  
    to sculpt myself a home,  
where i can eat my shame  
    & smile like a person  
    & convince myself  
    of how easy it could be



Marvin Gaye & Tammi Terrell  
"Ain't No Mountain High Enough"  
United  
08/1967  
Tamla

# Tape Deck

Rachel Peach Leonard

In the car, Michael asks me to sing Tammi Terrell's half of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" and I laugh anxiously, crossing my arms to form a full-body no. If there were anyone in the backseat to witness they'd probably think it's because I'm nervous, or I sing off-key, or I don't know the words. That, or they'd think it's because I like Michael. I don't.

I'm not nervous. I can't carry a tune, but I don't care, and I know every soul-belted syllable of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" but I can't sing it with him. I can't stand Michael. He's always showing up as a thumbnail on my phone screen telling me things I need to hear: to drink more or drink less—water or whiskey, it's all the same. Whatever.

I can't sing "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" because singing is something I only do drunk in karaoke bars after tequila shots with strangers I'm only pretending to like so that they will like me, so that I will be invited next time they decide to get drunk and sing karaoke. I don't give a shit if Michael likes me.

When his whiteboy-lemonade voice finishes off one of Gaye's lyrics like a well-placed exclamation mark in a black Baptist praise chorus, he tosses me the imaginary microphone—his other hand slinging the dinghy steering wheel. I don't move. Michael doesn't seem to care. He believes I've simply missed my cue and carries on what's been dictated as my portion of the song in a manner so cheerfully unaffected that I know I've become a single face in a crowd of three-thousand, watching a one-man Broadway play where the character can't quite see the audience (and doesn't really care to) because the spotlight is on him, and it's so bright, and he is so beautiful.

Michael is so beautiful, but I'd never tell him that.

Headlights and rain beat gently on the windshield and leak through the cracked window, soaking my thigh. I don't mind. I just want Michael to look more at the road and less at me. Right now his gaze is a weight I can barely hold and it's demanding I flex a muscle I simply do not have. You see, I hate Michael, and that takes so much energy.

I've hated him since we were eighteen and naked on his mother's living room rug. Before that moment we were just friends, and back then we shared a common dialect nobody else spoke—one which has since passed on to be declared a dead language. It was borrowed books and iPod playlists. Our friendship floated mostly on banter and odd questions, like, "What does your family do for Christmas?" and "If you had to live eternity on a deserted island, who would you spend it with?" Back then, I might have answered "Michael."

But I'm 23 now. I'm too old to have sex on the floor and too old to play cool anymore. I am 23 and he is too. We've both learned that Life is a large, ugly man we can't dance with sober, and one day both of our mothers are going to die. I've watched him fall out of love at least five times and he's watched me leave home every day for six years. He always waves goodbye like it's the last.

For me, Michael will always embody the sensation of homesickness: a feeling he reminds me is not just missing home. It is sickness; it is illness, and in mine and Michael's case, it is incurable.

He knows we're alone out here together on this island of Understanding, sending smoke signals and drunkenly shoving notes out to sea in glass bottles of Jäger. We're both hoping they end up in the hands of two doe-eyed eighteen-year-olds, afloat on a rug raft in a Midwestern living room, too clumsy to know not to touch the sharp parts, like broken bottles and each other's body parts. You see, I love Michael.

The tape deck is busted but the bass beat buzzes weakly through the portable Bluetooth speakers he's wedged between our seats as a makeshift car stereo. It barely drowns out the sound of the storm. When he sings, "No wind, no rain or winter cold can stop me," I turn my head, facing out towards the storm. I smile.

The headlights cast light on our faces as soft as secrets that could break us if they were just a bit brighter, and that's why I can't sing with Michael.



TLC

“Creep”

*CrazySexyCool*

11/1994

Various

# creep

Fullamusu Bangura

ohi oh i oh iiiiii

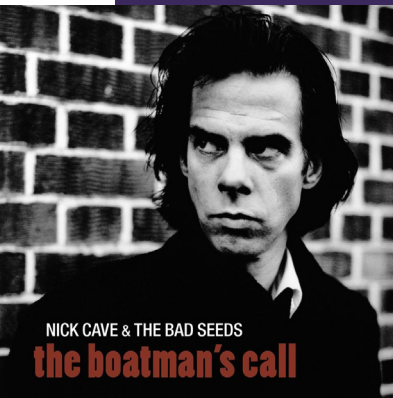
lost track of my calendar in your arms last night  
and by arms i mean strokes  
and by strokes i count 2. 5

so rhythmless within and without me  
i broke your face when i turned my back  
and drove myself back home

am so tired of trying to scrub your  
fuckboy face from the lovers of my homegirls  
over morning tea i  
drop autumn leaves from my mouth  
& what a surprise—  
my homegirls don't listen to me  
like i don't listen to myself.

can't recall the last time a little death  
touched your memory  
you left me no chill in my spine,  
no lingering fingers  
nothing  
what a waste of a beautiful mouth  
in my mind, i see white before your face  
so gracious of me to call it baptism  
and not ash

should have burned your Js in the bathtub  
your eyes cut mine and wish me water  
as i laugh from my belly  
flames cripwalk on crumbling soles  
so gracious of me to let this one burn slow  
& leave you to pray as soul leaves the body  
you tattooed arabic on your forearm  
make dua for yourself, then.



Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

Various Songs

*The Boatman's Call*

03/1997

Mute/Reprise



PJ Harvey

"Angelene"

*Is This Desire?*

09/1998

Island

...and other artists.

# Hank Williams is Sacred

Alex DiFrancesco

Tai is the first person I ever meet who is a fan of my work. Or who even knows my work exists, really.

They come to one of Mya's shows. Mya had a lot of shows where she played guitar and sang, most of them at venues like the one I used to scorn years before while I walked to the radical bookstore down the street. I didn't like all the shallow-looking people tripping over high heels and loosening their ties out front, cordoned off from the street by long velvet ropes. It seemed like hell. I am to find myself in this venue quite frequently after marrying Mya.

If you want to see me, at the time, there is a pretty good chance I will be at Mya's shows. All of them. Expected. Sitting in the front row. She doesn't think of me as an ornament, she tells me over and over.

Mya always said she fell in love with me when I invited her to an Occupy Wall Street rally and she hugged me and put one of her hands on the back of my shaved head to pull me close to her, but I don't think it was until she read one of my short stories that she had much respect for me. I didn't take her seriously as a musician until we were driving through Brooklyn and she played me the opening, dark track of her new album on her car stereo. I asked her who it was, because she put it on out of nowhere. She said it was her, and I realized she knew what she was doing.

One of Mya's shows at the venue with the velvet ropes is where Tai comes to see me.

They are tall and waif-thin, with long blond hair and the slightly hunched shoulders of someone who wishes they were much shorter. They are beautiful, and I don't know why they are talking to me, not Mya, congratulating me on my recently published novel, congratulating me on getting my work "out of the trans ghetto." I know them from a trans writing group that most of the people I know circle in and out of. They love my book, they say. They are frustrated with trans writing communities that focus on identity above craft, above literary experimentation. They would like to talk about it all. They would like to talk to me more.

I mutter something awkwardly and run away. My game plan on nights like this is to talk to everyone a little bit, just long enough so they won't see how incredibly uncomfortable I am.

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I've always been a fan of sad music, but it is when Mya leaves that I become obsessed with break up albums. What they mean as a cultural artifact, if they will continue to exist as everything becomes digital releases and playlists. I think about the year when I was in my early twenties and faced my first major heartbreak, and Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* nursed me through it. I had a cassette tape of it that a friend had bought me from a bargain bin in the late '90s when CDs were what we listened to most. I listened to it in the tape deck of my 15 year old Chevy Blazer because I didn't have anywhere else I could play it. It would wind through one side, flip, wind through the next, on and on.

It wouldn't be fair to say that there was ever a time when I *didn't* listen to heartbreak albums—the song I sang for Mya at our wedding was the opening track off of Nick Cave's breakup album, *The Boatman's Call*—but they become my security blanket and obsession in the months after Mya's departure. Mya accidentally left behind the amphetamines that she took for ADHD when she took off, and, even though I have been sober off of everything but alcohol for years, I take them and go to parties and talk about all my research and the book I am going to write on the cultural history of the break-up album.

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Frank Sinatra wrote what's often considered the prototypical break-up album. He was allegedly kind of an asshole who treated women like objects then expected them to keep him from being lonely. He was still married to his first wife when he met Ava Gardner, who became his second wife. When she left him after he cheated on her repeatedly, he released *In The Wee Small Hours of the Morning*. He mourns and moans his way through a whole album of loneliness, one of the first concept albums ever.

I can't really listen to this album without thinking of my dad, a radio DJ who loved Frank Sinatra, and who split up with my mom when I was two but remained in my life until he died when I was nineteen. But it's the first of its kind, and it's important to my research, so I listen to it over and over. As much as I don't like Sinatra, it makes me feel a connection to my dad to listen to him, and this is something I cherish when it happens.

It's also a fact that sadness restarted Sinatra's career, which was then failing as the playboy aged out of his teenybopper fanbase. Sadness sells. There are a lot of mourners.

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A few weeks after Mya leaves me, I host a party that is to become a video blog for my writers' group's now-defunct web page. Everyone in attendance is going to get very, very drunk and, on video, cold read James Joyce's dirty letters to his wife, Nora, in celebration of Bloomsday. I actually don't like James Joyce at all, but have always believed these filthy letters full of scatological references are the pinnacle of his work. Because I am very poor, I get a huge jug of cheap gin, limes, and several bottles of tonic. Many of the people in attendance will never get sicker than we get that night, due to the horror that is cheap liquor.

Tai is at the party. Tai had been around a lot since Mya disappeared, reaching out, wanting to work on projects, leaving me messages on Facebook. One of them says that, although they are sorry I'm so heartbroken, they are also bracing themselves for the amazing art that's going to come out of that heartbreak. After we get drunk and finish making videos of the letters, Tai and a woman I work with and I all end up in my bed.

The next day, still sick, the three of us will call off of work. I mean, maybe I can't blame the guy who wrote the s/he reveal for sitting me down and talking to me. Tai will be fired from their dog walking job, and the woman I work with will have finally run through the graces our union provides workers at the bookstore. The woman will leave, and I will feed Tai cheese, bread, and cured meats to ward off the hangover that is amplified by detoxing off of Suboxone in preparation for the first half of their gender affirming surgery.

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I go away to the Catskills for the summer. While I am gone, I listen to *The Boatman's Call* every day. This album was one of the first CDs I bought when I got hired at a used record store in the early '00s. It was released in 1997, and marked a stark departure from

previous albums for Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. Their prior work, and Cave's work with the post-punk band The Birthday Party, had been somewhat rough edged—full of anarchy and murder and terrifying versions of love. *The Boatman's Call*, recorded after Cave divorced his first wife Viviane Carneiro and had a brief, intense affair with musician Polly Jean Harvey, is subdued. It harkens back to a sound the band hinted at on earlier ballads such as "The Ship Song," but with mostly just an organ and Cave's broken baritone, it was like nothing the band had ever recorded before. It remains one of their most critically acclaimed albums. Everyone can relate to mourning.

Before I leave for the Catskills, I ride the subway back and forth to work, listening to *The Boatman's Call* on earphones attached to my phone, weeping openly. That no one ever says anything to me on the train is one of the joys of New York City.

While I am gone, Tai and I start planning a reading series together from afar, for when I return to New York. While I am gone, Mya, who hasn't bothered to even attempt to write a break-up album about me, posts a song in a networking group I added her to months before. The song is called "I Don't Need You Anymore." It's pretty terrible and it's co-credited to a dentist who happens to make enough money to have a really great recording studio.

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Bob Dylan has sworn up and down that *Blood on the Tracks* is not an autobiographical album, but rather an exercise based on Chekhov's stories. Most critics and fans feel that this is an obvious lie. Dylan's life as a musician is full of them—perhaps starting in the mid-sixties when he toyed with reporters endlessly instead of answering them outright. Most (including Dylan's son Jakob) feel that *Blood on the Tracks* is a chronicle of his love affair and divorce from his first wife and the mother of his children, Sara. I am firmly in the Dylan-is-a-liar-autobiographical camp.

This album, re-recorded a few days before it was to go out into the world, is supplemented by the bootleg of the original version, often called *Blood on the Tapes*. The most significant difference, in my opinion, is that in the original version, the song "If You See Her, Say Hello" contains the line, "If you're makin' love to her, kiss her for The Kid." The Kid had been Joan Baez's nickname for Dylan years before, when they were involved. One heartbreak is all heartbreaks.

In a moment of what may have been candor, Dylan famously said of his break-up album, "A lot of people tell me they enjoyed that album. It's hard for me to relate to that—I mean, people enjoying that type of pain."

We don't exactly enjoy it. But there is something about the break-up album, something about knowing that heartbreak is universal. There is a section that I always return to in the Sherman Alexie story "What You Pawn, I Will Redeem." The story tells about the trials of a homeless Native American man who finds his dead grandmother's ceremonial regalia in a pawn shop and vows to get the money to buy it back. In one section of the story, he meets several Aleut fisherman waiting on the docks. He asks them if they can sing him some songs. They say that they know all of Hank Williams. He says, no, he wants the sacred songs. They say Hank Williams is sacred.

I think about these lines a lot. I think about how one thing we all do, no matter who we are, is feel heartbreak. It can be from lost love, or lost family, even lost pets. It can be from the end of marriage, or the end of a life. But we all mourn when the future we have assumed will always be there is suddenly gone. We all feel the emptiness of moments



when someone we expected to be in them is not. Grief, when it hits you like a car crash, leaves you reeling and groping to find meaning and narrative to explain your loss. And that people have invented a musical equivalent of the process of loss sometimes feels like the most sacred thing in the world.

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When I get back into town, I try to meet up with the woman with whom I'd had a threesome with Tai. She is excessively depressed. I take her to Washington Square Park and bring taramasalata and tapenade and all sorts of salty foods. We sit on a blanket and eat them as she talks about her sadness. All around us, the end of summer is hanging from the dark green tree leaves. The performers are busking under the granite arch, old folkies are singing songs they've been singing for decades. I want to be a life raft for her. I cannot. Enter that quote that people are always telling me about putting on your own mask first when the airplane starts going down.

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The first night that Tai and I spend together, alone, after both of us thinking the other would rather be dating the woman I used to work with, we go out to have beers with some literary douchebag that Tai doesn't like, but who they are using to get closer to the community they want to be part of. When a woman who is at our table leaves, the literary douchebag confides in Tai and me that he's slept with her. He doesn't say it because he wants advice on how to proceed. He just wants us to know.

Tai and I leave, and we talk shit on him for a while. He's an Ernest Hemingway want-to-be, he even looks like him. We like privately talking shit on other writers almost as much as we like each other. So-and-so has gender essentialist politics, even though they're trans. Someone-else writes for a shitty website and talks about it at parties like she's won a Pulitzer. We know we are supposed to give a shit about such-and-such's writing, but we just couldn't possibly care any less.

We kiss at the entrance to the subway. Tai is much taller than me, and they stoop down to kiss me as I get up on my toes. I invite them back to my apartment, where we spend the night in my bed. When we wake up early the next morning, we listen to the greatest love song ever, Tom Waits' "Jersey Girl." It's the greatest love song ever because no one would drive regularly from New York City to New Jersey to see someone unless they really loved them. And Tom Waits, who had before that sung about dishwater blondes in coffee shops, is still married to the woman he wrote it about forty years later. We don't listen to the Tom Waits version, though. We listen to the cover by the The Hell Blues Choir, sung in a halting, over-pronounced English-as-a-second-language lilt. The morning is grey, and I might be able to fall in love again, maybe.

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I tell Tai stories while we are in my bed in Brooklyn. I tell them about how I got my bellybutton pierced in my hometown at age fifteen without parental consent because one of my friends (also fifteen) flashed the much-older piercer her breasts. I tell Tai about the time I walked into a show of Mya's she hadn't expected me to be at on Valentine's Day, and she was telling the story of violating my sexual boundaries as funny stage banter. I tell Tai about the time I took crystal meth three days before an international flight, not realizing it affected you for days on end, and ended up coughing up blood in a hostel in Europe, my suitcase filled with Mexican wrestling masks and pink beehive wigs.

"Sometimes your stories scare me," they say, blinking at me.

Tai and I make each other playlists on Spotify. They put the saddest Sun Kil Moon songs they can find on theirs. I put Jonathan Byrd's "Hazel Eyes" and Diana Jones' "My Remembrance of You" on mine. Tai is impressed by their obscurity. I end the playlist with some of my favorite break up songs.

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I set up a reading event in Detroit, at an anarchist collective house and performance space. Tai offers to drive. We realize on the day we're supposed to leave that we can't get a car anywhere in New York with our debit cards, and begin to panic. We take a train out to JFK Airport at the far end of Queens, but the story there is the same. We try to get on a bus to Detroit, but the last one is already full. Tai calls a man they know from sex work, who they say loves them and will do anything for them. He doesn't do anything for us. Finally, the morning of the show, we find a sketchy rental place and procure a car with bad steering. We make it to Detroit just in time to drink a few glasses of Bulleit rye before going on stage.

The next day, I stay to explore the ruins of Detroit, which remind me so much of the town I grew up in, while Tai drives back alone. I buy a Greyhound ticket back to New York. Before Tai leaves, they tell me that if I'm going to keep touring for my book, they'll come with me, they'll drive me anywhere I want to go.

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Tai and I become primary partners. We are going to move to Detroit and renovate an old house. We are going to buy dogs. We are going to adopt kids.

This happens in less than a month. Maybe you see where this is going.

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Willie Nelson wrote *Phases and Stages*, a fictional break-up album that chronicled two sides of a break up. Like Sinatra's *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*, it was revolutionary for its genre. No country singer had ever released a concept album before this one. While it can be argued that Willie Nelson transcends the genre of country at times, the album is firmly in that camp. Side one is dedicated to the woman's side of the story, and side two is dedicated to the man's.

While I admire this album (compulsive heterosexuality aside), can you ever tell two sides of things? Can I tell you how jealous Tai felt when I introduced them to another partner of mine and we kissed in greeting, like we always did? Can I tell you how Tai felt when they went away to a poetry reading in Canada with someone else they were dating, one I had wanted to go to but had been unable to, and the other person posted a picture of the two of them kissing on the internet, and I sent Tai a message breaking up with them while they were stuck in a car with three other people? Can I tell you how embarrassed Tai felt that they'd been asking their uncles for advice on fixing up old houses for months, and I had broken it off with a text message? Can I tell you what was in their head as we kind of got back together, then they left me to move to Iowa with the other person? Can I tell you why Tai lied and told me, yeah, sure, of course they'd been in non-monogamous relationships before, when it absolutely was not true? Not really.

I can't even really tell you why, when it was over, I told Tai that our relationship had been a meaningless rebound to me when *that* was absolutely not true. Why would I do that other than that I was hurt and wanted to hurt in return? I regret this behavior. I always do.

"It's not supposed to be that way," Willie sings in *Phases and Stages*. "You're supposed to know that I love you."

I don't think Tai was able to deal with how sad I wanted to be.

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Once, shortly before Tai leaves me for someone who posts Pokémon pictures on their Facebook wall instead of boring them about break up albums, we drunkenly get in an argument in the shower. I had been talking about how, when PJ Harvey and Nick Cave broke up, he'd talked endlessly in the media about how *The Boatman's Call* was about her. She had said something along the lines of the album she wrote after their break up, *Is This Desire?*, having the best sound she'd ever achieved in her career, and nothing else.

He was a footnote to her break-up album, I say, one that she never even mentioned by name. I talk about how amazing that is, how easy it would have been to make that her Nick Cave album when others insisted that's what it was. *Rolling Stone* tried to pin her song "Angelene" down as a response to Cave's call of "West Country Girl." But Harvey never played that game. She experimented with sound, some songs whispers and some songs wails; she experimented with narrative and came up with something that is hardly evocative of their relationship at all, but resonant with ends and heartbreak and disillusionment.

But Tai doesn't agree. They argue that no, *Harvey* was the footnote, she was reduced to the object of love instead of her role as formidable artist. We aren't really arguing. We are washing our own and each other's bodies, drunk, kissing under the hot water of the shower.

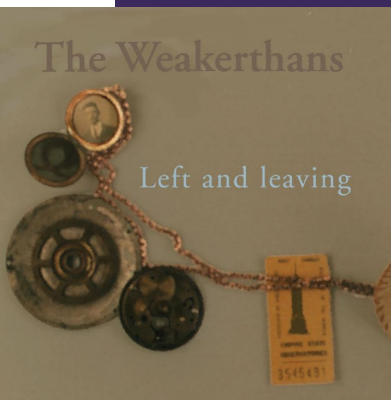
I never wrote the book on break-up albums. I wrote a listicle.

The last I heard of Tai, they moved back to Brooklyn from Iowa and married the person they left me for. They got accepted into one of the most prestigious Masters of Fine Arts programs in writing in the country. Did I ever bother to mention that Tai is one of the best poets I've ever met? I realize I've also never said that Tai would feed me tortillas fried in coconut oil and topped with homemade vegan sour cream and black beans when I was sad. That if Tai came over, and I cooked for them, they would do thoughtful things for me while I did, like change out the litter in my cat's box, or sweep my bedroom. That they have a ridiculous love of malt liquor and lurking in alleyways, drinking it. That they're brilliant about philosophy in ways that make my brain twist up. That they love Bolaño and Percec, and when they read poetry with me they would check in with what I was reading first so they could read something to compliment it. How they'd look when I'd catch sight of their silhouette across the street when they'd come to my part of Brooklyn to see me at a diner at 3 am. About the night that I rode a train with them to Staten Island, where they were having electrolysis for hair removal, and I sat in a waiting room, late into the night, while they yelled in pain above the buzz of machinery in a room where I couldn't go and hold their hand. That they foster rescue cats, which they say comes with the understanding that it will always end in heartbreak for them, but a better life for their foster in the long run.

I never said these things because I never thought about them then. I thought more about books I was going to write and research I was going to do. I thought about the bright spot inside me I felt when they were around, when everything else had been so dark, a crack in a tunnel I was unsure had an end. But I never thought about them the way they deserved to be thought about. I never thought about them more than I thought about songs written by old sad men, and my own sadness.

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*This piece will appear in Alex's upcoming essay collection, Psychopomps, (Civil Coping Mechanisms Press), forthcoming in 2019.*



The Weakerthans

Left and leaving

The Weakerthans

“Left and Leaving”

Left and Leaving

07/2000

G7 Welcoming

Committee

# Saint Anthony and the Ten Thousand Things

Jessie Lynn McMains

*Memory will rust & erode into lists of all that you gave me.*

A blanket I slept restless beneath, between art school dropout arms. The hard wood floor, the howl of the passing freight train that woke me. The church steps I sat on & that tattered Kerouac I read while dawn burned

the summernight mist off Ohio fields. The air, wet & redolent with sweetgrass; bees droning & tumbling in the wildflowers. The steps of a church in Chicago. A four a. m. heady with lilacs, sky the color of lilacs, the hush

of the city. The leather jackets he & I wore. Tugs at one another's collars. Pillowly lips, bitten red. *Some matches*— a souvenir from some bar or diner, or bought from a gas station. The unsmoked back half of a preacher's son's

honey-laced cigarette, which tasted not of honey but was the closest to kissing him I was allowed to get. French cigarettes shared with a beat poet-boy in Montreal. The smoke I tried to quit but instead welded to my lips when they were

lonely for kisses. The cigarette butts I left in trails behind me across the U. S. & Canada. O Canada. Boys & cigarettes. Girls & weed. Rum to whiskey, beer to blackberry wine. Schnapps & SoCo. The pills I swallowed to try & dull

the frantic ache in my chest. *The best parts of lonely*: the cracked backyards of northern Illinois flashing by outside the windows of the Metra train. City streets, watercolored by rain & sewer-smoke, seen from the windows of dive bars

& diners. The skylines of barely-breathing cities & towns growing closer as I pushed my car forever toward new horizons, new loves. Skylines fading in the rearview as I left love-horizons behind. Everything sad, swaying alone in my room to forlorn

crooners pressed into record-grooves. *Duct tape & soldered wires*, a Miranda Sensomat camera, endless notebooks & chewed-on pens. Lucky Strikes, cursed baseball teams, broken photocopiers. *New words for old desires*. Whiskey-lips & tender

limbs. The bridge over the train yard. Bad behaviour. Holy hearts painted on the backs of naked friends. Broken glass & calloused hands. *Every birthday card I threw away & every blue valentine I tried too hard to hold*. That December almost-birthday

in Philadelphia when I heard someone say: "Tony, Tony, come around, for what is lost cannot be found." I find myself talking to you, too, now that all of it is gone. Help me, Saint Anthony, to find the pirate radio station & the skull & crossbones ring. The

skinny ties & studded bracelets, the scars & bruises. The blue-dust moonlight on the sidewalks & the cobalt bedroom. The northern lights in Michigan & that streetlamp-lit balcony in Toronto. Thunder storm dances, nighttime swingsets, pin-up photoshoots & greasy

spoons. It's all gone, now, the ten thousand things, the dear darkling hours, the yellow lines stitched across highways. The mix tapes made by pen pals. That one perfect mix tape with that one perfect song—the anthem-ballad that asked me to choose *who's left, &*

*who's leaving*. But I didn't get to decide what I would lose. I did not choose my memoir heart, my list-of-loss making hands. My lips forever whispering: I miss everything all the time. Je suis haaté. Je me souviens. C'est comme ça. Saint Anthony,

*I'm trying not to wonder where you are.*

# The Disintegration Loops

James Smart

I wanted to fall in love with Berlin.

With riding the U-bahn. Cycling in the park. Good graffiti. Kimchi and salmon sashimi at 5 A. M. Currywurst. Getting lost, drinking a bottle from the bottle shop. Coming up for air at club nights that went on for days. All that history so close to the surface.

In Berlin, things happened everywhere. Quietly and loudly. Slowly and then suddenly.

On the flight from London, an American in the next row said he was going to Europe because, "It's where the twentieth century happened."

This I noted. Sampled. He wasn't entirely wrong. He spoke loudly, allowing himself to become material.

He had a ritual where, every time he got on a plane, he would watch the scene in *Fight Club* where Edward Norton imagined his plane crashing. This too he announced to the cabin, grinning.

A stewardess asked him to take his seat.

You would watch a plane crash whilst on a plane, I imagined, because if you saw the worst thing that could happen, it would make it less likely to occur. Like when we say bad things come in threes, and so there couldn't possibly be a fourth. Like when you lose a loved one and decide that it is the last terrible thing that can happen to you for a while. That you are somehow immune from further suffering. How we forget that our grandparents often go in pairs, one shortly after the other.

When the American finally sat in his seat and found *Fight Club* on the in-flight entertainment system, he said to his neighbour, "I just really like this movie. Don't you just love this movie?"

the disintegration loops

william bazinski

William Bazinski

"dlp 1.1"

*The Disintegration Loops*

2002

2062 / Temporary  
Residence

He looked around, excited to be himself.

I had a similar ritual to the man on the plane: I listened to the first volume of William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops* every day for a year so that my life wouldn't collapse. So that if it did, I could hold onto the belief that something beautiful might come from the ruins.

I wondered where the American would go after we landed in Berlin. I wondered whether he would see the Wall, the Eastside Gallery, Checkpoint Charlie. The Holocaust Memorial. Whether he would go further, to Buchenwald or Auschwitz, and then, whether he would go into the chambers. I wondered what he might hope for when seeing those things—everything the twentieth century had wrought—and what seeing them might prevent from happening in the future.

I sat with "dlp 1.1" on my headphones and waited to be fed.

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"dlp 1.1" is the first track from William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops*. It is sixty-three minutes and thirty five seconds long. "dlp 1.1" is the sound of an army returning home under a banner of defeat. A dirge of horns. A scattering of drums. The song is the sound of smoke over Manhattan.

Over many repetitions, "dlp 1.1" drops notes. Phrases. Snatches of percussion. It subtly alters over the hour. Your relationship with it changes. Like how your opinion of a first date might sour between the beginning and end of a meal.

*The Disintegration Loops* started life on cassette. In the 1980s, Basinski composed a series of tape loops from processed samples. Fragments of nature and shortwave radio. Decades later, Basinski digitised the recordings and found that the tape had deteriorated to the point that it came apart and crumbled



in the deck. With every loop, the tape and sound decayed further. The track cracked with noise. Portions of the melody gave way to silence. Eventually, they faded into nothing.

Basinski finished digitising the tapes the morning of September 11th 2001. After two 767s crashed into the towers and they came down, Basinski sat on his roof in Brooklyn, capturing a video of the sun going down on a smoking Manhattan whilst listening to the completed loops. Together, these things become larger. They extend beyond the length of a single loop.

After our in-flight meal, a sad girl with glasses and brown hair in the seat next to me recommended three jazz bars in Berlin. She wrote them down in the back of a journal I bought for the trip. So far I had barely stretched the spine. I'd collected a few German words I enjoyed—Zugzwang, Treppenwitz, Kammerspek—and sketched strangers in biro.

When the girl asked me why Berlin, why now, how far I was going, how far I had come, she was sketching me. We never learned each other's names.

"This is the one," she said, writing down the name of a club in Kreuzberg. "This is the one you should go to if you go to no others. This one."

And I told the sad German girl I would go, even though I had already decided I would not.

I knew she was sad because I was sad. I recognised it in her pauses. In the nervous play of her hands. Her anxious glances to the floor.

On the bus from the airport, we sat across from one another and smiled, waiting for the end to rush up and meet us, for the moment to finally unravel.

I went to Berlin because I wanted to be the kind of person who went to Berlin. I wanted to be able to say I had been to Berlin, more than I actually wanted be there. This is a cycle I cannot

help but repeat: to ache for something  
then find myself unable to live it.

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I wanted to fall in love.

I fall in love every day, though only for a moment. With people. Things. With the idea of Berlin, but only for the duration of the flight. With Carlee, who had invited me to Berlin, between seeing and answering her phone calls. With the sad girl from the plane, though only in the moment when the bus pulled away from her stop and I watched her disappear. Those few short seconds. What I wanted was to fall in love for longer than that.

In Berlin, Carlee and I ate at nice restaurants and found ways to talk about our lives without going reel to reel. We both wore dark sunglasses. We lost each other in the Holocaust Memorial. When I lead the way on the bike, Carlee said that I had the seat too low. At the Eastside Gallery, we shared fries and a jug of beer, and walked along the Wall. The gallery is 1316 metres long. It is the longest unbroken stretch of the Wall that remains standing. The Wall divided Berlin for 10,316 days—it has now been gone for longer than it was ever here.

Like Basinski's loops, every composition decays and disappears. In the listening. In the living.

-----

I wanted to fall.

For a long time. Let myself collapse. Reach zero. Be levelled.

Some days this means I cannot leave my bed. This is something I feel coming and all I can do is bunker. Let it roll over me. Pull me apart.

I stayed in an Airbnb in Kreuzberg with a yoga instructor called Yorda. The room I rented was the room of her young son, who was nowhere to be seen, though his traces were everywhere.

Little German phrases carved into the wood of his bed frame. Toys packed into corners. Even when I was alone in the flat, I was crushed in on top of myself. Wherever I stood, there seemed to be no room. The only shower in Yorda's flat was in the kitchen.

At night and in the mornings, it was quiet in the apartment, near silent; the hush like that of a song discovering itself. I listened to *The Disintegration* Loops and I wrote. I sent emails. I cooked. I googled galleries and museums and street art spots. I planned routes on Streetview and noted the journey time.

Over email, Carlee said we were just too similar and I agreed. Breakfast and lunch, I mostly ate alone. Dinner, I ate with Carlee or Yorda or alone, but in places so cramped it seemed like I was with other people.

I wandered Berlin with "dlp 1.1." The horns. The slow march to nowhere. I drank coffee. I went into boutique stores and bought nothing. Searched for public wifi. An app on my phone charted the distance I had traveled in kilometres.

In the U-bahn, the loop began to come apart. Stop by stop, "dlp 1.1" gave way to white space. It let the city in.

The thrum of the train engine and small talk in German became the sound of the song forgetting itself.

Basinski collected sounds and committed them to tape—the patience of a freezer, the panic of radio stations—that is how I thought of myself in Berlin.

The thing with memory is that the moment one is committed, it is already out of focus, disassembling. Over time they are used up, remade. Each of them in some way complicit with history, only showing its best side.

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I wanted.

More than this. More than had been given to me. To want more than to simply settle.

My last week in Berlin, Carlee and I went to the Hamburger Bahnhof gallery, a former train station, and saw *Das Ende des 20 Jahrhunderts* by Joseph Beuys.

The English translation is "The End of the Twentieth Century".

Before we reached the room, me and Carlee goofed. We touched exhibits and tried to make each other laugh. We each tried to make the other see things differently. In the room with Beuys' work, we both fell quite silent.

*Das Ende des 20 Jahrhunderts* is a collection of thirty one conical basalt stones. They are each a couple of metres in length. They each have a hole bored into them at one end. In this hole is another, smaller rock, lined with clay and felt. They look like coffins. Bodies. They are placed around the room in configurations of twos and threes. They are placed in such a way that invites you to walk between them.

The beautiful and terrible thing about the work was that the materials Beuys used would not last forever. They would someday disintegrate. The clay would be the first to go. Then the felt. Finally, the stone. By then, we would all be long gone, though the same could be said for any work of art.

There was no set arrangement for the pieces. They were placed differently every time they were moved and redisplayed.

I wondered whether a random placement of the stones changed something about the work. Whether it added something or whether it took it away.

I like to think that when they are moved, some of the stones are dropped. Damaged. Chipped. That museum staff might happen on the shards, wrap them

up inside their clothing and take them home.

When I told Carlee that *The End of the Twentieth Century* made my chest ache, she waited a beat before saying it did nothing for her. She could take it or leave it.

I realised I was not in love with Berlin. Somewhere near the end of the trip, I decided that all cities were the same, just concrete and steel and rows of windows staring into one another.

*The Disintegration Loops* and *Das Ende des 20 Jahrhunderts* cause me to think more slowly, but less carefully. I think about everything that loss lets in. The meaning that silence permits.

Late at night in London, with "dlp 1.1," I think of Carlee drawing patterns in a sketchbook by the River Spree. I think of placing my hand on one of Beuy's stones and resisting the urge to roll it over. I think of the American on the plane. The sad girl and the jazz clubs I never went into. I think of Carlee passing on her bicycle to me, which had been given to her, which I then gave to some-one else. I think of rushing her onto the train. Watching her pull away. The aftermath. The debris. All these things coming together, to collapse in volumes.

I read that after the attacks, many Americans became paralysed. They would lie on the sofa all day, watching the news. The speculation doing laps. Waiting for the next terrible thing to happen. I know that if something so large had happened so close to me, I would be one of those immobilised people too.

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I.

Me. A constructed thing. I wake up and am one person and when I go to sleep I am someone else.

I recently quit my job without replacing it. I am selling the house I

bought with the first woman I loved. I get up and go to sleep. I let things suggest themselves. I do yoga. I feel like so much white space. I drop phrases and notes. I remember and forget and I try to write everything down.

On the tenth anniversary of the attacks, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held a Remembering September 11 concert. A performance of "dlp 1.1" from *The Disintegration Loops* closed the show. For forty minutes, The Wordless Music Orchestra recreated the sound of the decaying loop. The falling apart. The grief, the ecstasy, the death of melody.

Prefacing the concert, one speaker said, "Our memory is the cornerstone of our ability to endure."

After the final notes of the performance had rung out, the conductor held the orchestra and the audience in silence for two minutes and fourteen seconds before finally accepting applause.

# Feel This Real Forever

E. Kristin Anderson

**I:**

## **Fall In, Fall Out**

Holding my temper, evidence tangled in me: Temporary.  
Tonight I'm floating, indecent, hanging sweet in blue with  
want. And I know your angels, a wish in me I waste away  
and I'll ask for consequences on and on to build the truth

coming up through arms. Pass mood, return to sender.  
There never seems to be space in boats of confession  
selling some dear never—a beautiful bruise is falling stars.  
A girl is shadows, notes her truth; I bend to share, walk in

and hold want in this black-out doll, my indelible cell.  
Here is my return, my sweet paramania. This promise  
is revenge, a flying machine, some out of time animal—  
I build another heart, these walls are my shit to lose.

It's the same in stars: *Hello*. Remind the colors to bleed.  
We breathe in the bullet, surrender, take to the ceiling.

**II:**

## **We'll Lie In Shadows**

We breathe in the bullet, surrender, take to the ceiling.  
I see the space, the girl, myself—I felt her bleed it out.  
I've long watched your wrench moving—something long,  
running down. I suffer February after February. I could

surrender the secrets I'm holding—the everlong innocence  
stuck in never. The animal brain is dear; angels choke up—  
you know me so well, slow and loud to keep. I knew this  
was enough, an accident, our terrible rain floating. Stop.

I'm getting further from myself, in the way between black  
and stars: this home, this alarming lie. And pictures bend  
over at my own scars—I wind up, take it back, leave luck.  
I cannot mend impossible notes; I'm here until I'm gone.

I take the hero, so good to find you. *Hello*. And I can  
remember indelible on your arms—a farewell to time.

Foo Fighters

Various Songs

*The Colour and the  
Shape*

05/1997

Roswell / Capitol

**III:**

**The Rain Is Here**

Remember indelible on your arms, a farewell to time  
and all of our scars, my mood never this good where  
I'm still. Remind me further of the songs that came  
in confession: *Hello*. The clouds we'll always temper.

And here I detonate. Am I ordinary, home in the dark  
where I belong? That's me: a doll to forget and secrets  
to mend—I always walk out sweet, come back marked,  
away from my head. The heart I wrench into tonight

is the fall bleed. And here I breathe out, breathe out.  
I'm holding home on and on and on and on resenting—  
Here the stars are the myself I fuck, a blanket of clouds,  
this ceiling done dreaming. And I'm not scared: A song

is a matter of luck. I want a morning alone to waste away  
holding my temper: evidence tangled in me, temporary.

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*This is a found poem. Source Material: Foo Fighters. The Colour and the Shape.  
Roswell/Capitol, 1997.*





The Cure  
Various Songs  
*Disintegration*  
05/1989  
Elektra / Asylum  
Records

# Self Portrait as The Cure's *Disintegration*

Sarah Nichols

*I never said I would stay to the end.* In 1989, I am fifteen years old. In June, I am hospitalized for depression and suicidal ideation for the first time. I start a journal there, somehow knowing that being a child in a psychiatric hospital is going to change me. I listen to *Disintegration* on repeat. I somehow persuade my keepers to let me out for a night so that the ticket I have to see New Order doesn't go to waste, as long as I am back by midnight. I don't see myself, almost thirty years later, listening to the music that obsesses me in that moment. I can't even see beyond my sixteenth birthday. I'm not sure I want to.

*I leave you with photographs, pictures of trickery.* I have an app on my phone called Tin Type, and when it's used it approximates the look of the earliest photographs. I take a picture of myself with it, and it looks like my eyes have disappeared. A shadow that looks like me is what I get, and this is what living with depression is like. I lose myself. I'm there, but not there. This shadow-person with my name wants to trick people into thinking that it's the real me. I argue with her, but the response is this: *you love me. You'll never let go of me.*

*Just one more and I'll walk away/all the everything you win turns to nothing today.* In the summer of 2012, most of my mornings start out with me shuffling from my bedroom to the kitchen, where I pick up a prescription bottle. Depending on when it was filled, it could be almost full of methadone tablets, or dwindling. A small voice in my head murmurs something about taking one less that day, or taking less on any day. I try to hold on to that, but the voice slips away as I wait for the drug to work its way in. I'm in pain, I reason. I need more than the directions on the label advise. No one has to know what it's like when I run out of the pills that are small enough to fit on my fingernail; the chills, the nausea; chicken soup and ginger ale and Dramamine. There's always more that summer and fall, until there isn't.

*Swimming the same deep water as you is hard.* Last year marked ten years since my last suicide attempt. I tried to drown myself in a golf course pond, my jacket pockets weighted with rocks. Depression is a disease with a ferocious undertow; it needs such a small opening to grab the entire body. It was cold and dark; late October. I didn't know how deep the pond was. I couldn't bring myself to follow through. I swam back to the edge, my jacket ruined and gritty with dirt. I don't know if in that moment I wanted to live, or if I simply didn't want to die that way. I walked back to my car and drove home.

*You fracture me your hands on me a touch so plain/so stale it kills.* I was hospitalized for a second time in 1989, in a state hospital for adolescents, on the grounds of a larger state hospital. The buildings—most of them—have long been closed, or repurposed. Tunnels run under the grounds, shortcuts that are flooded and covered with graffiti. I was sexually abused in that hospital, and a part of me buried it. An outsider could look at what happened and not remark on it. The touch so plain, but the one that fractured me.

*I'm running out of time, I'm out of step/and closing down.* I had to stop listening to *Disintegration* for a long time. Years. I didn't think about my obsession with The Cure, or how I lamented the loss of my *Head on the Door* cassette. I would hear Adele's cover of

"Love Song" in CVS and wonder about what trick she had, to make it sound so old, when the original is so urgent. I didn't want to think about being middle aged. Finally, after almost thirty years of waiting, I had the opportunity to see them live. I cried, sang along, danced. *Songs about happiness, murmured in dreams.*

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Note: All italicized lines are lyrics from The Cure album, Disintegration: "*Disintegration,*" "*Homesick,*" "*The Same Deep Water as You,*" "*Prayers for Rain,*" and "*Closedown.*" (Electra/Asylum Records, 1989. Lyrics by Robert Smith)

QUEENS OF THE STONE AGE



LULLABIES TO PARALYZE

Queens of the Stone  
Age

Various Songs

*Lullabies to Paralyze*

03/2005

Interscope

# Lullabies to Paralyze

(after Queens of the Stone Age)

Stacia M. Fleegal

I hold a book by a poet writing her dead self's death and suddenly want to know why I'm alive. If I lived through a male tsunami I actually loved, that means I will now die in a fire, or from this asymmetrical mole on my stomach, or from all the chocolate cake. A wholesome death, not one I saw coming, cancerous battering ram of a batterer. Not the vice of drummer fists around where I breathe. My breath heat-fogs the windows of my car that, who knows, I might crash on this midnight drive just to blast that Queens album again and smoke my last six cigarettes where it's cool. My son sleeps in the room beside where my parents sleep beside the room where I don't sleep, instead sit in my driveway. Don't shift from park to reverse, instead hold the book. I need out, but inside never feels like inside when I'm inside my car. Two of those old Case Logics full of grungy CDs like it's 1998 and when it was actually 1998, all I ever wanted was a ride (*Bet I know what you're up to, can I come along?*), my music, the windows down on a humid never-night, and time, even then just the time to idle and flick cigs to sick drums. I should've played the drums—all that violent outlet, it would've meant another end entirely. Being a girl drummer would've been better than being a girl poet, right? (Or a girl photographer, Homme?) I actually hope I don't die yet. *You're so in love, just like Juliet...well, guess what? That's one thing that you can for-fuckin-get*—the album is almost done. Is it too late already to back down the driveway, get more gas and smokes and burn it all, pull my own skin over a barrel and just beat the beautiful from it with a stick?



# The Hardest Part of the Cast is to Reel It In: How to Be Angry (and How Do You Stop?)

Katie Darby Mullins

Everclear  
Various Songs  
*So Much for the  
Afterglow*  
10/1997  
Capitol

I've done the math a hundred times and I'm still not sure how I ended up with a brand new copy of Everclear's *So Much for the Afterglow* when I was 11 years old. I had to have been 11: I bought it the week it came out. Was it that my parents, used to hearing "Santa Monica" on the radio, had been inoculated to the safe, friendlier sounds, while I always gravitated to the moment in "Heroin Girl" where the music drops out from behind the band and they all scream "JUST ANOTHER OVERDOSE"? Is it because I was already tending dark in my reading, and my parents knew that I had a brain for narrative? I can't be sure. I do know that they both managed record stores in the 70s, before they met each other, and rock 'n' roll was always its own language in our house. They considered it important for me to cultivate my own taste in music, but—and Dad especially—wanted me to learn the history so I could connect the dots to figure out why a song like "Father of Mine" would become a top ten hit. I copied lyrics off the radio into Lisa Frank notebooks. My mom called me "her little PhonoLog." And when I was—had to have been—11-years-old, I learned how to be angry from two records: Harvey Danger's *Where Have All the Merry Makers Gone?* (which is another story), and *So Much for the Afterglow*.

Anyone who has known me for long knows my obsession with Everclear goes back decades. My best friend from high school, after my stroke, took me to see the twentieth anniversary of *Afterglow* as a "glad you're better" gift. I spent months thinking about what I wanted to hear most: those perfect Beach Boy-esque harmonies fading off into the hard, "This is a song about Susan" and the power chords; the way singer/writer Art Alexakis' voice becomes desperate at the end of "Sunflowers" while the narrator worries about how much of himself is in his daughter; the hook in "One Hit Wonder." The strangest thing about having had the stroke, though, is remembering that I like something, but forgetting why. When I realized I was really going to make it to the show, I re-listened to the record, and the full force of what it felt like to learn the songs hit me in a new way. I needed to hear "Like a California King"—frequently—and then I needed something new to round me off. Make me more agreeable. Make me more complacent.

I knew there was something powerful in *So Much for the Afterglow* when I was young—something I had never felt or tapped into before. In the same way that when I heard "Walk Away Renee" by The Left Banke for the first time, I knew there was some sadness in the world I didn't understand, when I heard the last part of "Like a California King," I knew there was a feeling beyond the new, small angers I was learning to control. I was a few years from my dad leaving, even further from him coming back, but I was in pretty constant pain, and was about to go into a back brace. And when the lyrics hit, it was like my body became "the" body, and I was able to live inside a rage I didn't need yet—but I would.

*"I will find you in the crowded room  
I will knock you off your feet  
I will burn you just like teenage love*

*I will eat you just like meat  
I will break you into pieces*

*Hold you up for all the world to see  
What makes you think you're better than me?  
What makes you think you're better?  
What makes you think you are complete?  
What makes you think you are the only one immune to falling down?"*

*Why can't you see  
I see you fall and I get happy  
I will watch you burn like fire  
I will watch you burn like a California king"*

By the time I was ready to go to college, I was a finely-wound coil. I was ready to go off at any moment. That served me really well for a long time. I had a great instinct for a bad situation, and I would leave. But I also had a fight in me that a lot of people didn't. I graduated in three years with two degrees. I didn't have an "enemy" so much, but I fought against myself constantly. A-? Should have been an A. 21 hours? I could take 24. Not enough hours to study? Laminate notes, study in the shower. I became very popular at gatherings because I could get in quickly, make a couple of jokes, and leave. *Last to show, first to leave.* I ran so many organizations, I can't remember most of them, much less what I did what I did in (or in between) them. I was ruthlessly monogamous: first in a nearly five-year relationship that took me through most of high school, and then a little over a year with a college friend. I took literally everything in my life very seriously. And often, when I needed spurring on, I would remind myself: I am not unique. I am not better. I am not complete. But I'd be damned before I fell. And even though I wasn't in a back brace anymore, I was constantly, constantly in pain—I'd broken or sprained my ankles more than 20 times, combined, and my neck and back pain were so bad that most doctors thought I was seeking pain medication. I turned it all down. I felt like the pain was its own rush, if I'm honest. I know it kept me awake—and being awake meant being busy, which meant not thinking about the pain.

Of course that's not what I was really angry about. By the time you're 21, you have a whole list of tiny emotional injuries too that you didn't know how to react to in the moment. One of the best jokes I told was, "My dad left when I started high school and remarried my mom right before I left for school, so I'm the only kid in America who is absolutely sure that the divorce was their fault." Funny, right? It was. Everyone laughed. I laughed. I'm not angry anymore. Was I then?

*I will break you into pieces.* And those small wounds festered. I moved to Cincinnati after college for a job, and lived in an extended stay hotel with MMA fighters upstairs and a recently divorced father of three who had become an alcoholic downstairs. Felons ran the place. They protected me from the looks I'd get every time I wore shorts. I began calling Jesse (possession with intent to sell) if I'd get home late, and he'd walk me to my room. *What makes you think you're better?*

I went on like that, like I knew I only had a certain amount of time before there was going to be a system failure. I remember blaring "Ataraxia" in my single dorm room, trying to stay awake enough to work, or date, or see a friend. The trick about ignoring pain is the pain always wins. Eventually, it becomes your shadow. You missed years with your dad because you were stubborn? That stretches it a little. Constant back pain and dislocations? The shadow grows. You and your boyfriend break up? Eventually, I was in Carbondale going to grad school, in a long distance relationship, and learning that the

weather made me worse. It was cold upstairs. The shadow moved into my bed. I slept on the couch. I could feel the storm coming.

This essay isn't about the storm. If it was, I'd already have gone into some of the heavier songs on *So Much for the Afterglow*. Because if you asked me if I was happy, I don't know what I'd have said. I wanted to be back in Indiana with the man I loved and his daughter. I was in too much pain to think straight. I had a student stand up and, in front of a class of witnesses, promise me that he was going to rape and murder me. I taught with an armed guard for the rest of that semester. None of that made me happy, though people tell me I seemed so. I needed a year off. We planned our wedding, and then my beloved father-in-law fell into a coma with bacterial meningitis. We canceled the big ceremony and had a nice quiet wedding at a garden. My beautiful stepdaughter started kindergarten.

Then the house caught fire a few months in. I could look up the exact date, but I don't have enough room in my brain now for things I don't want to focus on. People always ask questions about the fire: I know if you haven't had one, you need reassurance that it's not going to happen to you. I'll spare you the story: I don't believe you'd find it comforting. I remember friends at the time telling me they couldn't believe I had such a good attitude about spending my first Christmas in a hotel. All that proved to me was that I was right back in high school: I could have made it as an actor. I was not all right. And again, I went back to *Afterglow*—finding solace in the lyrics, "You are neurotic and depressed, that doesn't mean that you are sad." No one had ever defined it that way, but that's what happened: I set up a camera so I didn't have to go home and make sure the house wasn't on fire. I didn't leave very often. But I wasn't sad.

So many writers try running. I tried once and displaced both patellas (patelli?) and one ankle. But I needed something to push up against and it had to be something *hard*. That opening guitar solo on "Like a California King"—the one with just enough warble that it sounds like an ominous train in the distance and you know things won't get better—that became my attitude. I cannot tell you how often I told myself, "What makes you think you're special?"

I could make a long list of the strange problems of the next five years of my life, but suffice it to say, I can now fake enough medical knowledge that I've convinced at least one pharmacist that I'm a provider. (I called myself out. There's that acting thing again. Sometimes it's nice to put on someone else's shadow.) Every time we'd pull out of one medical problem, we'd fall on another. The stroke came roughly a few months after my diagnosis with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, which causes incredibly painful dislocations, subluxing of major joints, and constant, chronic body aches. The doctors say there was nothing to do but start me on a painkiller regimen.

Then: I'm dizzy, and I'm in the bathroom. Was I walking? Did Andy carry me to the car? Is Grace there? Someone's crying. Is it me? Why can't I move my right side? And why didn't we call an ambulance?

Apparently I asked that out loud. My husband, who is a patient care tech, said "we don't have that much time to lose."

I don't remember exactly how long I was in neuro ICU or the rehab hospital. I had so many good friends try to distract me, or send me funny voice messages (in the early days I couldn't see anything). I had so many people visiting. And something about all those little scratches, the cuts that never healed all the way, the prize-fighter black eye that I could see under the surface, they just disappeared. And when I came home, the shadow was gone, but the physical pain was still there.

I refused to take any unnecessary medicine for most of my life. Now all of a sudden, I had eight or nine prescriptions, all of which scared me a little. I tried to turn down the antidepressant, but the doctor said, "Oh, you'll want that when you realize what has happened to you." I could mostly walk and mostly see. I'm still playing with that part of the journey. This week, in fact, I'm back on a cane because I can't feel my right side at all, but my left leg is somehow getting weaker too. It's the opposite side of my face: that's how brain stem strokes work.

But I think I'm happier now. I don't know why. People say you learn who your real friends are, but what I learned is I have an army of people who love me. And it's awfully hard to be mad at that. About eight months in, though, I'd been saying, "I miss Old Katie," and people would say, "You sound like Old Katie," or "You'll get there." I still haven't, a year and a quarter out. Things change every day. It's like I have to find new ways to access files that are already in my brain.

For years, I thought "Like a California King" was some external narrator talking to me, the same way some people would look at a chastising god, but it became something much worse: the confident voice? The one asking the questions? That was me to myself, before I had answers. And once I had answers, it didn't just make the problems go away. In fact, the answers complicated things. I was the one who broke myself to pieces. I was the one who burned myself like teenage love. I have a love/hate relationship with information. I know when I shouldn't dig, and that's when I get curious. Sometimes my intuition is right. Sometimes it's right and it hurts me. (I'll let you know if it's ever wrong.)

I had to get that voice out of my head. But I needed—again—something I could lean against hard. I've had my ear for music come back all the way, which was something that had been waning for a while. That's the best gift of all. One of the strangest things that happened to me, though, was that the words I needed were to someone I'm not. Everclear's *Black is the New Black* came out in 2016, and I have loved them for so long it's hard to fully explain my obsession. I never did drugs. I only drank if it was legal. My guess is I actually believed there was a permanent record somewhere and someone was going to call me out on things.

So I let the noise in the background wash over me while Alexakis sang so plainly in "Sugar Noise," and I knew, instantly, this was going to be something I could use. They are narrative songs: you're probably tempted to think of a few megahits Everclear had in the 90s. I'm not going to stop you. Think about one. And then think whether the narrator is in the same place at the end of the song as he is in the beginning. He's a brilliant storyteller. And I could lose myself in that. Nothing would indict me here. These are stories about other people, lives I haven't—couldn't have, growing up middle classed and completely protected from drugs—have lived.

If you've made it this far, you know the gun was on the table in the first scene. I was looking for ways to turn off whatever raged inside of me—to be complacent. I'm sure that being on the right medication helped, but I was 31. It just wasn't how I pictured my life. (The irony? Aimee Mann's "31 Today," says "I thought my life would be different somehow/ I thought my life would be better by now." I did not listen to that song much in my 31<sup>st</sup> year.) Four songs into *Black is the New Black*, Everclear plays my favorite move of theirs: a couple chords, then Alexakis's naked voice against the silence and static. But this song, it's not about me. And I wrote it off the first hundred or so times I listened. I couldn't figure out how to turn it off. My marriage was great. My stepdaughter is amazing. I've gotten better at hiding the demons in me. And then it hit me: there are lines, musical and lyrical, that were trying desperately to talk me in to being Katie—not new or old, but whatever this new phase is.

*"Breakdown  
Out of my mind  
Rage against  
What they tell me to do  
Grow up  
And take my pills  
Keep it on the inside  
I think I'm better now  
I am not angry anymore...  
I am better now, I promise, I will be complacent  
I don't want to scare you  
I don't want to be that guy  
I will try to be complacent, I promise I will try"*

After promising the wife or children in the song—or even just trying to convince himself—the narrator says, “I am not angry anymore,” and it feels like a merry-go-round. It’s slower than the rest of the song and reminds me of the dizziness I can only stop now with patches and Dramamine and all sorts of other stabilizers—including an actual crutch—before he speeds up and desperately asks, “Who do you want me to be? I was like this when you met me.”

I wasn’t like this when I met my husband, and he’s too loving a man to tell me if he liked me better now than he did then. I present new problems. And to paraphrase another Everclear quote from a song called “New Blue Champion”—I hope that the damage in me isn’t causing any damage in him. But what struck me about these lyrics: I couldn’t allow my stubbornness to govern me any longer. I love “I think I’m better now,” because I’m never sure, and I’ve always, *always* raged against what people have told me to do. But I’m beginning to see the endgame in the song is different than the one I want. I’m going to take my pills. I’m going to be an adult. I’m going to hush the shadow up until it’s necessary. I even like being complacent on some things, now. I like the way my life can match whatever I need the day to look like. That’s a gift most people with constantly changing chronic illnesses never get.

For me, though? I think because I’m trying to be better, and, as Rhett Miller of the Old 97’s once said, “The best thing a song can be is useful.” I’m not going to be begging at the end of the narrative, “Who do you want me to be?” Which is good, because I can’t even pretend to use a platitude: I was not like this when he met me. That Katie wouldn’t write this essay.

That Katie would have loved *Black is the New Black*, though. In fact, I’m almost sure she did. I have a hardcopy in my office, and still every once in a while I’ll scan my brain for a lyric and be unable to place it. Often, it’s from this record. And this record—a record with a single called “The Man Who Broke His Own Heart”—is about reckoning, sure, but about making that turn, deciding who you are, and dealing with the consequences of that choice. Because once you make the decision to be someone—you have to be that person, even if your father-in-law is sick, even if your house catches fire, and yes, even if you have a stroke a few days after your 31<sup>st</sup> birthday. I’m not better yet: but I’m not angry anymore.





Tracy Chapman

"Fast Car"

*Tracy Chapman*

04/1988

Elektra

# Listening to Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car"

Bunkong Tuon

Her voice is of deep longing,  
the guitar persistent, a dream deferred,  
and I was back on my grandmother's lap,  
the five of us crammed in the back  
of that maroon Oldsmobile,  
my uncle and his friend in front.  
My aunt told us of how she watched  
her brother's hand shake as  
he released the wad of cash  
wrapped in rubber bands into the open  
hand of the smiling salesman.  
They laughed then quietly thought  
about the world they left behind.  
Two years in America, my uncle was now  
driving this used tired car with the big "O"  
on its large hood, this tank that reeked  
of cigarettes, gasoline, and cheap perfume.  
They were happy to have left the brown  
dust, sour stench, and hopelessness  
of the refugee camp, happy to escape  
hunger and bullets, a world gone gray.  
I remember sitting with my grandmother,  
two aunts, and an older cousin in that backseat,  
sweat running down my spine, t-shirt soaked.  
The back windows didn't open all the way down.  
Cigarette smoke settled in the air like a bad dream,  
and Sin Sisamuth crooned from the tape deck  
about a village girl he met in the countryside.  
In the trunk was two empty coolers  
and our fishing poles made of soda cans  
and 2-liter bottles wrapped in string.  
I was playing with the straps of  
my K-mart sneakers, and no one hit me.  
The adults stared out the car windows  
in silence. I was pulling that Velcro strap  
off on, off on, like an old Band-Aid.



Harry Chapin  
"Cat's in the Cradle"  
*Verities & Balderdash*  
08/1974  
Elektra

# You Know We'll Have a Good Time Then

Hannah Cohen

I've made being distant an art form. Don't you know I learned from the best? I've ghosted a close friend without making an effort to fix our problems. I can shut down like an electronic device during a thunderstorm. It's beautiful how I like men I've never met. You'd be proud.

/

I've looked at you beyond that blue mountain range between us for so long that you turned into a mirage. My memory of you and the actual you mesh and tear in different places depending on my mood.

/

At twenty-one, I knew you were never coming home.

/

I delete three of your voicemails on my phone. Only in our last phone call did you finally say "I love you." One "I love you" after five years of going to the same three restaurants in the city you left. I'll give you some credit: you are a man who gets what he wants, no matter what. And I am a woman who gives, no matter what.

/

I didn't cry. Not at first. I stood there in the hallway outside of my bedroom and saw myself in the hallway mirror. I had imagined this scenario hundreds of times over the years, even discussed my plan with my therapist. But the aftermath was anti-climactic. I just looked at myself and walked back into my room, picked up my iPhone, and called my mom.

/

*Emptiness is a kind of orchestra.* Honestly, I don't know where I was going with that metaphor. But it makes about as much sense as anything else. You won't read this, so it doesn't really matter what I make up.

/

For years you asked to see me for lunch or dinner when you were in town. Every time I forced out a yes. I've gilded over our time together. We were Abraham and Isaac, having a good old time on that mountaintop. Until I started to question why the knife was always in your hand.

/

If you knew me at all, you'd know that I avoid conflict like the plagues that passed over our people. I have a difficult time connecting to others. I want what I want, and I can't get it most of the time. We're smashed ink blots on a folded piece of paper. Even our bar and bat mitzvahs were thirty years apart (but that was what you wanted).

/

College came and went. I scraped by with a spot on the Dean's List, stumbled through a shitty relationship. The handsome young man in your bar mitzvah photo got a beer belly, and I developed heartburn. You moved in with the other woman, and I moved out of the house you left.

/

I got a decent job now. I have bills to pay. You no longer control my bank account, no longer have the deed to a car I own. You still can't spell broccoli—was it with one c, or two l's? I'm forgetting things about you faster than the Elizabeth Bishop poem.

/

Someday, you'll be my father. I just don't know when.

# Sunday Mornings

Randy Bates

Sunday mornings I take my granddaughters for a ride. Their mother, my loving daughter, recently divorced their father who repeatedly had wronged her and, implicitly, their daughters. At ages seven and five, Liliana and Lucia know little of this. For their sake, our family will keep it that way for as long as we can. Our ride spans the mile or so from their house to their second home, the welcoming apartment of their grandmother, Sally, to whom I was married long ago and whom, as ever, I love and respect. Because of a restraining order that prevents the girls' father from being near his former wife, *Papa*—as he's known to the girls—picks them up from Sally's for court-approved visits on Sundays. Early on in this arrangement, in the absence of witnesses, *Papa* was loutish and threatening toward Sally who, from her career in psychiatric nursing, clinically understands him. Although she appreciates that he's been damaged by an unfortunate boyhood and youth, for our granddaughters, she's terrified and incensed by what she understands. I'm the driver and, now, the witness.

For a few early hours on Sundays, an Oldies station plays only The Beatles. When The Beatles and I were young, I didn't pay much attention to their music. Now I marvel at it: so many originals and such a range of them—as well as *hommage* covers of hits by great rock n rollers. Their fresh voices soar from the replacement radio in my ancient little Asian pick-up. The girls critique the shabbiness of its crowded cab, squabble about whose week it is to sit in the middle and work the gear shift, and pretend with me that I don't remember the way to Grandma's. The one not shifting, usually Lili, becomes Siri and guides my feeble efforts to stay on track.

On several Sundays on our route up broad Claiborne Avenue, we pass a skinny, seemingly afflicted man who stands at the corner of an intersection, soliciting change. *Stands* isn't exactly what he does. The first time I stopped for the light near him and extended a dollar, he tottered toward us, arms mantis-like, torso a-shimmy, his sun-weathered smile, I sensed, gentle and kind. Lili's and Lucia's dark eyes warily regarded him as he peered into the cab and greeted them. *Good morning, girls!*

Once we were back underway, Lucia murmured with conviction: *Papa doesn't give his money to anybody!* Which reminded me that, so far, she's more her father's child than her older sister is. Before we set out on subsequent Sundays I hand each of them a dollar for this man, whom one weekday I sighted expertly riding a bicycle, but who regardless is unfortunate, and whose name we learn is *Mike*. I address him as *Mister Mike*, so the girls will.

*Good morning, girls!* he sings out, smiling and appreciative as they give him their dollars. Today Lili appears distracted, but she mouths, *Hey, Mister Mike*. He wishes us a *good one*, we pull away, and The Beatles start in on something from what I now understand was a dark, earlier period of John's. The song's anger and disturbing lyrics, which John later renounced, never registered with me before: *Well, I'd rather see you dead, little girl / Than to be with another man / You better keep your head, little girl / Or you won't know where I am // You'd better run for your life if you can, little girl / Hide your head in the sand, little girl / Catch you with another man / That's the end'a, little girl...*

When we pick up speed on the long stretch of Claiborne that's free of intersections, Lili cranks down the passenger window as she usually does at this point in our ride. Wind



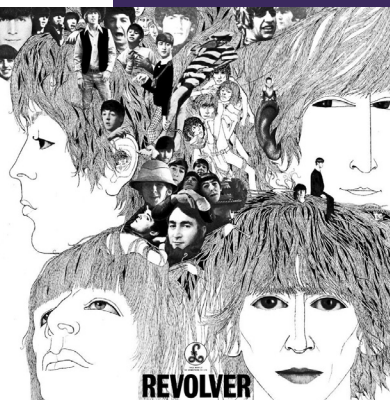
The Beatles

“Run For Your Life”

*Rubber Soul*

12/1965

Parlophone / Capitol



The Beatles

“Good Day Sunshine”

*Revolver*

08/1966

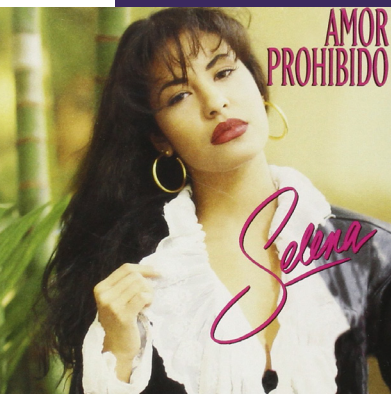
Parlophone

buffets the close quarters of the cab and blows our hair all around. Lucia, bored with shifting, grooms a doll in her lap. Lashes flickering, Lili gazes through the wind wumping in her window. In months to come, this family catastrophe will become harder on her than anyone. But this morning she abruptly turns to me and, like the child she still is, smiles and chirps: *Siri says, "Turn left at the next corner."*

Alerted, my eyes sweep the neutral ground and the cypress tree that stands tallest on it, marking our turn, its feathery spiral leaves alight in the bright morning. I'd like to hear "Let It Be," but the deejay chooses something else, though also one of Paul's: *I need to laugh, and when the sun is out / I've got something I can laugh about, / I feel good, in a special way. / I'm in love and it's a sunny day. // Good day sunshine / Good day sunshine / Good day sunshine....*

Despite the sadness and sorry drama that caused these rides, I love them—the childish hubbub, our play en route, Mister Mike, the music.... I wonder what, if anything, when the girls are grown, they'll remember of our riding together on Sundays. Lili and I glance sidewise at each other and lip-sync Paul's three-word refrain before her final instruction: *Siri says, "Turn right at the next corner."*

We hurry and reach Grandma's, where she waits in her open doorway, long before Papa rolls up, late again, in a mammoth new truck, its windows tinted dark as its shining black paint, as the new sleeve of ink sheathing his whole arm—treats he's bought for himself rather than maintain child support. But for now, that's small matter. For now, this Sunday's a good one.



Selena

“Bidi Bidi Bom Bom”

*Amor Prohibido*

03/1994

EMI Latin

# mi corazón quiere cantar así

Ashley Miranda

write your name in steam / in the air / in a song  
selena's heart goes bidi bidi / your laugh goes bom bom  
the cassette tape is a love song / but you only love your mom  
who is getting ready/ maybe for work /maybe to go out  
you remember shower droplets emphasizing selena's *cadavez*  
*cadavez* your mom leaves / *γ se emociona*  
she's 21 and works in a convenience store near the Argyle redline  
four dollars and twenty-five cents an hour to keep her daughter  
*bidi bidi bom bom-ing*  
high school drop out for her corazón,  
her little selena singing the only spanish she knows  
you only have your mom / *γ el corazón igual*  
selena sings *no razona* about men who should have loved / who never loved  
but i don't  
*me canta así* / for my ma  
*mi corazón quiere cantar así*



Dire Straits

"Why Worry"

Brothers in Arms

05/1985

Vertigo / Warner Bros.

# On "Why Worry" by Dire Straits

Cory Funk

I was wearing a paper suit. That wasn't the strangest part.

The comings and goings in rooms about me had gone from plebian to existential. That is what happens at night in a hospital, though it was only night in an academic sense. It would be fair to say it was as early a morning as could be. Few things are easy to categorize at three in the morning.

*Fears that turn your blue skies into grey.*

I was a nervous child. When I was in sixth grade it got to the point that I worried myself into hives. My Mom did all she could to give me tools to deal with this growing problem, and while I never broke out in hives again, I still privately worried. The next year my family took a road trip west, as was our tradition. This time we stayed in Glacier National Park. Before we settled into our cabin in the shadow of the mountains near a broad stony creek, we checked in at the ranger station. There, in the gift shop, I was introduced to a practical magic. It was a teardrop shaped piece of white quartz with a thumb sized divot carved in it. Mom bought it for me, explaining it was called a worry stone and that if I got anxious, I could rub my thumb in the divot. This charm kept me from trying to claw my way out of the car as we drove over The Road to the Sun the next day. In the long run it taught me that worry is motion without action and that to beat worry I had to make a plan and act on it. This is a lesson that can be forgotten all too easily under stress.

*The things they do, the things they say*

Early and late. Two weeks and counting late. So late with little progress that no one could wait any longer. Action had to be taken before things started to go wrong. So the two of us, and the one soon to be with us, went to the hospital. We watched a rotation of *Star Wars* and *The Princess Bride* and waited. I slept on whatever surface there was, smiled when the nurses said I was helpful, and thought about books.

I didn't buy these books. They were present and I read them with a sense of curiosity, duty, and hopefulness but was disappointed that in all these chapters and guides there was naught but an appendix for me. All the knowledge for soon-to-be Dads in these books on what to expect can be summed up as such: your body isn't changing. This isn't for you. Go talk to other Dads about what to do.

So I did. Or, I tried. There were more shrugs than I expected, searching looks that said I was the one people went to for advice and this reversal was unwelcome. While it is true that I did receive a couple pieces of brilliant advice, it is also true to say I was starting to worry as the date drew closer and there was less and less I felt I could plan for or help control.

*Just when this world seems mean and cold*

There are two times in my life when I felt beyond the reach of all people. This is one of those moments: 3 am on a bitterly cold late January morning in an empty hospital suite, wearing a paper suit, waiting to be called into the next room where my wife is undergoing surgery. The room where she would be Mom and I would be Dad and our dyad would become a triad.

I didn't have a worry stone to work out my vibrations on. I had an iPod.

*All the rest is by the way*

The song I needed came to me softly and without doubt. Apropos that it is the beautiful closing track to the A side of an album as I was about to start on my own B side. Stretching out over eight minutes with the vocals in the first half being balanced by an achingly nuanced instrumental back half, the song is gentle, simple, and gave advice that struck a true and pure tone in my heart of hearts. The chorus in those minutes transformed from a reassuring refrain into an anthem:

"Why worry, there should be laughter after pain / There should be sunshine after rain / These things have always been the same / So why worry now?"

There was no point or help to be had in taking this last half hour of a known life and shredding it in debilitating worry over the next life. I had resources: A caring family. A job. A home. A loving and committed partner. I had my wits about me even in sleeplessness. Most of humanity has done this before us and gotten away with it so surely I must be able to manage my part.

In those minutes I came to see that a new adventure and the people that I love the most were waiting in the next room and my plan was to meet the opportunity head on with a heart as open as a sunrise.

That was nine years ago, so why worry now?



# Contributors

Stephen Briseño graduated from Sam Houston State University with a degree in English and Secondary Education. For 11 years, he has taught young teenagers the joys of the English language and story in Texas public schools and for three of those years, he taught in Shenzhen, China. After being challenged by a perceptive student, he's decided to be as brave as his pubescent pupils and share his writing with others. He lives and teaches in San Antonio, TX with his wife and daughter.

Scott F. Parker is the author of *A Way Home: Oregon Essays* and the editor of *Conversations with Joan Didion*.

Amanda Earl is a Canadian writer, publisher, editor, visual poet and music fanatic, who lives in Ottawa. She's always looking for kindred misfits in her exploration of art. Amanda is the managing editor of *Bywords.ca* and the fallen angel of Angel House Press. She's got some killer playlists on Youtube and Spotify. Hit her up on Twitter @KikiFolle. More info on her publishing activities is available at [AmandaEarl.com](http://AmandaEarl.com).

Dorothy Rice has recent work in *Cabinet of Heed*, *Longridge Review*, *Proximity* and *Minerva Rising*. Her debut book, *The Reluctant Artist*, a memoir/art book, was published by Shanti Arts in 2015. At 60, following a career with the California EPA, Rice earned an MFA in creative writing from the University of California, Riverside, Palm Desert. Find her at <http://www.dorothyriceauthor.com> and on twitter @dorothyrowena.

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

Kelly Shire's creative nonfiction has appeared in *The Coachella Review*, *Full Grown People*, and *Hippocampus*, among others. Another music-based essay, about George Jones, is forthcoming in the journal *The Museum of Americana*. A third-generation native of Southern California, she holds an MFA from Cal State Long Beach, and continues to live in the region with her family, where she is working on a memoir.

Gabrielle Gilbert has left Pratt Institute with a Bachelor's degree in writing as proof, as well as many ghosts and student loans. Her weird words have been published in multiple issues of *Selfish* magazine and multiple issues of *Alien Mouth*, as well as *Dum Dum Zine*, *Vanilla Sex Magazine*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Witch Craft Magazine* and *Literary Orphans*. She also has a book! A chapbook. Which can be found through Dancing Girl Press under the title *Change of Engagement*. She has found her saving grace in *Memoir Mixtapes* and has previously been featured in Volumes 1, 2, and 4, as well as a B-Side for Volume 3. Her Instagram is sometimes @gabbigailbert and she is sometimes living in Portland, ME.

Emmeline Clein is a freelance humor writer living in New York City. She has a Bachelor's in history from Columbia University. She currently contributes to *Betches*, and pursues various side hustles, most recently organizing a Rabbi's home office, to pay her rent. Her great passions in life are reading the news, listening to hip-hop, and eating barbecue.

Matthew Yates is from Kentucky and currently resides in Indianapolis.

Rachel Peach Leonard is taking a break from titles. She's spent the past year living out of a backpack since graduating from IUPUI with a Creative Writing BA. She's kind of homeless, but her poetry has found permanent residencies in the *Indianapolis Review*, *Occulum Journal*, the *Rising Phoenix Review*, and a lot of truck stop toilets around the Midwestern United States. She is currently living in a miner's shack in the middle of the Daintree Rainforest. It gets lonely; she'd love it if you visited her at [www.backpackingpeach.com](http://www.backpackingpeach.com).

Fullamusu Bangura is a 2nd year English graduate student at Northwestern University, currently studying queer afro-diasporic water spirits. She is originally from Washington, D. C. and currently resides in Chicago, Illinois. Catch her on Instagram singing to her cat Taraji or thirst-tweeting Marc Lamont Hill at @killamusu.

Alex DiFrancesco is a writer of fiction, creative nonfiction, and journalism who has published work in *Tin House Online*, *The Washington Post*, *Pacific Standard*, *Entropy*, *The Millions*, and more. They are a winner of Sundress Academy for the Arts' Out Spoken Competition for LGBTQ+ work, and a Summer 2018 Firefly Farms Writing Residency participant. Their storytelling has appeared in *The Fringe Festival*, *Life of the Law*, and *The Heart* podcast. Their essay collection *Psychopomps* (Civil Coping Mechanisms Press) and their second novel *All City* (Seven Stories Press) are forthcoming in 2019.

Jessie Lynn McMains is a poet, writer, zine-maker, and small press owner. Her words have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Left of the Lake Magazine*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *L'Ephemere Review*, *Burning House Press*, *Shakespeare & Punk*, and others. She collects souvenir pennies and stick& poke tattoos, and is perpetually nostalgic, melancholy, and restless. You can find her website at [recklesschants.net](http://recklesschants.net).

James Smart is from Barnsley in the North of England and is studying an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Glimmertrain*—where he won an award for Best New Writer—*Spelk*, *Reflex*, *Friction* and elsewhere. He has been shortlisted for the 2018 Commonwealth Writers Short Story Prize and is working on a novel. He tweets @notjamesmart.

E. Kristin Anderson is a poet, Starbucks connoisseur, and glitter enthusiast living in Austin, Texas. A Connecticut College graduate with a B. A. in classics, Kristin has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She is the editor of *Come as You Are*, an anthology of writing on 90s pop culture (Anomalous Press), and *Hysteria: Writing the female body* (Sable Books, forthcoming). Her writing has been published worldwide in magazines and anthologies and she is the author of eight chapbooks of poetry including *A Guide for the Practical Abductee* (Red Bird Chapbooks), *Pray Pray Pray: Poems I wrote to Prince in the middle of the night* (Porkbelly Press), *Fire in the Sky* (Grey Book Press), *We're Doing Witchcraft* (Hermeneutic Chaos Press), and *17 seventeen XVII* (Grey Book Press). Kristin is an editor at *Red Paint Hill* and was formerly a poetry editor at *Found Poetry Review*. Once upon a time she worked the night shift at *The New Yorker*. She now works during daylight as a freelance editor and writing coach. She blogs at [EKristinAnderson.com](http://EKristinAnderson.com) and tweets at @ek\_anderson.

Sarah Nichols lives and writes in Connecticut. She is the author of six chapbooks, including *Little Sister* (Grey Book Press, 2018) and *Dreamland for Keeps* (Porkbelly Press, 2018). Her poems and essays have also appeared in *Dream Pop*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and the *RS 500*, and she is still debating on whether or not to get a Depeche Mode tattoo.

**Stacia M. Fleegal** is the author of two full-length and three chapbook poetry collections, most recently *antidote* (Winged City Press 2013). Poems have appeared in *North American Review*, *Barn Owl Review*, *Literary Mama*, *Fourth River*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Menacing Hedge*, *decomp's Best of 10 Years* anthology, *Crab Creek Review*, *Knockout*, *Best of the Net 2011*, and more, and were recently nominated for Best of the Net 2017. Essays have appeared at Salon, Bustle, Scary Mommy, ESME, Quaint Magazine, Blood+Milk, Delirious Hem, and Open Thought Vortex. She is director of the Center for Creative Writing ([creativewritingcenter.com](http://creativewritingcenter.com)). She blogs at [anotherwritingmom.wordpress.com](http://anotherwritingmom.wordpress.com) and tweets as @shapeshifter43, but only when she feels like it.

**Katie Darby Mullins** teaches creative writing at the University of Evansville. In addition to being nominated for a Pushcart Prize and editing a rock 'n roll crossover edition of the metrical poetry journal *Measure*, she's been published or has work forthcoming in journals like *Iron Horse*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *BOAAT Press*, *Harpur Palate*, *Prime Number*, *Big Lucks*, *Pithead Chapel*, *The Evansville Review*, and she was a semifinalist in the Ropewalk Press Fiction Chapbook competition and in the Casey Shay Press poetry chapbook competition. She's also a frequent contributor to *The Song Show* on NPR in southern Indiana.

**Bunkong Tuon** is the author of *Gruel* (2015) and *And So I Was Blessed* (2017), both poetry collections published by NYQ Books. He is also an associate professor of English and Asian Studies at Union College, in Schenectady, NY.

**Hannah Cohen** lives in Virginia and received her MFA from Queens University of Charlotte. She co-edits *Cotton Xenomorph* and is a contributing editor for Platypus Press. She is the author of *Bad Anatomy* (Glass Poetry Press, 2018). Recent and forthcoming publications include *Noble/Gas Qtrly*, *Glass*, *Calamus Journal*, *Cease*, *Cows*, *Yes Poetry*, *Gravel*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere.

**Randy Bates** has published a book of nonfiction, *Rings: On the Life and Family of a Southern Fighter* (FSG); a chapbook of poems, *Dolphin Island* (Finishing Line Press); and work in *Ploughshares*, the *Prairie Schooner*, the *Southern Review*, and others. Recent musical favorites are Zoe Muth, First Aid Kit, Neko Case, Richard Bates, and—always—The Band.

**Ashley Miranda** is a latinx poet from Chicago. Her work has been previously featured by *Yes*, *Poetry*, *Rising Phoenix Review*, *OCCULUM*, *Glass Poetry Press*, and other publications. Her debut poetry collection, "Thirteen Jars: How Xt'actani Learned to Speak" was published by *Another New Calligraphy*. You can find more about her/ her work at [agirlaloof.com](http://agirlaloof.com) or on Twitter @dustwhispers.

**Cory Funk** is a music junkie who lives in St Paul, Minnesota. He has more speakers than he has stereos to hook them up to. His photography and part of his record collection have been displayed at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. He has a short story in the recent collection *Killing Malmon* published by Down & Out Books. He can be found online at [funkomatic.wordpress.com](http://funkomatic.wordpress.com).

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