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Amy Whipple. OUT HERE, LISTENING. (Under the direction of Dr. Steven Faulkner) Department of English and Modern Languages, April 2007.

The purpose of this thesis is to conduct an examination through creative nonfiction of identity throughout my life, primarily in regards to the folk music community. In the eight essays serving as my thesis, collectively entitled "Out Here, Listening," the exploration has led me to learn the difference between communities given to us by birth and the communities we find for ourselves. All people, but especially women, it seems, are often taught to define themselves in terms of community, of what role they are assigned or assume relative to the other people in their lives; the essays then explore the moments in which I am forced to define my identity for myself, not by the boundaries of any given community. To this end, I have looked closely at the work of Virginia Woolf and her use of people as both individuals and as parts of a group dynamic and the unease her characters find in either realm. In each of my essays, I continue to seek a specific place for myself in the folk community while recalling the other groups of people of which I have been a part. The hardest lesson, however, is that I cannot keep running from myself, that community originates from within. For the voice of each essay, I tried to maintain where I was at the point of action, rather than as a future observer. I did this in order for the essays to build on each other in a larger narrative arc, which I could not do if the voice of the essays already had all of the revelations readily available. Most of all, I did not want to dismiss the person I had been in the search for the person I have become. In order to define each of the communities - be it for folk music, religion, or high school - I've gone back to the people involved and allowed them to define their own group. They, after all, created - or adhered to - the boundaries that I saw as a member of the community. This research included talking to people and going back to written records of the time. In the course of gathering and synthesizing this information, I realized that I have always allowed other people to make the rules so that I may find a way to break them. Most important of these sources, both about the folk community and myself, has been the interview material from contemporary singer/songwriters; their insights gave me a much deeper look at the community than any book about the folk community that I have read. Community is, after all, about people. In the end, I do

think that we need community to define our past and our present; otherwise, we have no history. Or, as Charlotte Black Elk said, "Remember your history. To forget is not to belong." But, in order to make the future, we, especially women, need to be able to define community in our own individual terms.

OUT HERE, LISTENING

by

Amy Whipple

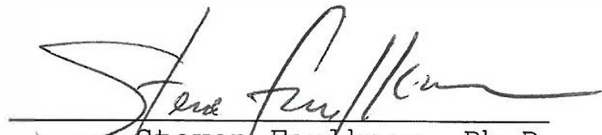
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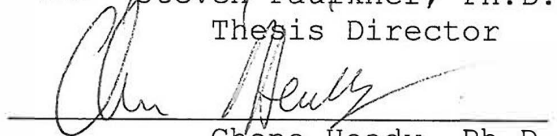
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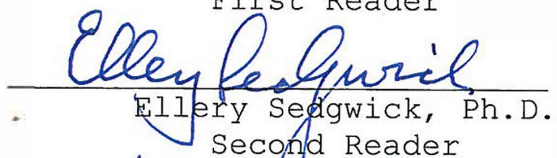
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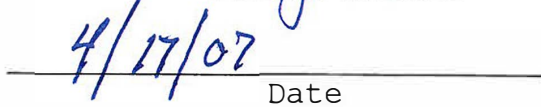
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Dedication

To Grammy and Grandpa - for everything, always.

Acknowledgements

I would like to both acknowledge and express gratitude to the members of my committee, Dr. Chene Heady and Dr. Ellery Sedgwick, as well as the other members of the English Department faculty; I cannot imagine making it through without any of them. I also have endless thanks for my director, Dr. Steven Faulkner, who took a big chance on doing this project with me, and who was very patient in the process. I also could not have done this without my fellow classmates, who provided ruthless criticism both inside of the classroom and out.

HoboNation, you know you have my heart. I, of course, thank my parents for encouraging me, even when they didn't understand. I also have to thank all of the folk women - especially Susan Werner and Jane Paul - who gave their time for interviews, let me steal their song titles, and continue to be accessible when so much of the world is not. This entire experience could have never happened without the hard work, determination, and love of my program coordinator/mentor/mom at school, Mary Carroll-Hackett. Even when I fought it, she made sure I had - and took - every opportunity. For that, I will always be grateful. Lastly, I thank Doc Brock (could I really call her anything else?). From the first week of my freshman year all the

way through the grad program, she has never once given up on me. I am absolutely certain that no one has ever been as kind, caring, and as tough as she. I could not ask for a better role model. Thank you so much.

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I first saw Tracy when she and her then-partner Dave Carter performed with Joan Baez. I spent most of that night watching Tracy as she played the violin and the mandolin - my first folk community crush. I met both her and Dave after the show, me trying to pretend to be nonchalant about the whole thing, them being nothing but nice. Dave passed away suddenly the following summer, and I didn't see Tracy again until I went to Falcon Ridge Folk Festival in the summer of 2005. Even with all of the space between, I still feel connected to Tracy, like she is one of the roots to my folk experiences.

As I sip on my soda, I can't help but wonder what really brought me here, into a community that, at one point, I didn't even know existed.

At eleven, most things in my life referenced back to Amy Grant - the Amy Grant of her brief, secular-pop phase before she went back to Christian music. One afternoon, my friend Allison and I had *House of Love* playing on the boom box in Allison's room. She danced on the floor while I jumped on her bed, shouting along to "Big Yellow Taxi." Allison's mom walked by the open door and stopped, sticking her head into the room and filling out the doorframe. I slowed my jumping.

"What are you listening to?" Mrs. Nolan asked.

"Amy Grant!" I said, making my fist back into a microphone. "Shoo-bop-bop-bop-bop."

She shook her head. "This is not 'Big Yellow Taxi.'"

I opened my eyes big. "Yes it is. Look at the CD."

Mrs. Nolan waved her hand at us, motioning that we should follow. "Come on, girls," she said. "I have something to play for you."

I slid off the bed while Allison rolled her eyes. "Mom," she said in her eleven-year-old defiance. "We don't want to listen to your music."

We followed anyway, traipsing down the hallway into the living room. I stood in front of the couch while Mrs. Nolan leaned down into a glass cabinet, pulling out a record. The white cardboard cover looked worn at the edges, really old in an eleven-year-old's eyes.

"*This*," she said as she took the record out of its case and placed it on the player, "is 'Big Yellow Taxi.'"

Tinny chords from a guitar pushed out of the speakers, announcing a voice that lacked Amy Grant's polish.

"Someone else did this song, too?" I asked, meaning Amy Grant did something so amazing that other people felt the need to sing it as well.

"Joni Mitchell did this song *first*," Mrs. Nolan said as she sang along.

Who?

The voice went really high, then dipped low on the last chorus. Allison and I scurried to her room and Amy Grant.

"This is so much better," I said as the CD whirred in Allison's boom box. "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot. Shoo-bop-bop-bop-bop."

Carole King captured my attention when I was three years old, simply by singing the theme song for a Care Bears' movie. By ninth grade, I proclaimed her my favorite. My friend Maggi and I would beg my dad to play her greatest hits CD as he drove us home from crew practice. His van had a six-disc changer. "Only if you can guess which spot it's in," he'd say. Mostly, we guessed wrong.

During our drives, I explained why I liked Carole King. "She writes her own stuff," I said. "That makes it better."

"Someone like Linda Rondstadt, though, has a far better voice," my dad argued.

"She does, but none of the music's hers. So it's not as good."

"I can admire that," my dad said, "but her voice still isn't that good."

When I got my permit that year, my dad wouldn't let me play music the first few times I drove. Then, we could only play his music. All my life I had heard, "When you drive, you can pick the music." I reminded him of this. "I'm still the dad," he said.

One spring afternoon, I climbed into the driver's seat while the rest of my family got into the back of the van. My dad sat up front and started to play with the stereo. I took a cassette tape out of my purse. Carole King's *Tapestry*. "My turn," I said. My mother groaned. "But you like Carole King. And I'm driving. I get to pick."

I put in the cassette and turned up the volume, not understanding how I could possibly lose a battle about music my parents owned. It's not like I was asking to play a rap CD. "Turn it down," my mom said.

I sang along to each of the songs, knowing every word along the way. As I steered the car around an off ramp, the song "Tapestry" started, quiet and simple. My grandma spoke up. "This is a beautiful song," she said. "Very sad."

I nodded, though I hadn't thought of it as sad before, just pretty. No longer singing, I tried to listen to the words. I heard the story of someone whose life, a tapestry, is colorful and full of memories, but by the end of the song the tapestry starts to unravel. I decided then, in the quick judgment that fifteen affords, that "Tapestry" would always be my favorite song.

The car's black leather sweltered, and I scowled in the back seat, angry that my mother wouldn't let me drive and that my sister got shotgun. At fifteen, I spent a lot of time angry. I slumped down, keeping the backs of my legs off of the scorching leather. My mother pushed buttons on the radio until she came up with the local soft rock station, which promised "the best of the '70s, '80s, and today."

A rough woman's voice emptied into the car. She seemed to ache as guitars and pianos clashed behind her. "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," she cried.

Nothing left to lose, I thought. For my two short years as a teenager, I had remained convinced that life could not possibly get any worse.

I stopped sulking long enough to ask, "Who's this?"

"Janis Joplin," my mother answered, her hands steady on the wheel. "The song's called 'Me and Bobby McGee.'"

When we got home, I ran down to the rec room to rifle through my dad's CD collection. My finger tips jumped along the edges of the cases. "Billy Joel, Elton John, Janis Joplin." I plucked the CD from the shelf and shut myself into the bedroom I shared with my younger sister.

I spent that evening and many after with headphones jammed into my ears, the volume on my Discman as high as I could stand.

My dad told me about how Joplin died, and we talked about the structure of the song.

"It sounds like there's at least two of every instrument playing in the background," he said. "Listen carefully."

So I did - the pounding, the strumming, the way everything got so chaotic toward the end, and then it just . . . stops. "It's like her life," I said. "All that screaming and she died anyway." In my teenage mind, the connection to my life did not seem too far.

Two years later, I found *Rolling Stone's* book of women in rock at Border's and took it to a café table. I flipped first to Carole King and then to Janis Joplin. "By all accounts, she seemed chipped, ambitious, in control," I

read. "She died October 4, 1970, alone in her hotel room with a hole in her arm, trying not to feel so big, trying not to feel so small." Right there at the café table, I cried. Never had anyone so powerful seemed so real and so fragile.

"I don't know what to do with that," one of my friends said.

Neither did I.

On the stage, Tracy sits in the chair to the right of a small table, her new partner, Jim Henry, in the chair to the left. She's wearing olive green pants and a black turtleneck. "I'm glad I brought a turtleneck for a seventy-degree tour," she says, referring to the unusually warm winter. Jim wears black pants and a blue-ish-gray button-down shirt. "A brand new gig shirt just for you," Tracy says about Jim's outfit. "TJ Maxx!" Jim says, excited. Tracy's grown her hair since I first saw her; the long wavy blonde makes her look younger. Until she says she just attended her twenty-year high school reunion, I always assumed she was closer to Dave's age, hovering somewhere near fifty.

Tracy introduces an old song of Dave's and, when everyone claps, says, "There's no sense talking about it if

everybody knows the story." I wonder how much his death haunts her and her career. Even with four years' gone, their CDs still top folk radio charts. At Falcon Ridge, they've named a "street" after Dave; their fans hold a tribute circle every year. Tracy's latest CD includes songs written by Dave. She also just released the album they had been finishing when he died. What's weird, though, is that people I know have bought the CD, but they still can't listen to it. Tracy doesn't play new-old songs with Jim; she'll play the songs she and Dave did together when he was still alive and the songs of his that she's released on her own since his death.

Dave exists in some kind of dead-but-not-dead world, a world that he wrote about in one of his most popular songs. In "When I Go," he sings, "And should you glimpse my wandering form out on the borderline / between death and resurrection and the council of the pines / do not worry for my comfort, do not sorrow for me so / all your diamond tears will rise up and adorn the sky beside me when I go."

But it's not Dave I worry about. Right before the four-year anniversary of Dave's death, Tracy posted an entry to her blog about her doubts and insecurities, about how she can only go so far without Dave on stage with her. She wrote, "Whatever power I have to bring back the dead

will expire and I will be forced to face myself, my life, what's left of it; forced to translate for myself and myself alone the curves of experience that I have traveled and see if it's possible to discern a pattern, some meaning, the larger It of it all." No matter how good Jim Henry is on stage with Tracy, he won't be Dave Carter. I think that everyone in the folk community knows that, but doesn't know what to do with it.

Tracy has admitted that her entire mission when she and Dave were a duo was to make sure people knew of his talent. She, in her eyes, remained in the background. I would argue that her own talents prevented that from happening completely. And, now, she must bring her own brightness to the stage.

Dave keeps appearing throughout the concert. Tracy and Jim play another of Dave's songs, a beautiful and quiet piece about a business man and a prostitute at a bus stop called "Hard to Make It." In the song, I hear the struggles of the prostitute, how she's beaten and small. At the end, though, I realize the song is from the business man's perspective, as he climbs onto the bus and says, "I checked my wallet as we pulled away / cause it's hard to make it in this world today." Tracy says, "This song is

indicative of Dave Carter's genius. He had that writer's compassion."

Tracy and Jim have developed their own chemistry on stage. Jim jokes that, as the tour continues, "the distance between us on the stage grows." They pick on each other throughout the entire show, but as they play, Tracy looks at Jim with a smile toying in the corners of her eyes. People in the community have speculated on the matching rings they wear, and I notice them, too, but am not sure it matters all that much.

"We should be taking a body count at the end of every show," Tracy says after introducing another song, "Preston Miller" about a boy going home to meet his distanced father, only to have the father kill the son. "There's a lot of dying in folk music."

"That's how you know it's an authentic folk song," Jim says. "What if they go to therapy and work it out?"

"Then it wouldn't be a folk song," Tracy replies.

"What if they kill their therapist?"

Tracy laughs and then starts to strum her guitar at a pace faster than a song about death would suggest.

Throughout the concert, the music invites audience members to stomp and clap along. Tracy plays a fiddle

medley, and the rickety floor below me shakes with everyone's enthusiasm, including my own.

Contemporary folk music skirted around my life by the time I turned sixteen. The editor of the school paper that year played tapes of the Indigo Girls while we worked in the office. Other people complained and she always said, "When you're editor, you can listen to whatever you want." I didn't mind the music, preferred it to the top forty radio stations that most other people played, and hummed along as I clicked away at the ancient computers.

The next year, I stumbled across Ani DiFranco, one of the few folk singers who, in a warped way, could be considered a superstar. I liked the way her songs talked about people and situations that were different than pop music. Her use of sexuality - lesbians in particular - in her songs wasn't something that I had really realized could be in music. The idea had never occurred to me. In the pictures I found of her on the Internet, she sometimes had her hair snagged into dreads, sometimes had it completely shaved off.

I often played one song, "Little Plastic Castle," on repeat. The bouncy, saxophoney music contrasted with lyrics about a lesbian couple sitting in a coffee shop,

considering that they might not be safe. "I wish they could see us now," I would sing along, "in leather bras and rubber shorts." I giggled whenever people squinted their eyes in my direction.

"*What* are you listening to?" they would ask.

"Ani," I would say in a sing-song voice.

"Whatever that is."

After the Tracy show, my friend Joanne and I wait to talk to Tracy at the merchandise table. Joanne has no problem butting into conversations, and her large Italian stature ensures that she's seen and heard. She forces her presence on Tracy, while I quietly buy the last Dave and Tracy CD from Jim and consider the weight of hearing something new in his voice after he's been dead for four years. Watching Tracy as she listens to Joanne share her favorite memory of Dave - him sitting down on the stage and teaching her to play one of his songs on the guitar - I wonder where this will take the folk community, the toll it takes of losing one of its greatest lyricists and most genuine people. Tracy's strength through the last four years, the way she easily chats with Joanne, shows - to me - the intimacy of the community, the family-like atmosphere.

Inside the liner notes of the CD, I find old pictures of Dave and Tracy. I acknowledge Dave, his soft features in the black and white photographs, but I can't linger on him. "Oh, short-haired Tracy," I say and focus on her sharp cheekbones and cropped hair. Something so small leaves me thinking of changes.

Diamonds and Rust - Joan Baez at The Birchmere

"Now you're telling me

You're not nostalgic

Then give me another word for it" - Joan Baez

My friends and I gather at a front table in the main listening room at The Birchmere, my first visit to a place that will later become my favorite venue. The Birchmere sits in a part of northern Virginia referred to by locals as Arlandria - a borderland of Arlington and Alexandria. I look around and notice that we seem to be the only people under fifty in the audience. At nineteen, I lack the haggard look of aging hippies. Maggi sits to my right while Dani and Greg sit across from us; we can all touch the stage, just enough room between it and our table for a hurried waitress to scrunch by. Everyone is on top of each other - to get to the bathroom requires an intricate twisting of bodies. Big gaudy chandeliers string across the ceiling, clashing with the green plastic gingham table cloths. Another performer will later refer to this room as a "gay Denny's." Along the back wall on the stage, someone's painted a stage door. Nothing here looks right; everything here feels right. We pass around mints while we

wait, hungry, for our food. I could complain, but we are, after all, holy shit, going to see *Joan Baez*.

Joan hurries on stage with Dave Carter and Tracy Grammer. She has an oriental rug underneath her bare feet and a hot toddy in her hands. She apologizes for her voice and tells stories of performing for the Dalai Lama, nights in prison after protests. I get more excited about her playing "If I Wrote You" by Dar Williams than I do about most of her own songs. Dave seizes my attention when they perform one of his songs, "The Mountain," a song about grace that echoes with earthy spirituality. The song seems more personal and rooted in Dave's own experiences than anything Baez sings. I spend most of my time looking at Tracy as she presses across a violin. As I realize I should probably be taking in the talents of a legend, I understand that maybe the greatest gift Joan Baez can give me is the current generation of folk singers. Most of the night, even meeting Joan after the show, fades in my memory.

I don't know what to make of Joan Baez. She exists, above all else, as an icon - to musicians, to women, to the lesbian community. I understand her place in history -

even respect it - but, sometimes, I'm not sure what all the fuss is about. Her voice lifts a little too high, her songs float a little too far. I don't feel grounded in her music, as I might someone else. She is that person who has an experience for everything, who could probably always have the last - and better - word. I think I like Joan Baez better in theory than in practice.

That doesn't stop me, though, from seeing a picture of her with Bob Dylan in the '60s and thinking, I wish I could have been there. I want that. And I do wish for it, sometimes, to have been part of an era so vibrant and new. These people, they *changed* things. They marched and picketed and made a difference even though they didn't have to. What could possibly get done today? At least back then, Dylan and Baez made it on the radio, Top 40 style. People heard them - even if they didn't want to. But then I think, with the gauze of thirty years' gone, isn't everything always this romantic? It has to be, otherwise I wouldn't have to spend my time defending my ambiguous feelings over past legends.

In "Charmed Circle: Folksingers and Singer-Songwriters," Leslie Berman writes, "The dominant tones in women's songs and styles are far distant today from that

celebrated and equally vilified era." She adds, "The nineties girls who slip comfortably between folk clubs and alternative-rock bars are heroines in their own mythologies. With them have evolved new voices and new body languages with which to ply stories of isolation and anger, sans self-pity and with no mercy."

I have to search hard to find a definition for the folk community I know today. Berman, in a paragraph, gets the closest; at least someone else acknowledges that things are different. Most books talk about the revival in the sixties and predecessors like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. What little I find about today doesn't mesh with what I know or see. Maybe because I'm removed from the hotbeds of New York and New England, maybe because we all see what we want to see. The familiar names like Dar Williams and Susan Werner remain absent in the books I find, and the focus stays on the biggest and loudest - people like Ani DiFranco and the Indigo Girls. So I went right to the artists I love and asked them what they saw from their places on the stage.

In my head, I picture this like a dinner table discussion, though everyone answered on her own, through e-mail or phone conversations. But I can still place them sitting next to each other, passing baskets of bread,

bottles of wine. The women here compliment each other in a way I'm not sure I realized before talking to them.

What I hold dearest about the folk community is the connection between artist and audience. The barricades of commercialized music break away both physically and (somewhat) emotionally. Tracy Grammer says, "Folk performers, for the most part, love to engage with their audiences after the shows. Part of the success of this music, and the success of the touring circuit, is the personal connection audiences feel to the music and to the performer. And part of the reason we love this work is that we feel like we know our people. In many cases, we really do. I would be hard pressed to play a show in any city in the country where I would not recognize at least a small percentage of the audience by name."

Patty Larkin adds, "I think though, that part of the reason I enjoy the 'folk' or acoustic circuit is that the underlying premise is community, a living room relationship with the fans that is either real or imagined."

Dar Williams, who has one of the more active fan groups, looks at her fans' reactions in a positive light. "It seemed like, like the bonds were valuable to them and that I was a catalyst but it wasn't a cult of personality. It seemed like a community that had a lot of things in

common and they used my music as the springboard. And it seems very healthy that way and - it would have been creepy if it had been about stripping me down and about going deeper into my life."

Sometimes, though, the audience gets more personal. When Tracy Grammer's partner, Dave Carter, died in the summer of 2002, fans in the community rallied together in support of each other and of Tracy. She says, "The bond I have with my audience now is strong and, I believe, unique among folk artists. It has been a wonderful gift to me as I've moved on with my life and my career."

I might believe that this is only possible in highly liberal, northeastern cities, where the liberal bent on politics, gender, and sexuality remains the norm and these performers can continue to appear with greater frequency. Maura Kennedy argues, "On the other hand, though, when we play places like Kansas, Nebraska and Ohio, we find that the people who feel marginalized by their communities - especially when it comes to issues that they strongly believe in, like health care, education, clean air, human rights and the war - they really NEED us to bring our music and idealism and message of hope to them. They are often the most appreciative audiences." Sometimes, though, I find what the folk community believes in to be too

idealistic. I doubt the ability for music to make a difference, rather I see it as a connecting point for like-minded people. Did Bob Dylan and Joan Baez really ever change someone's views about Vietnam or racial struggles through song? At best, I see music expressing ideas we know we have but don't know how to articulate.

Maura tells a story of one of her and her husband's songs and the experiences their audiences share with them. One woman in particular told Maura of how the song "Life Is Large" encouraged her not to kill herself. "I think that the song told her something about herself that she knew deep down...it just took the song to illuminate that part of herself that was shrouded in darkness," Maura says. "I believe, because people have told me this, that our music does that for a lot of people. Instead of trying to drive out the darkness, we try to bring in the light."

This comes up frequently in their answers - what the music means. Susan Werner says, "Lyrics could mean so much to people, lyrics becoming a kind of shorthand for their own hopes and disappointments and politics and worldviews." Folk music, I might argue, relies more on lyrics and messages than on the music itself. The simplicity of acoustic guitars keeps the attention on what might be lacking in other genres. Tracy Grammer notices the effect

on the community as well. She adds, "The music is deeply woven into the lives of those who have listened. I hope there will always be a community to celebrate this music and carry it forward."

This seems to apply not just to the audience at large either. Jane Paul, Susan Werner's road manager, says that's what drew her to the folk community in the first place. "I found that I could be in the worst possible place in my head and both the music and community made me feel all right about it and gave me ways and reasons to become a better person," she says. "I've never felt out of place at a show, and never felt more understanding in a form of music than folk." I find more truth in Susan's and Jane's views. The same thing could be said, though, for fans of genres like metal, which depend on an outsider status. Metal, too, wants to go against the mainstream system; they just go about it differently and with a little more noise.

Dar Williams looks at the way the folk community works in relation to traditional, historical, gatherings of people. She says, "If you don't go to church, if you don't go to town meetings - the new millennium is finding its communities are different." So we gather around the music that offers answers we can't find elsewhere, calling out in

a way that is not unlike the stories of the Baez and Dylan days. Susan Werner believes, "Folk music is almost as much an ideology as it is a kind of music: it's a worldview."

Katryna Nields sees the difference between folk fans and their community as compared to fans of other types of music. "Most super famous people don't have that. I don't hang out with other Bruce Springsteen fans. It doesn't make us unique in any way. Everyone likes Bruce," she says. "But liking the Nields is kind of unique. It's not a gigantic club. I think there is a common ground in that. Enjoying music that exists under the radar is a kind of glue."

Joan Baez is still Joan Baez, whether I like her or not. And I'm not one to pass up opportunities, so I go see her again two years later. This time I go with my friend Joanne, who is closer to the right age for Joan Baez fandom, and we're back up at the front table. We sit with ten women from a larger group of thirty - all friends, most ex-military, women who took to Joan Baez during their receding teenage years. They have close-cut hair and practical clothes - much like Baez when I saw her the first time - not exactly the flowing images of long hair, flowers, and skirts that I have of the 1960s. They look,

well, gay. These are the type of women who keep that generation performing, who exalt the voices of their youth. We chat, and they tell me about life after the military, about archeology digs in South American countries and smuggling fossils back into the United States, about friendships and anti-war sentiments that last through decades longer than I've been alive.

The woman next to me, whose name - all of their names, really - I can never remember, keeps her responses clipped. She eyes me. "What are you doing here?" she asks.

"Uh, seeing Joan Baez."

"Why? How do you even know who she is?"

"Because she's Joan Baez," I say, answering both questions at once. I think, I have nowhere to go, I'm going to be squished next to this woman for the next three hours. Don't take your anger out on me. I don't say any of this; rather, I smile and pay more attention to my other tablemates.

Eventually, the woman reaches under the table for her purse and spots a copy of *The Washington Blade* - the area gay newspaper - that I put under there with the rest of my things. She looks up at me and points at the paper. "Is that yours?"

I nod.

"Oh really?"

I nod again. I understand her trying to call me out about liking Baez, a generational thing, but sexuality too?

"Well then," she says, a sly smile breaking through her eyes. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

I tell her, yes, but she doesn't like this kind of music. I ask if she's with anyone.

Her smile gets bigger and she points her index finger low against the table to the left. "Three years," she says. "Where do you go to school again?"

I tell her, and she and her friends start nudging each other. "Longwood? Hey, do you remember those Longwood girls?" Naming off women from their pasts, they laugh and wink. "Didn't that one girl go to Longwood?"

My seat partner leans into me. "I should tell you about the teacher who made me come out when I was sixteen. But that's another story."

Before she can get into it, the opening act appears.

"Oh, she's cute. Throw your number on stage."

I giggle and turn my chair to face forward. I don't bother remembering the rest of the evening.

Along with the changing cultural climate, folk music is also evolving. What the contemporary folk artists

describe as the community today still has some dark points. Patty Larkin, if she could change one thing, says, "I'd like to change the fear of change, the idea that in order to perform on the folk circuit your music has to fit into my definition of folk. It's a constantly evolving form. There is much to learn."

Jane Paul looks back at the activist days of music: "I wish that more artists now were making a little bit more of a political statement in their music and tapping into the frustration a lot of us feel about the government and where it's gotten us in the last six years; I think we need more of that and folk music will not only survive but grow," she says and then adds, "We have plenty to be pissed off about right now and I'm not hearing enough about it."

Politics seem to be making a comeback, though, even if not to the extent that some wish. A dialogue continues to grow throughout the community, something that rings through several of the women. Equality in race, class, gender, and sexuality makes appearances. Questioning religion and political power structures comes up as well. Dar Williams says, "I believe that art is about trying to remember something. I don't underestimate the importance of talking. It's not a hootenanny anymore." She adds, "Folk music is an oral history - not just in the music but in the

way you put it together. So people have to share this information with people. People have to understand that they have to step in and start these things."

Susan Werner says something along the same lines. "Again, the worldview figures into this: it's a way of keeping a certain ideology out there, out front, speaking, contributing to the dialogue."

Tracy Grammer sees some of this already at work. She says, "I'd love to think we are very close to seeing a major breakout artist from the folk world igniting the nation on a grand scale, like Joan Baez did in the '60s, but I just don't know how that would be done these days. Maybe on the Internet, I don't know..."

Maura Kennedy adds, "We have direct contact with our audience, and the audience is aware of the active role they play in keeping our music alive. Often, they'll host house concerts, start up folk series or festivals and discussion groups just to keep the folk community together. With folk music, it's always been quality over quantity."

But how does this happen when radio-driven music constricts what it will accept? Tracy Grammer says, "I'd like radio to be de-corporatized so that folk music could enjoy a wider listening audience. There's a place for pop, rock, classical, and news, yes - but there are also some

brilliant, moving, intelligent songs being written and performed right now, songs that on many levels, capture the essence of the modern human experience, especially with our current political conflicts. People I talk to tend to be left cold by corporate radio, it doesn't speak to them and they don't see themselves reflected there."

Maura Kennedy finds a connection between radio play and the faltering of major record labels as people go more toward the Internet for a wider selection of music. She says, "I think that the reason the record labels are floundering is that they're not giving the audience the quality of music that it craves. It's not that there's no good music out there...there IS. It's just that the major labels are not issuing that music and not providing any artist development."

Nerissa Nields sees hope within the members of the folk community - both in the artists and the audience members. "A lot of people give above and beyond what they're getting paid for," she says. The future of the community, though, won't be defined by her generation of singer-songwriters. "It's on the younger people now," she says. "I wouldn't tell them what to do, but I hope that I can be a part of it."

The Birchmere - or, at this point in my life, The Birch - and the folk community I know start at two in the afternoon. The shows cease being completely about the performers and more about friendship and shortening the distance between us all. One late August afternoon, in the drenching humidity, I throw a football in the parking lot with my friends Sally and Gail. Stef and I take pictures next to the murals painted on the wall, which showcase the hottest cities for music - Austin, Memphis, New York - and a jazzman wailing into his saxophone. Joanne plucks at her guitar, and we stop with the football long enough to sing a few songs. We talk about Sally closing on her new house the next day, about her upcoming marriage to her girlfriend. Stef and I are still the youngest but not by as much. Everyone accepts us without question. Gail says, "Ah, the Dancing Girls," before she decides to name me "Junior." We watch as our friend Sharon shuffles inside with the merchandise and wait for her to come back to the parking lot. I take sips out of her coffee. Someone passes out the kind of candy necklaces that melt pink, blue, and yellow against my skin. Could there possibly be anything better in this thick August sun?

I think about the women at the Joan Baez concert and wonder if this is what they remember, what they long for as they wait for her to appear on stage, as they cram together in what seems like the not-too-distant past.

This Town Is Wrong - Nerissa and Katryna Nields at The
Barns

"They gave you all these big dreams, big plans, beneficial programs
A studio with mirrors for walls
Your doctors tell you work it through, smooth it out, feel your pain,
let it out
They never let you learn how to crawl" - The Nields

We bumped along on a charter bus for the sixteen-and-a-half miles from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. to our high school in Springfield, Virginia. The hopeful blue of spring rolled along the sky. I shared a seat with my friend Nikki and tried to face forward to avoid motion sickness. A group of us talked about a recent six-part series of articles in *The Washington Post* called "Fairfax's Fortunes." I twisted in my seat, leaning my back against the window.

According to the *Post*, Fairfax County, in Northern Virginia, reached the highest median income in the country for the second year in a row. One article in particular held our interest that afternoon. The third piece in the series discussed Fairfax's quarter of a million children and teenagers under the headline of "Pampered and Privileged." We already knew of the rich parts of the

county - McLean, Langley, Great Falls - but Springfield, as we saw it, remained tame middle class. The article, however, told us otherwise, and gave us the first tangible definition of our daily lives: "At West Springfield High, parents decided they wanted to send the Class of 2000 off in style, so they raised nearly \$60,000 for its all-night graduation party."

CJ, a tall computer geek, sat behind us on the bus. "That's unbelievable," he said. "Do you know how much money that is?"

Nikki twisted a lock of her black hair around her index finger, pinching the end with her thumb. "We should use that for our next Top Ten," she said.

I squinted my eyes at her. We were editors-in-chief of our award-winning school paper. In fact, aside from boys' basketball and football, our school ranked near the top in sports (within the state) and academics (nationally), something that always pressed down around us. "Use what?" I asked.

"Top ten reasons you know you're in Fairfax County."

I shuffled through my navy blue Jansport backpack for a notebook. Upon finding one, I flipped past my notes from the Stieglitz exhibit and from Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* and circled my pen in a corner to get the ink flowing. By

the time the bus pulled into the school parking lot, we had, for every eight teenagers, "10 pieces of Abercrombie clothing, nine AIM screen names, eight cars, seven cell phones, six skip school to get coffee, five 4.0 averages, four recruited athletes, three AP classes each, two with their natural hair color, and one communal brain." Then Nikki and I really did skip last period to head over to Starbucks. At the time, we added the communal brain line as a joke, but maybe it was true.

At eighteen, I packed up my suburban bedroom and moved my life into a tiny high-rise dorm room at Longwood College in Farmville, Virginia. I knew little about the area before going, aside from what I read in *The Washington Post Magazine* a few months before leaving. The year I left, 2001, marked the fifty-year anniversary of Prince Edward County - of which Farmville is the county seat - closing its schools rather than integrating them. An infamous note on which to begin.

With a little research, I found that in terms of physical space, both Fairfax County and Prince Edward County covered about the same area. But Fairfax crammed 2,500 people from a world of races and ethnicities per square mile as opposed to the spacious fifty-five people

per square mile in Prince Edward who appeared to be either black or white. Prince Edward's median income also settled at less than half of Fairfax's with a quadrupled poverty rate.

During orientation, I stood in a circle with a group of about fifteen freshman girls, most of whom came from small towns similar to Farmville - or smaller. I rolled my eyes as we played yet another ice breaker. I internally judged each of their dramatic Southern accents, but I found myself humbled as, one by one, most of the girls admitted that they were the first person in their family to attend college. "My parents are so proud," several of them said.

Proud? Of Longwood? I couldn't imagine anything except ashamed.

At home, money was money and some people had more of it than others. Nikki's family went on elaborate month-long vacations during the summer - unless they left the country and then it was only for three weeks. One of our classmates was surprised by her father one afternoon with a brand-new Sebring convertible. Sometimes these things happened; more often, they didn't. CJ was the oldest of four kids in a Mormon family who lived modestly in comparison.

We knew neighborhood divisions within West Springfield; single mothers generally lived in the townhouses of Shannon Station or in the condos of Cardinal Forest. More teenagers, such as Nikki and CJ, lived in Orange Hunt. My family lived among retired couples in a two-story house in Cardinal Forest that had the same floor plan as every two-story house in Cardinal Forest. Our house had a perfect placement right across the street from the high school, and my friends parked on our street in order to avoid the hundred-dollar, seniors-only parking passes or the gone-by-six-thirty-in-the-morning spaces in front of the school.

What we knew, what we really knew, was the pressure. Nikki, who wound up one of thirteen valedictorians (anyone who had a 4.0 or above), fought with her mother over shadowy traces of failure in her grades. If Nikki received a ninety-seven on an assignment - a mid-level A - her mother would ask why she didn't get a perfect mark. Another classmate who scored a 1590 on the SATs struggled over whether or not to take the test again. Our high school boasted often that, among its average of five-hundred graduates per class, ninety-seven percent went on to college. And not just any college, either. The running joke was the renaming of the University of Virginia to West

Springfield Part Two. During my sophomore year, I watched seniors grudgingly apply to UVa as their safety school while they ached for Columbia, NYU, Duke, and Harvard.

We knew the pressure existed because of our parents' best intentions. During a discussion on utopias in AP English, our teacher asked us what a high school utopia would look like. I'm sure we came up with the standard smartass remarks of eighteen-year-olds, but I don't remember. I do remember what our teacher concluded: "Fairfax County has the highest percentage of lawyers in the country. If your parents want something for you, you're going to get it."

I wondered then and I wonder now what my parents want for me. Sure, they got angry about my less-than-stellar grades, but they seemed genuinely proud of my accomplishments at the newspaper and tutoring at the elementary school and making the cheerleading squad and being on the crew team and working at one of the public libraries and interning at a local historical site. But, looking at that list now, part of me feels like I never really did enough. Didn't do the right things. Even then, I knew I was only doing a fraction of what some of my classmates did, that I was the token slacker kid.

My parents, though concerned that I was closing opportunities for myself by not trying harder, didn't hover the way my friends' parents did. They didn't complete assignments for me in elementary school, didn't ask to see any papers in high school before I turned them in. "I've already done this," my mother would say to me and to my two younger sisters. "It's your turn now." They never kept me in activities once I lost interest or made me take SAT prep courses or dragged me to colleges they knew I would never attend.

By the time I applied for college, I knew what was coming. I sat on a couch in the Messiah United Methodist Church basement - yet another place where I kept myself overactive - and a friend asked where I had applied.

"VCU, Longwood, and Tech," I said, picking at the loose threads on a pillow. "I think it's going to be Longwood." By the fall, I had been accepted into VCU and Longwood. Virginia Tech rejected me by the spring, even though they "recognized my close family ties" - both of my parents were alumni - and I framed their response.

"Oh, Amy," my friend said, "you're better than Longwood."

I switched from picking at the couch to pinching the skin on the inside of my elbow. "No, I'm really not." My

3.0 GPA and 1180 SATs gave me ample proof of my not being good enough. Especially when people like CJ slept through two sections of the test and still managed a 1400.

In the conflict of social classes at Longwood, I unconsciously reached out for the group most familiar. I ran wallet-first into the folk community, an upper-middle-class haven of do-gooders and rabble-rousers. Someone asked me once the difference between country music and folk music and my dad responded for me, "Country music is for poor white trash, and folk music is for rich white trash."

He was kind of right.

The folk community consists of a social-change-oriented demographic. In history classes, we always learned that major social movements were pushed forward most often with the help of middle-class white women. They had the resources and the time that lower-class women did not and the compassion that upper-class women did not. Those struggles resonate in folk music.

During the folk revival of the '60s, singer-songwriters such as Joan Baez focused heavily on the old-fashioned protest songs, though they still aimed their music at college students. Both then and in the contemporary setting, folk musicians were activists off the

stage as well as on. Baez shares stories about nights in jail after protests, but, again, it's all in a very middle-class way.

During the Woodie Guthrie and Pete Seeger eras of folk music, the songs reflected the working-class labor movements. Music in Baez's day moved on to other social injustices, such as race and the Vietnam War. Folk music, by definition and history, is supposed to be the music of the people. Contemporary singer-songwriter Nerissa Nields notes that folk music today depends on the college-student demographic, but, she says, "How poor can a college student really be?" What struggle, then, is present in this music? The folk community, it seems, is populated by those who are "choosing an existence where less is more," as Nields puts it - a "downwardly mobile" group that wants out of middle-class life.

I saw a show at The Barns, which is a portion of Wolf Trap - the only national park for the performing arts - early on in my folk-music-listening experience that portrayed everything I didn't then have the vocabulary for. The venue only seats about three hundred and is located in the moneyed enclave of Vienna, Virginia - a small part of Fairfax County. The clientele for Wolf Trap appears to be

the closest to high society you can get in Fairfax. They attend shows to be seen and participate in fundraising galas, usually to the tune of performers such as Linda Ronstadt; they regularly leave shows at intermission.

During the spring of my sophomore year of college, my best friend, Stephanie, and I went to see Nerissa and Katryna Nields, formerly of the five-person band The Nields, both of whom are Fairfax County natives. They attended the legendary Potomac School, a private K-12 school in McLean that costs almost twice the state college tuition. The type of school my parents drive around on a weekend "just for kicks," while my dad will tries to figure out exactly how much the ninety-acre campus would cost. "That's millions and millions of dollars," he says with a little bit of disbelief and a little bit of annoyance. I heard the same tone of voice at a later concert from a guy who flustered from his chair, "Have you seen the equipment the Nields sisters have? Where could they possibly get the money? They have better equipment than Ani DiFranco and she's actually famous." The sisters, though, were the type of people I thought I could connect with.

But the sisters Nields understood, at that concert at The Barns. As they stood on the sparse stage, with the heavy red curtains hanging around them, they sang a song

about a girl under pressure from her parents and school and the community to be perfect and the friend who tries to save her. They gave voice to the middle-class anxieties that my friends and I spent the entirety of high school trying to understand. The song opens on the lines:

This town has so much at stake in you
Do you have any idea what they put you through?
They tell you you will go far, a little star, how
I wonder what you are
When I watch you wearing their jewels
They want you to have long hair, short skirts,
clear skin, nothing hurts

The song ends in the triumphant midnight escape of the girls to the city where, like Laverne and Shirley, they get to make their own rules. And, for a moment, I felt connected, like somebody genuinely understood.

As Nerissa and Katryna finished singing, I elbowed Stephanie. "That is so us...I mean, hello, Fairfax County?"

I spent the first three years of undergrad at Longwood in a microcosm of my suburban life. I roomed with a friend from home, joined the school newspaper, which was staffed with other middle-class students, mostly females. I dated middle-class girls and smoked pot while walking through a

mostly middle-class neighborhood in Farmville. I solved my problems with middle-class, white-girl solutions like self-injury and starving myself. I read middle-class literature in my English classes and wrote cheeky feminist-slanted papers the morning they were due. No one really expected much out of me, so I continued to do as little as I had in high school - only with better results. After the hell of the high-rises during my freshman year, I lived in the honor's dorm for two years and did just poorly enough to not be considered for the honor's program itself. I became editor of the paper by my junior year and - for what it was worth - felt a little bit accomplished. Like maybe I wasn't an entire waste of space.

But everything changed during my senior year and my first year of grad school, as things are apt to do. By senior year, I got comfortable with a group of creative writers. The creative writers, it seemed, were mostly loud and proud working-class types. Their leader - our program coordinator Mary - encouraged her students to be outspoken about their gritty pasts by talking incessantly about her own. When I first met Mary, she was missing teeth, smoked Virginia Slims, and spoke with a heavy North Carolina accent. She had no qualms with "getting redneck," even though I found it incredibly embarrassing for her. The

group expected the few middle-class creative writing students to delve into and appreciate the lives of those less fortunate, the let go of our stereotypes for the poor Southerner, though they never had to afford us the same respect. I put up with it, though, because of the closeness of the group, the ability to have that token family at school.

I admired how comfortable my classmates and Mary seemed in their upbringings, no matter how rocky, no matter how terrible. They had the powerful stuff of good fiction - open abuse (as opposed to the carefully covered middle-class abuse), poverty, and crappy waitressing jobs. I had a fistful of stories about hopping into D.C. for an afternoon and scooping *The Washington Post* at fourteen. Working-class life became romantic, kitschy - very in. I stayed up late in my apartment, smoking cigarettes in the back bedroom, going story for story with a friend who had factory experience and once lived in a trailer. My four-year-stint in an apartment during my early childhood still seemed too urban a tale, still too gentrified and honey-glazed.

For a while, everything remained fine. I learned about my friends' and professors' lives the way I had about my grandparents' own working-class upbringing and thought

them all stronger for the experience. The side comments, though, started to ache, little numbing bits of tossed aside information. Middle-class kids, according to my peers, just mooched off of their parents, never really knew how to work, were lazy, and expected to have everything handed to them. While I knew myself to be lazy, I couldn't help but think of my high school classmates who once worked themselves into ulcers just to try to maintain.

I could have been angry, I guess, at the way I was written off because of my parents' income, but I chose instead to play the role of the hardened rich kid, like I could throw away all of this nonsense, like I didn't feel myself seventeen all over again, never being good enough, never being the person I was supposed to be. In the private company of my fellow middle-classers, I found myself defensive. I bit my lip and exhaled smoke. "Am I just supposed to sit there and pretend that the judgment they put on me isn't exactly the same thing they accuse me of?" I'd say. "I understand that they have a right to talk about it, but all the damn time?" And, to myself, I'd finish, "I'm tired of feeling like less of a person just because my parents are able to support me."

In the eighth grade, I got kicked out of GT (Gifted and Talented) English for not doing my homework. "Your high school teachers will never tolerate this," my teacher told me. I didn't care.

My friends looked sympathetic throughout the next year. "Oh, regular English," they said as if I had been diagnosed with cancer. But I flew through that year, returning to GT English for the tenth grade.

The teacher that year got angry with us one spring day because we were, as always, "not living up to our potential." She stood at the podium in the same old-lady flowered pants and solid top that she'd been wearing all year. "I can send all of you back to regular English," she threatened. My classmates fidgeted in their desk-chair combo units.

I leaned back against the wood panels of the chair. "So," I said, "it's better than this."

Instead of responding, the teacher grabbed a box and started tossing copies of *Lord of the Flies* down on our desks. "Figure it out for yourselves," she said. "I'm done." Then she put on an anti-Communism propaganda film from the '70s. "If this is what you want, fine." She didn't speak to us for two days.

Two years later, I had the same teacher for an advanced composition class. She, again, glared her displeasure. "This should be renamed mediocre comp," she said before leaving for a cigarette break.

Both she and my eighth grade English teacher were correct, in my case at least, to say that I wasn't doing my best. But I held onto that failure because part of me said, *Even if I try my hardest, I'll still fail. It's easier just not to try because, no matter what I do, I'll never, ever be good enough.* So I cried when the friend at church told me I could do better and again during the episode of *The Simpsons* where the school threatens to hold back Bart in the fourth grade. I laughed when another friend said, "Longwood? That's like paying to go to high school" because, for a long time, I knew that statement to be true.

Four years after seeing Nerissa and Katryna Nields at The Barns, I went to see them again at the same venue. The sisters stood on the stage, looking both like they totally fit in Fairfax County and that they totally didn't. For instance, while they are both attractive women, they aren't pretty in the plastic magazine sense that I associate with the people I knew in high school or that I see lounging

inside of Starbucks. They were dressed nicely: Katryna in a black skirt and a black top edged in red and Nerissa in black pants and a blue flowered shirt. But neither outfit came out of *Cosmopolitan* or *Vogue*.

The Barns felt stuffy that night, something a friend of mine mentioned before the show. "There's such a different crowd here," he said. "Usually people go anywhere for a particular show. The people here always seem like they're here for the venue and don't care about the performers."

Katryna mentioned something similar during the show. "My mom said you all wouldn't sing along unless we asked you to. Apparently this is a very proper room."

The Nields, however, weren't what I thought they were. That legendary Potomac School encouraged the arts, as, apparently, did their parents. They brought their dad on stage to sing with them. Another friend leaned over in her seat and whispered, "Can you believe he's a big deal lawyer?" I looked at the man in his corduroy pants and rugby-style shirt. He seemed in between ideals like his daughters.

One of the sisters shared a story from when they told him they wanted to be folk singers. The most negative thing he had to offer, they said, was "If you want to make

folk music for a living, make sure you still make folk music in your life for fun."

What, I thought, could I do with my life that I could also do for fun, that would make my parents or my peers say something that positive? I couldn't come up with anything.

For several years at Longwood, I found myself trying to recreate the pressure of Fairfax County, as if I could only exist in a place where I failed to meet expectations. Maybe with a little more effort in high school, I could have studied journalism with Nikki at Chapel Hill or at Northwestern or Missouri - the latter two being my dream schools. The other part of me knows it's ridiculous to backtrack on a part of my life that, in the end, will only be a fraction of my time.

Instead, I tried to compete with my high school classmates from a distance. I wound up on the executive boards of four different campus groups during my junior year of college - editor of the newspaper, president of the women's studies group, and webmaster for both the radio station and the gay-straight alliance. By my first year of graduate school, I was the production editor for the school's international literary journal and working at the campus library, where I was nominated for student employee

of the year. None of that, though, matched up to internships at the *Boston Globe* or summers at the White House or government security clearances or buying condos in Arlington. I remained that step behind. And though my mother still said cheerful, proud parent things in her annual Christmas letter, I sometimes wondered if she wished she had more she could say about me. Or if I just wished that for myself.

My baby sister, nine years younger than I am, started slacking off in middle school as well. When I was home on a vacation from college, I overheard her fighting with my parents about her homework and her grades. "Do you want to wind up like Amy?" my mom yelled. I still have no idea what she meant by that.

Life Is Large: The Kennedys at Jammin' Java

"You've only got one chance to walk this line
And if you should get lost or stuck in time
Just believe this road does not end here" - The Kennedys

Almost two years ago, I followed Joanne's maroon minivan into a shopping center parking lot in Vienna, Virginia. We were headed for Jammin' Java, a coffee shop that features different music acts; several folk singers with smaller reputations perform there regularly, including Pete and Maura Kennedy. We had just left the Susan Werner concert at The Barns, which is not too far from Jammin' Java. "It's your birthday," Joanne said when she asked if I would go with her. "I'll buy you ice cream. They have an amazing brownie sundae. And I haven't seen Pete and Maura in a long time."

Ice cream I could do. Folk music I could do. Although I had heard of The Kennedys, I had never actually listened to any of their music. But Jammin' Java, I had my doubts. In high school, the coffee shop was religiously based, a place where my church friends went on the weekends. Without once going, I had developed an aversion

to it, set my mind to never going. Back then, I had to draw a line somewhere as to what God could really cover.

Now, at twenty-two, I was long past high school. And things change, right?

Except that, sometimes, I feel like I'll be sixteen forever. Especially when I walked toward that door.

I can find my sixteen-year-old self in a bundle of pink Precious Moments. The Bible itself is pale pink, Catholic, given to me by my mom when she found out my sister and I went halves on a Protestant Bible at the local Christian bookstore.

A year after the trip to Jammin' Java, at twenty-three, I scrunch into my corner of the couch, and I go through it for the first time since I left for college at eighteen. Opening the carnation pink case - vinyl with little embossed butterflies - I see that everything is still in there. But of course it's still in there. In the zipper pouch, a baby blue gel pen and pink Bible highlighter and orange Post-it notes.

In the back of the case, I once stuffed handouts and worksheets from Sunday school, youth group, and Bible study. On a spiritual gifts profile, my sixteen-year-old self scored a six out of ten for prayer but a shy one for

love and enthusiasm. I find scrap paper saying that I want to write when I grow up. On a chart divided "right," "gray," and "wrong," I filled in Wild Cherry Pepsi, homosexuality, and curly hair, respectively. At twenty-three, I prefer Cherry Coke because it's not as sweet, I've long since come out as a lesbian, and I'm even reconciled with my curly hair - for the most part.

In the middle of the pile of papers rests a small orange flyer, advertising a concert at Jammin' Java, cosponsored by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. As I go through all of this, my first thought is, *God, religion came so easily then*. At twenty-three, that's the quickest thing to believe when I see "I [heart] Jesus" written in pink highlighter or blue gel pen.

In theory, the stretch from religion to folk music isn't very far. In the 1960s, Joan Baez and her contemporaries sang songs such as "Put Your Hand in the Hand" and "One Tin Solider," both of which I sang at various church functions. Earlier than Baez, Pete Seeger integrated gospel music and spirituals into his songs. Even in the contemporary setting, singer-songwriters such as Susan Werner are bringing back gospel and spiritual elements into their work. Werner, for instance, is

currently working on her "Godless Gospel" project, in which she brings back the musical elements of gospel and questions religion and politics within the lyrics. Werner says, "Americans don't have to necessarily 'get right with God,' but they do have to get alright with God, because God isn't going away from the American political landscape anytime soon."

Singer-songwriter Patty Larkin views "all music [as] a pathway to the spiritual." She says, "The difference is that in folk music the idea is that the music is accessible to all. It is a self-taught form (theoretically) passed from one generation to the next." The same thing happens with hymns in church. At some services, churches will print only the words of songs for congregations, assuming that people will either know the tune already or that they can pick up on it. No real skill is involved in basic church singing.

Nerissa Nields, another contemporary singer-songwriter in the folk community, recognizes spiritual influences in her own work as well. She sees some of her songs as following a tradition where "politics and spirituality meet and work toward a common goal," such as during the early Civil Rights movement. Nields also believes that folk

music "reflects an ecumenical spirituality" - musical spirituality for everyone.

But the community as a whole seems to stay away from organized religion, especially Christianity. The funny thing is how many concerts are held in churches. Performers joke that they've never been in church as much as they have since becoming folk singers. Maura Kennedy admits to never being into "preachy music." She does recognize, though, that "the folk community, by nature, is a curious community. We are all soul-searchers, and as we grow and go through life, we go through different stages of growth, like the structure of the chakras." Everyone goes through similar stages, which links people together through myth and archetypes. Kennedy says, "If we can connect with that for ourselves, then it will come out in our music, and maybe it will help others too." The music she does with her husband, Pete, reflects that idea. Kennedy adds, "I don't want to say that spirituality should play a role in all folk music, just that that's the role spirituality plays in our music. We like to think of our music as pan-(or even non-)denominational gospel."

In the Precious Moments Bible, I know exactly what I'm looking for. If nothing else, I remember my sixteen-year-

old obsession with the book of Job. In Job, God and Satan make bets on Job's faith, so they take away everything from his family to his farm animals and wait for him to denounce God, though, true to form, he never does. In return for his devotion, God rewards Job by doubling everything he had before. Job, essentially, becomes the cliché "when bad things happen to good people."

So I look for it, no longer remembering its exact place between Esther and Psalms in the Old Testament. It's the first section I once marked with a magenta ribbon, passages alternately underlined in blue and highlighted in pink. Here is where I know religion was never easy. I go from Job 10:1 "I am tired of living" to later in the same chapter with "Why, God, did you let me be born? I should have died before anyone saw me" in verses eighteen and nineteen. The hope I see in 22:28 - "You will succeed in all you do and light will shine on your path" - does little to calm me, remembering the fights with friends, remembering that I was never good enough to be with God.

I close the Bible and its case, press it into the couch, and say, "I've got to stop."

At fifteen, I made the decision during a basketball game that I was done with cheerleading. For good. I was

not cheering that night because of a missed practice, and, from where I was sitting in the stands, the squad looked like it was doing fine without me. I was the only person from the JV squad after football season not to move up to varsity, a move made by the coaches on a political, rather than a talent, basis. I wasn't popular enough, racy enough, for cheerleading. It's not that I was unpopular or a nerd but more a member of the middle wasteland.

Earlier in the year, in order to find something outside of cheerleading, I started going to the Methodist Church across the street from my house with a friend from a journalism class. Growing up in a very conservative Catholic church, I didn't entirely understand the Jesus-is-my-best-friend brand of Christianity. My friend Allison listened to contemporary Christian music, went to church willingly, maybe carried a Bible in her backpack, and just seemed so convinced, so normal, so . . . happy. I wasn't. At all. The drudgery and guilt of Catholicism didn't help, especially since I never found solace there in the first place. I needed something, anything, to keep the metallic sting of a razor blade out of my skin and to stop crying all the time. The anger inside of me felt so intense, gritting like sand under my skin. Anger which had no

reason or purpose. My mother, however, didn't like the idea of me going to a Protestant church.

"You already have a church," she said. "That's your faith. It's your heritage."

But if I told her it wasn't, she would cry. If I told her that God in the vision of a Methodist church was the only thing holding my life together, she would cry harder. None of it would be about me. It would be about her being a bad mother. Even on the surface level of church alone, my mother would have to deal with my grandma who, as my grandpa says, is "holier than the Pope." I needed a community, though, a sense of belonging outside of the dark, multi-thousand-member St. Bernadette Catholic Church.

So I said, "It's just for the friends. It's not like I'm converting."

Messiah United Methodist, however, came with its own problems and drama. The rules of the teenage world still exist inside a church. Everything remains the same, only now salvation is at stake as well. People still kissed in stairwells and snuck beer from their parents' fridges, but with religion came a new kind of pressure. Who, really, could be the most (outwardly) pious? Who attended more retreats and prayed the most often? Who really, really, with all their hearts, loved God?

I remember my time at Messiah in tones and themes. I can see myself sad but open, allowing people to take care of me. I know that I loved people more deeply than I had before or since. That, maybe, made the other things that much worse - when Allison would tell me, "I just can't deal with your problems," and I would tell her, "At least you get the option of walking away," or when she later wrote me and another friend a note, trying to discontinue our friendship, because we brought her down spiritually. "Isn't the point of Christianity to bring people up with you?" I wrote her back. She never responded to that, though she did eventually agree to be friends again, but it was never the same after that. The intense love and understanding I had felt in the initial stages of our friendship deteriorated as I could never be sure when she might just dismiss me again.

Allison's doubt in my faith made me try that much harder to prove her wrong, to be that perfect Christian girl. My non-pious behaviors like swearing or *talking* about the *concept* of sex didn't help my cause. I kept at it, though, taping a copy of Luke 15 - the prodigal son - to the inside of my locker. Even Christianity has a consumer side, which allowed me to buy everything from religious tee-shirts to Testamints - mints wrapped in

scripture. And, while I had been praying every night of my life since I was in a crib, I prayed harder and dug into myself, wanting nothing more than to be okay in the eyes of many - and for myself.

Inside, I still felt miserable, like even the love of God couldn't keep me from wanting to die. I held onto the idea, though, that the next Sunday would bring the answers; if not, then the next. If it could work for Job, then surely it could work for me, too, right?

Inside, Jammin' Java looks like every standard coffee house. As a Christian coffee house, the venue had failed. With the new owners, the club ranks as one of the best in the D.C. area. They have tables up front by the door and a large L-shaped counter that provides a barrier to the listening area in the back. The venue can squeeze in 180 people, but the crowd that night seemed sparser.

Joanne and I made it inside as The Kennedys finished their set. They stood before an exposed brick wall as I half-watched them sing their last two songs. Part of me felt like a fake folk community member for showing up at the end of a concert, but part of me felt like a full member of the community, willing to squeeze in as much in one night as possible.

As I picked at my half of the brownie sundae, I tried to understand the clash of excitement from the Susan Werner concert earlier in the night and the anxious flashbacks of high school. As the room cleared out after the show, I started to think that maybe it had been silly to close off Jammin' Java as an option in high school. What point did I really make? Sometimes a coffee house is just a coffee house.

Joanne sipped from her paper coffee cup before getting out of her chair. "Let me introduce you to Maura," she said. "You'll love her."

I considered the potential awkwardness of the situation before getting up and following Joanne past the counter.

At the merchandise table, Maura stood, talking to another fan. I noticed how skinny she was and how young she looked, though I later learned she was closer to my parents' age. After the fan left, she gave Joanne a hug and shook my hand. She seemed genuinely interested in what Joanne had to say, then asked her for workout advice to help with some problems she had been having since a car accident a few weeks before the concert.

As the two talked, I thought about how, to me, Maura was just a regular person. If I were to run into someone

like Britney Spears, even though I could care less, I wouldn't be able to just talk to her. Famous is still famous in the pop world. In the folk community, though, performers are still people. And, in a small place like Jammin' Java, fans can see how they help support the performer's career.

"That's what I love about these concerts," I told Joanne as we walked back through the parking lot. "Maura seems so accessible and friendly. What other type of music can you say that about?"

"They're just like us," Joanne responded. "They're good people."

Community, I know, is everything. Susan Werner said, "I've thought for a while that folk music is a kind of church for folks who don't go to church. There's the same kind of passionate commitment to a set of priorities, to a political outlook, to a way of life."

The summer passes, and I keep the Precious Moments Bible on the bookshelf in my bedroom. I can't look through it again and feel silly for being afraid of my teenage years. I do start going to church again, though, to a tiny, country Presbyterian church near college, again to stave off the suffocation of depression. This time, I keep

myself wrapped tightly inside myself. But the services don't feel the same. I can't get out of my own head long enough to take in the sermons, and I don't let the other congregants - almost all retired couples - see me as anything but the nice young woman who goes to Longwood. In Bible study, we work through Job - two slow chapters a week - and I bring a different Bible and never give any commentary on what we read. Sometimes, while the other people talk, I try to figure out in the new Bible which passages I highlighted at sixteen.

I know that I can't pass an opportunity for the growth and learning afforded by a second chance, yet I'm not sure if I'm ready. And I don't know when I'll ever be ready. It's not that I've ever stopped praying, ever stopped believing in God. But something, somewhere inside of me, is irrevocably different.

Instead, I listen often to a recent Dar Williams song, "Teen for God." The narrator of the song struggles with the divide between her and the other girls at a Christian summer camp. In it, Williams sings

The girls have looks and the girls have rules
They came here from their Bible schools
They can make you pay attention
To the way you dress and eat

Make you trip over your own two feet

The narrator continues to compete with the girls until the song takes a turn as the narrator expresses how empty she feels, how unworthy of these other girls. Then she notices boys and, when asking God for help, says

Help me know, four years from now

I won't believe in you anyhow

And I'll mope around a campus

And I'll feel betrayed

All those guilty summers I stayed

But then I'll laugh

That I fell for the lure

Of the pain of desire to feel so pure

I don't know if I ever feel - or will feel - guilty for the years I spent in the basement of Messiah United Methodist. Or how I would have dealt with adolescence outside of the safety net of God. Sometimes, though, I wish that I still had the conviction I had at sixteen, the hope that something out there would take care of me.

Starting Over - Falcon Ridge Folk Festival

"And she thought to herself, you know what, he's right,
it's a big, big world out there, as big as the blue Pacific
or that cracker in his Cadillac in Tampa Bay
or the sequoias in California,
as big as Chicago traffic
or those power towers marching across Elizabeth, New Jersey"

- Rachel Bissex

We sit, huddled together on a tarp in the increasing cold of a July night in the Berkshires; long stretches of hills rise behind us, filled with thousands of people. Before Dar's set started, I traded in my flowered bikini top and yellow shorts for gray fleece pants and a long-sleeved shirt. From the stage, just enough light shines to show the faces around me. Everyone has glow sticks, lighters, cell phones out, by now, that glow light in small puddles around them - especially in our section of the hill, where the members of Camp Dar sit on a tarp someone placed during the tarp run first thing in the morning. We know what's coming. Sharon and Chris pass out long neon glow sticks throughout our group.

Dar Williams stands behind a microphone on the main stage, petite in her jeans and a maroon tee-shirt with a

dove on it. She has her blonde, shoulder-length hair loose. Like I imagine the women in her songs, Dar's body curves beautifully in a way I'd never see in a fashion magazine. She looks tiny in the open air, in the largeness of the stage - it's just her and her guitar toward the end of her set on the third night, Saturday night, of Falcon Ridge Folk Festival. She's singing "Iowa," a celebrated sing-a-long song that the crowd clamored for when she asked for requests.

Dar pauses mid-song, but continues to strum her guitar as she says, "Everybody, let's just bathe the hillside in darkness."

I turn around to see everyone along the hill smother glow sticks, extinguish lighters. I put my pink glow stick in my lap and cover it with my hands. All that's left are the lights from the stage and the speckle of stars above our heads.

She giggles, her cheeks coming into the corners of her eyes. "Oh, my gosh, I feel like a dictator. I've never tasted such power before."

The guitar, an acoustic, continues to hum beneath her words. "For the last five years, no, I think seven ... I've been asking everyone to lift up not just their lighters, not just their glow sticks, but also the twenty-first

century symbol of connectivity - the cell phone - in the air in solidarity for something."

I can hear other parts of the hill laugh, people, I guess, who are not as familiar with Dar. You can always spot a new listener by the eagerness in the laugh, the surprise in the tears. Veterans, however, come prepared for Dar's quirks and slicing lyrics.

"Today, I just racked my brains for what to, you know, sort of dedicate our light to," she says, "and every time I thought about it, my brain said, 'to the connectivity of humankind.' And I was like, 'Stop it. What else? Something really specific, man.' Nope, to the connectivity of humankind. It would not stop."

The whole crowd laughs this time at Dar's honesty and openness with her audience. No plastic pretenses from this woman. I watch as Gail, who is sitting in front of me, puts her arm around her girlfriend's back and rests her head on her shoulder. Gail runs darwilliams.net, signing her Dar-list e-mails as "Oh Canada Gail" after Dar's song "Oh Canada Girls." On the other side of Gail, Sally snuggles against her wife, Laura. Sally works for the Human Rights Campaign and also heads Dar's birthday project, a yearly collaboration of local community service - helping those in need being a big part of Dar's career.

Dar continues talking. She's thought of things to dedicate our light to, other than to connectivity. "One is to Nerissa Nields who got married in May," she says, "to this great guy named Tom."

She pauses, still strumming the guitar. "I thought we could raise our lights to Nerissa, and I thought we could raise our lights to those who are in our hearts, such as Rachel Bissex."

Camp Dar nods, as if confirming this perfect dedication. Beyond us, though, I can't see much. Maybe everyone agrees. Rachel, a good friend of Dar's and a well-respected singer-songwriter, died last February from breast cancer. This year's Falcon Ridge, perhaps, is for her.

"So I was thinking we could sort of have a hillside, a contoured hillside, filled with lights for all our dear friends. All right. So, you ready? Dictator says, 'Light your lights.'"

I take a breath.

And then she says, "Here we go," pressing into the strings of her guitar.

The hillside explodes in lights and colors. Pinks and yellows and oranges of glow sticks and lighters, blues and greens from cell phones. A complete rainbow of connection.

And then we all continue to sing along, just a simple word, over and over: "Iowa."

How could it possibly be, I think, that I ever once for a moment doubted I should be here?

The morning before, I drove toward the farm in Hillsdale, New York. Already, on the nine-hour drive from Virginia (and an overnight stay in New Jersey), I had doubts. Serious doubts. Was I really going camping? Even fake camping? I had never done that before, much to the disbelief of everyone else in my life. "How do you go twenty-two years without camping?" they asked. Easy, you don't go camping. You sleep in a bed in a building. "Weren't you ever a Girl Scout?" No, I wasn't. Double points toward no camping experience.

During the past summers, I had listened to other folk fans talk about Falcon Ridge Folk Festival, how much they loved it, the community it inspired. Five thousand people, I thought, is a lot of community. Roughly the size of my rural, Southern college. For the weeks surrounding the festival, dar-list - an e-mail group of Dar fans - plans meetings and song circles at Camp Dar and then shares pictures and stories once the event is over.

The questions ran through me as I drove, sliding along with the wind from the open car window. How exactly am I supposed to shower under a garden hose? How am I going to find anything? What am I going to do if I burn really badly? It's not like I can avoid the sun. What happens if it rains and I'm miserable?

The week before, I went shopping with Sharon and she told me horror stories about a particularly needy camper with an emotional imbalance and bulimia issues and how Sharon had no plans on taking care of anyone during this year's festival. "This one's for me," she said. Her words rang again as I neared my destination. I'm going to be a needy camper, I thought. Really needy. Because, even at home, I'm needy.

The pressure of midsummer hit hard that week before Falcon Ridge. I had to pass two semesters' worth of Spanish in seven weeks in order to complete my undergraduate degree and be able to start graduate school at the end of August. I had already failed or withdrawn from Spanish twice, and that was at the introductory level. The summer was intermediate. Falcon Ridge fell right in the middle of the class, the homework trailing along in my canvas tote bag.

I made it to the farm, saw the parking lot, the crowds and said, "Oh, shit." Technically, the festival started the day before, so most people were already settled by that point. But I could only miss one day of class, so Friday it was.

A parking lot volunteer in an orange vest waved his arms at me. "You're going too fast," he said.

No kidding.

I pulled into a space and called Chris, hoping he had his cell phone on. Sharon, I knew, was leaving hers at the hotel.

I called twice before he answered. "Come get me," I said.

"What? Get your wristband and bring your car up to Camp Dar," he said, his voice distant, even though I knew he couldn't be too far away.

"Are you kidding me? Where the hell is that? Where do I get a wristband? I'm not driving up the hill. Please come down here."

He conceded, and I waited. This is ridiculous, I thought. How is this ever going to work? I ran the toe of my flip-flop in patterns through the dirt. Everyone looked like they belonged, like they had all been there before.

Chris came down, wearing one of those backpacks that's filled with water and has a connecting tube. Really? I asked myself. This is too hardcore for me. I had bought a durable water bottle from the school bookstore the week before in hopes that I would remember to stay hydrated. "That's the most important thing," everyone said. "You have to drink water." I tried to think of the last time I drank water, and I came up blank. I also noticed how Chris sort of stuck out. He's Asian and everyone else was, well, white. Really, really white.

I tried to be patient as I signed in, as we made our way up the hill. Chris and Sharon had a tent, an air mattress, everything already set up for me. A big step in the right direction. I met both of them through dar-list. Chris, born and raised in Brooklyn, works as a social worker for people who care for the elderly. He's a few years older than I am and rather quiet. Sharon is Dar's main merchandise woman for her East Coast shows and a multiple-times-a-day poster on several folk lists. I took to her instantly a couple of summers before, the moment I heard the blend of Massachusetts and Brooklyn in her voice. She, too, is a social worker in New York and is two years younger than my parents. Sharon and Chris live near each other in Brooklyn, and I meet them for concerts in New

Jersey. They have a lot of patience with me. I prayed that it would last.

On the way up the hill, I saw Sally and Laura, who live near me at home in Washington, DC. Familiar faces, I thought, check. At the middle part of the hill, off to the side, rested Camp Dar. On the map in the program, I saw that the space even warranted its own "road" name. That's a start, I thought. At least people will know where to send a lost me. From that elevation, I could see just how vast this space was. Tents everywhere. Two big stages at the base of the hill, vender booths and the children's areas behind the stages. Food tents and dancing tents. RVs in a special lot beyond that.

For a second, I let my guard down. "This is incredible," I said to Chris. He nodded.

By that night, I settled, figuring out at least how to make it to the port-a-potties. Sharon took me around, introduced me to people.

It stormed during dinner, and people crushed together in the food tents, smushed themselves around the wooden tables, watched as a lone red camping tent tumbled down the hill. The rain rushed in torrents, and I stood at the edge of one of the food tents with other Camp Dar members,

looking at the rain pounding on the cars in the parking lot. I stuck my hand out as the rain stung the skin on my palm.

"I want to go dancing in the rain," I said. In my head, I added, "with my best friend." Where did that come from? Stef was back in Virginia, already graduated and starting her new grown-up job in Fredericksburg. She never once expressed interest in going to Falcon Ridge. If anything, she made fun of it. I shook my head and withdrew my hand, wiping it on the big blue jacket Chris lent me.

One woman in the tent told me she was once struck by lightning and had been petrified of storms ever since. She shook on the bench. Something in her tone of voice sat strangely with me. You meet a lot of weirdos in the folk world, I thought. Maybe it was mean to make fun of someone who had been struck by lightning, but, come on. Who does that happen to? I saw nerdy men whose voices trembled when they spoke and women whose clothes were just a shade the wrong size. Nothing that they actually did, said or wore was all that bad, though it still unhinged me.

People compared concert experiences like war stories - how much contact they got with the other side and when. Only the folk singers weren't enemies. Weird day in hell,

I thought, when I'm one of the most normal people in a group.

The rain cleared to a sunset and a rainbow, the air chilling dramatically. People went to their tents to change into sweatpants, long sleeves, and jackets.

"Well, there's something you don't get in the South," I told Susan Moss as we walked up the hill. "Jackets in July, no mosquitoes." She laughed at me and agreed.

Susan is an earth mother from Florida. She's got a mass of tight gray curls on the top of her head, a contrast to the deeply tanned tone of her skin, which rounds like the women of antiquity. Her personality rests comfortably in her body, covered by a long skirt and a tee-shirt. She has that mom-perfume smell that soothes. Prior to the festival, we had never met in person, only exchanged emails on dar-list, sent each other cards during the twice-a-year swap. The subject lines on all of her e-mails come from songs of all genres. She was an instant favorite, the kind of person who immediately makes sense. When Sharon introduced us, Susan pulled me into a big hug. Comfort. She turned fifty the summer before I met her, a few years older than my parents, but somehow seems younger, more connected to people my age.

That night, Friday night, I watched the song-swap on the main stage, the only event of the night I particularly cared to see. For the song swap, Susan Werner, Tracy Grammer, Vance Gilbert, and Chris Smither traded turns singing their songs. Really, I just wanted to see Susan and Tracy on the same stage. During the day, the main stage hosted the emerging artist showcase, a hit-or-miss affair. Some of the bigger acts of the weekend, such as We're About 9, started out as emerging artists at this festival.

I sat on the tarp with Vincent, my little folk brother of fourteen, and pointed to Tracy and Susan. "Two of the hottest women in folk music," I said.

"So hot," he replied. His voice cracks sometimes, and he's gangly in the way only a teen boy can be. "Dar should be up there, too."

"Dar's cute like a mouse."

Vincent rolled his eyes. "Whatever, she's hot."

When Vincent joined dar-list the year before, he took my place as one of the younger members. While there were other college students, most of the active posters hovered in middle age. Vincent hit the list in the storm of early puberty, but he had started to mellow out. Some older members, my best friend included, found themselves

irritated by his immaturity. But I felt for his enthusiasm and eventually warmed to him, as did people like Sharon. Sometimes, though, we still have to give him etiquette warnings. Lots of rules in the folk world, it seems; for instance, you can't announce to dar-list if she gives you a shout out from the stage - someone else has to do it for you. Vincent's dad takes him to concerts, and he came along to Falcon Ridge as well. It's their time together. My parents, I told him once, would rather kill themselves than go to a folk concert. His mom, apparently, feels the same way.

After the song swap, I found bed early and easily, as someone played "Taps" on bagpipes at the top of the hill.

Saturday morning, the day loomed hazily ahead. Saturday meant prime time, the big events. We're About 9, Susan Werner, Tracy Grammer, Dar Williams, Eddie from Ohio. The workshop stage had "Land of the Free" (politics and America), "It Just Takes Two" (duos), "The Songwriting Process" (obvious) and - for the highlight of side entertainment - "FRFF FOLKQUIZ" (hilarious).

I wandered between the events and realized just how small I was in the folk community. I thought I understood my place within the folk community - on dar-list, with

other fans, with the artists. Earlier in the summer, my friend Jen relayed to me that Susan Werner thought I knew everyone. But there, in that moment, as I walked around people and avoided eye contact, I felt so tiny. Sharon, Chris, everyone seemed to know so many more people, so many more artists. Sharon and Chris kept running off to meet someone or see something that I had never heard of. Looking at the schedule, it occurred to me that I only really knew the bigger names, and I didn't feel like trying anything new.

I could blame my lack of depth on not living in an area that supported the folk community as heavily as places like New York and New England did. There's an intensity up there, a mission for this music. Virginia, after all, has no folk music radio station. Fewer house concerts. Fewer venues. But I guess that's where initiative comes in. If what you want isn't where you are, you've got to go out and find it or make it.

As I walked around, I ran into Jane Paul, Susan Werner's road manager. "I forgot your shirt," she said. As a gesture toward my struggles with passing Spanish, Sharon had asked Jane if she had any more of the Susan Werner tee-shirts they had sold long before I became a fan.

Jane said she had one left in a box under her bed somewhere.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "You've got enough to deal with right now."

Not much later, I ran into Susan Werner. As I saw her coming toward me, I quickly debated the easy wave hello, how to judge if she was going to stop and talk, what to say if she stopped. How to not pee my pants if the latter happened.

"Hey, Amy," she said, slowing down. Sweet. "You're going to burn." She pointed to my bikini top. Best time ever to not wear a tee-shirt.

"I put on sunscreen like three times already."

She raised her eyebrows. "Be careful," she said. "I'll see you later."

"Good luck on your set," I said, surprised I survived the encounter.

I continued on my walk, thinking, Do I really belong here? It's true that I feel more at home at folk concerts than in any other part of my life. Never have I felt more accepted or understood. The folk community brims with well-educated, insightful people. But I go to the same venues to see the same artists over and over and over again. I don't go to support a venue, regardless of who's

playing. I dismiss people who appear slightly off kilter, like the people in the food tent from the night before. But, I mean, Jane and Susan had both just spoken to me, knowing who I was. That had to count for something, right? I questioned my ability to branch out in music after it took me so long to find my little piece of the folk community. If it took me twenty-two years to get to this point in my life, who's to say that I don't just need a little longer to expand again? I knew, though, that this question could not substitute for the right answer.

So I watched the performers, laughed as two announcers fought over the right to introduce Susan's set. Then again as Susan did a freestyle rap during "FRFF FOLKQUIZ" on the workshop stage. Vincent and I planned to go to Susan's signing time after dinner. "You're going to have to go first," he said. "I'm scared."

"What are you scared for?" I asked. His Falcon Ridge bag sat on the ground beside him, already crowded with signatures from performers. "Look at that thing. Plus, she already knows who you are."

"Not really," he said. "Please?"

Patience, I thought.

And, again, I had more time to spend thinking. When I first started listening to folk music, it all happened at

once, a steady rush of acoustic guitars and women's voices and burgeoning friendships. My place in dar-list came quickly. Stef and I bought all of Dar's CDs and went to concerts and became established as Dar's Dancing Girls. Looking back at our posts on the list, I see eighteen-year-old-girl versions of Vincent. The growth I experienced at eighteen, nineteen, was incomparable to anything else I had experienced. In just a few short years, performers like Dar and Susan knew me by name, something I didn't even know could happen when Stef made a best friends mix CD, including one song by Dar, before we left for our freshman year of college.

Since that time, I attended only one Dar concert without Stef, and she only attended one without me. We expanded to other singer-songwriters, went to more concerts. During our last year of college, however, things changed between us as we started to find the different paths of our lives. But when we were Dar's Dancing Girls, she would have been here with me, and all the thoughts I had, I could have said aloud.

"Iowa" ends, and Dar winds up her set. Everything riles back up in my head as she sings "When I Was a Boy," a slow song about packing up your past and hiding it as you

grow older and conform. I look around me and consider reaching out. But this is vacation time for most people. They don't need the angsty whining of a twenty-something. And, aside from Sharon, I can't really think of anyone I know well enough to talk to about things like lost best friends and school anxiety and the weird, sorrowful feeling cresting around my lungs. Needy camper, I thought. A needy camper who should just go to bed.

I get up to head back up the hill to Camp Dar even though it's only ten-thirty. Everyone else stays down on the tarps for Eddie from Ohio. I blame a sudden heave of exhaustion for sending me away to my tent. I fall asleep quickly, only to be woken up when the bagpipes play again to sound the end of the structured night. Eventually, I can hear other Dar Campers coming back to the group. Sally starts singing Dar songs with a Scottish accent, much to everyone's amusement. People pass around guitars, playing mostly Dar songs. Maybe there is even a drum. I only try to picture them for a moment.

This, I know, will be the time everyone talks about post-festival on dar-list. But I also know that the list will soon revert to political arguments, song-of-the-week discussions, concert reviews, and Dar spottings in the media. But there will be that week of Falcon Ridge talk

and pictures. And, later, someone will write, "I've never been before. What's it all about?" Tonight will be the moment that people will share in response.

I try to get up, but I feel a deep pressure in my chest. Everything about the weekend, about the summer struggle, about the things we lose along the way, hits me as hard as the storm the night before. I start to cry, the silent heaving sobs of anonymity and regret. And soon, I cry myself to sleep for the first time since elementary school.

The last day and I want to go home. Really want to go home. But I'm tired - over-stimulated, as Sharon says. And Susan was right; even with all of the sunscreen, my skin still managed to crisp red.

I know what I'm going to miss today: Eliza Gilkyson, Vance Gilbert, Nerissa and Katryna Nields, The Kennedys, and Ani DiFranco. I must have sunstroke, a lapse into brain death, to willingly miss some of the best singer-songwriters in the business, to leave a group of people I may very well not see again until next summer. I promise myself to hang around for the Rachel Bissex tribute, more for the people performing than for her memory.

By eight, the sun bakes campers out of their tents. They wander, sleepy-eyed into the port-a-potties or down the hill to the showers. Most have only been asleep for a few hours, dozing after the song circles. I hear from other people that, last night, at the very top of the hill, someone had an open bar going. Across the fields, Happy Town campers paid tribute to Dave Carter, a favorite of the festival, who passed away in the summer of 2002. His partner, Tracy Grammer, attends the tribute each year, singing along with the other fans and friends.

Susan Moss and I wait in line for coffee from one of the many vendors at the festival. As Susan's bracelets and rings and necklaces shine distraction under the morning sun, I share my most recent thoughts with her.

"I'm looking for something new," I say. "Something that captures me."

She nods, looks tired from the weekend.

"The thing is," I add, "I've found new music lately, but nothing that makes me want to run out and buy it." Music, it seems, is always the answer.

"It's got to come to you," she says, like she's talking about love.

"I know that," I say. "That's how I found Dar, Mary Chapin, even Susan Werner. They all came at times I didn't

know I was looking for something, but they led me where I needed to go."

We move up in line, and she nods again, sage feelings drifting.

I keep going. "Mary Chapin started it all, got me through that summer after high school. And then Dar through the first year of college. Susan through the past couple of years." I take a breath. "I know there's a change coming; graduating college deserves a soundtrack, doesn't it?"

Susan laughs, puts her arm around me like I'm her own daughter, rather than this summer's adopted child. Of all people, I think, she knows how to match a song to a moment.

By ten, we're all assembled on tarps dusted with kicked-up dirt in front of the workshop stage. To the right, at the main stage, Eddie from Ohio, Lowen and Navarro, and The Kennedys warm up for the Gospel Wake Up Call. The rest of the big names are over here. The stage huddles with talent and remorse.

Before Rachel Bissex died, Victor Keyman asked what he could do for her. She said she wanted to make sure that her two children made it through college. Keyman took that concern and came up with a way for Rachel's children to go

to college and to keep Rachel's music alive for everyone else. Over a hundred people volunteered their time and talents to create *Remembering Rachel*, a two-CD set full of covers of her songs, every penny of which will go to Rachel's children. In the liner notes, Rachel's quoted as saying, "No one would play my songs. They're too quirky." But the CDs, and the people gathered on the stage this morning, might prove otherwise.

In the front row, Tracy Grammer, Dar Williams, and Susan Werner sit next to each other. My three favorite performers, I think, all right there in a row. Also, Vincent's dream come true. He notes how hot they are, and I don't disagree. Most everyone on the stage wears jeans, tee-shirts, something to keep comfortable for the long day ahead. I'm back in my bikini top and blue shorts, giving up on preventing any new burns.

I close my eyes, sun searing deep on my back, my chest. Sunscreen seeps through my closed eyelids, and wiping it away only makes the pain worse. One by one the performers each sing a song of Rachel's; the banter from the rest of the weekend is absent, except when Vance Gilbert introduces Susan Werner as his ex-wife, Alicia Keys and Fantasia as their daughters. "They talented, ain't they?" he asks. "They don't give us no money."

I watch Dar as she stares at the ground, her head bent slightly to the side. Susan taps the beat with her fingers on her thighs, nodding along. For a few songs, Tracy plays her violin along with the other performers.

Then Tracy stands up with her new musical partner, Jim Henry. He's got the acoustic guitar hanging at his waist. She holds up her violin and begins to sing, her voice emptying slowly and carefully into the heat. I watch, only half paying attention, leaning back on my elbows, until Tracy gets to the lines, "Well it's all laid out before you / all the joy and all the shame / now that you're a woman / welcome to the game." I sit all the way up, gather my knees to my chest, squint as if this will help me better understand. She continues, "Don't let the game get you / cause it surely left me standing / in the smoking ashes of my life's debris / the flames lick my lips / my eyes turn to ice / I used to be normal / I used to be nice."

And then I start to cry, the sunscreen and the tears stinging their way down my burnt face, dropping onto my bare arms. I think about the emptiness back in Virginia, at a school I may or may not ever get out of. How I'm no longer sure where each of the pieces of my life fit.

Dar sings a song that's both simple and urgent, like a phone call between friends at the end of the day. She

strums her guitar alone, chords working between the words,
"When you have more than you need / do you spread the rest
around / be it time / be it money / be it love?"

I think about the people I seek now in my life, most
of them women and men like those who surround me right now.
Even though I lack the ability to reach out, they are still
willing to look after needy campers like me.

I came to Falcon Ridge thinking - nervousness and
doubts aside - that I belonged in the folk community, that
I knew exactly where I fit. And I do belong; I just need
to grow a bit more, give myself to the people who give
themselves to me. To fill the space I've been afforded.
Susan Moss knew what she was talking about when she said
the right music would come to me.

Sitting on this tarp, I wonder if everyone has a
moment like this, collected in the sun, the easy epiphany
of summertime and friendship and music. If they know
people, as Dar sings, who are "just like that."

As Cool As I Am - Dar Williams at Starr Hill

"And as long as she's got noise she's fine
But I could teach her how I learned to dance
When the music's ended" - Dar Williams

Date: April 17, 2003

From: Stephanie Young

To: dar-list@grassyhill.org

If you can't guess who we are, we're the two cute people jumping up and down and squealing and dancing and giggling because that's what Dar makes us do.

The last song at Starr Hill starts with whisker brushes on cymbals, adding in electric guitar and claps from the audience. Dar Williams, in her jeans and sparkly purple tank top, strums thick on her acoustic guitar. Her small blue eyes squint into the tops of her cheeks as she sings. The lyrics rise familiarly, which we shout along to with ease: "I'm not that petty / as cool as I am / I thought you'd know this already / I will not be afraid of women." My best friend, Stef, and I dance, all hips and arms, bouncing on our tiptoes. The audience connects over

lyrics that bind women together as sisters, rather than male-driven enemies.

I have seen Dar three times before tonight, but this is the first time with the band, something she reserves for CD-release tours. Julie Wolf on keyboard, Carole Steele in the Karma Corner on percussion, Steve Holley on drums, Mike Visceglia on guitar, and Ben Butler on bass surround Dar in a semi-circle.

I have also been to Starr Hill before, the first time I saw Dar last year. The venue sits in Charlottesville, not too far from the University of Virginia. The lower level of the building hosts a restaurant and brewery with expensive but worth-the-money food. A staircase to the upstairs cuts through the middle of the listening room. The stage is waist-high in the right-hand corner with an exposed brick wall behind it. They have a bar in the back-left corner, and almost everything is standing-only. A few lone tables dot the area by the bar. Across from the stage on the left-hand side, someone sells merchandise out of a closet with Dutch door. At most, the room probably holds no more than three hundred people.

During the night, Stef and I have already danced until our legs ached, ankles and calves flaming red from jumping and twirling. We managed to seduce the opening act, Ben

Taylor - James Taylor's son - off of the stage to dance with Stef. Stef's tank top droops low over her large chest, and I have my Care Bear's tee-shirt tucked up, exposing my midriff. Stray hair from our ponytails clings to the backs of our necks.

Stef and I look at each other and then up at Dar as she sings, "And then I go outside to join the others." We pause and then throw our arms up in the air with Dar and everyone else, yelling, "I am the others!"

Just as the song should end, Carole Steele launches into a conga drum solo, her hands flying over the skin of the drum. Mike Visceglia challenges her with his electric guitar as Steve Holley breaks in with his drums. As I cheer along, I lose my breath, but we keep dancing, not knowing when they'll stop. When they finally finish, Dar jumps in the air and slams the strings of her guitar like she's a rock star.

Stef clasps the palm of my hand in hers, sweat-slick skin. "I love us!" she shouts above the shouting and clapping of everyone else. Dar thanks the crowd for their enthusiasm.

I squeeze Stef's hand. Leaning toward her ear, I yell back, "I love us, too."

We spend a summer driving around and listening to a copy of "As Cool As I Am," recorded somewhere on the tour, hitting the steering wheel and dashboard of my car along with Carole Steele, dancing underneath seatbelts. We memorize the timing so that we can even say along with Dar, inflections and all, "Thank you so much Ben Butler, Steve Holley, Mike Visceglia, Carole Steele, Julie Wolf, you, you, you, thank you." Our other friends shake their heads and tell us we're crazy.

Every picture shows us pressed together. Our arms tucked across each other's stomachs and backs, standing on the dock of a lake, the sun setting behind us, a bulky Mary Washington sweatshirt covering Stef, and I'm still in my Fraggie Rock tee-shirt from earlier in the day. Arms around each other's shoulders after a concert in Richmond, matching jackets protecting against the late fall cold. Tipsy at my twenty-second birthday, her wearing my metallic blue hat, me in a light blue ballerina top, my hand grasping her hip, her hands on my arm. Our hair goes from curly and long to short and straight for her, short and still curly for me. She wears flip-flops almost everywhere, and I make up for our two-inch height difference with sneakers or high heels. Her ring that says

"pimp" is hidden in most of the pictures, but I know it's there. In the photographs, I can still hear the reverberating giggles of being young and female. Of having the best friend.

I can tell you this: I could not - or would not - give Stef everything. At seventeen, Stef rescued me from the dramatic tides of a teenage-girl friendship gone wrong. My "best friend" at the time was a Jesus girl who always needed to be a spiritual step up from me. My interactions with her often resulted in tears and angry online journal entries.

Stef left me a note after finding my journal that said, "Fleece makes everything better." In that line, she gave me the comfort of something warm and soft, something simple in which I could hide. But I had been so invested in the previous friendship that the hurt of it ending kept me from being the best best friend I could be to Stef. At the time, I assumed I would get over that feeling; however, as the years passed, my ability to connect became less and less.

For girls, I knew that the ideal best friends came up from childhood. Memories of learning to ride a bike waver into the first few months behind the wheel. Sleepover

movies grow from cheesy Disney musicals to John Hughes dramas meant to explain the mysteries of high school. Even in separation, the big moments happen together: first periods and kisses and heartbreaks. You buy lip gloss to share at school, though your parents find you too young for make-up. You stuff socks in your bathing suits in an attempt to glimpse the future. She is the one person who can check your pants for stains and you won't be embarrassed. She can even read your diary because she already witnesses everything anyway.

Stef and I started as enemies. At thirteen, she stole my boyfriend, and then I stole him back - a big-eared scrawny boy whom neither us has spoken to since we left middle school. I made fun of her for changing the spelling of her name to match pop singer Gwen Stefani and for still being a Girl Scout. She mocked me for being flat-chested and juvenile. Our mutual friends learned to keep us apart.

By the time we became friends, we were already in the depths of SATs and college applications. We had mastered our parents' minivans and our after-school jobs. Depression and self-injury slunk around both of us - perhaps the only things we had in common beyond the surface. Friends who had witnessed all of the firsts left with parental military transfers. We bonded over being

from two of the few families who were always left behind. We kept our friendship light. Our dreams included having a *Golden Girls* house someday with the pilot-episode-only gay cook Coco. None of the things we could share afforded me the comfort of the friendships I read about in books and saw on TV and in movies and had experienced in the past. We never got paired with famous names as I had with other friends: "Laverne and Shirley," "Mary and Rhoda," and "Lucy and Ethel." For a long time, I pretended we existed above that.

As people leave the show, Stef and I wait with other friends in the small listening room, hoping Dar will come out to talk. I have met Dar two of the three times I have seen her before, but I haven't yet made the list of faces and names she recognizes. I know from reading the liner notes of her latest CD that getting to know her proves possible. In the acknowledgement section, I noticed the names of people from dar-list, the e-mail forum that Stef and I both belong to. We spent a good deal of time, after reading liner notes and everyone's congratulations on dar-list, discussing what it would take for Dar to know us that well.

We're talking about how amazing the show was and how amazing Carole Steele turned out to be, when I spot Carole in the back by the bar. "There she is," I say to Stef.

"She's smoking a clove. Do you think she'd bum us one?" Stef asks.

"Let's go talk to her. She's just standing there." In my limited musical experience, I can't imagine another community that would allow me to interact with band members like they were real people.

Stef clasps my hand again and leads me toward the back. Before we can say anything to her, Carole takes us both in a hug, her right hand tilted outward so she doesn't burn us with her cigarette. "My dancing girls!" she says. "I could see you from the stage. What wonderful energy!"

I don't know how or why things changed. Everyone who said college would drive us apart turned out to be wrong. We knew when our friendship started that we wouldn't be attending the same school, but we would be staying in Virginia. Our schools were only two hours apart from each other: Stef in Fredericksburg and me in Farmville. For the first couple of years, we had no choice but to return home to Springfield during extended breaks. At home, we saw each other almost every day, went on road trips and

vacations together. During the school year, we met for every folk concert we could find. Our friends from high school expected us to be together; the friends we made at Dar shows paired us together as the dancing girls.

As the years went on, and we moved out of the dorms, we had no reason to come home as often or for as long. We still made time to see each other and spoke on Instant Messenger at least once a day. Dar started to recognize us at shows, knowing us by name when we spoke to her afterward. I became close with some of the women who once seemed legendary on dar-list - the same women listed in the liner notes. By senior year, I had expanded to several singer-songwriters all over the folk community, while Stef stuck to Dar and a couple others. She dropped dar-list to get away from the long political arguments.

But then college ended; Stef ushered herself into the real world, I into grad school. From there, it seems like everything ended all at once. Not even six months after graduation, and we might as well have been strangers. We both found ourselves staying up all night but for different reasons. She drank away each evening at bars in her college town. I paced in my apartment two hours from her, wondering how I might get all of my work done. I realized that the IMs and the e-mails slowed, phone calls stopped

all together. She no longer promised to come visit; I couldn't find it within myself to make the extra effort. She let herself fall into a non-relationship with an emo boy, the kind of boy and relationship we had always talked badly about when they involved other people. I asked her to meet me for shows; she claimed that she couldn't stay out that late. Her away messages on Instant Messenger said otherwise, as she stayed at the bar through last call. She stopped making the forty-minute drive to Springfield, coming home only for the day on Christmas and Thanksgiving, and then wanting to go drink in Fairfax with some of our guy friends.

My innocence in this situation is only partial. In the betrayal of what felt like losing another friend - though neither of us said so, still calling each other "best friend" in cards and referring to each other as such - I shut her out even more than I already had. I badmouthed her to our friends from high school, calling her a stupid drunk slut. I made judgments on her ability to lead an adult life, even though I wasn't doing much better.

Two years after our first band show, Dar releases a new CD and comes back to Starr Hill with the band. Everyone is back on stage, except for Carole Steele. I

stand on top of a folding chair behind the merchandise table, Dar and the opening act having enough to sell to get out of the Dutch door closet. My friend Sharon stands on the chair next to mine, and we can both see above the heads of the crowd and right at Dar. Sharon is top of the top in Dar world, traveling all over the East coast with her to sell merchandise at shows. She teases Dar that, while rock stars get body guards, Dar gets her own traveling social worker.

Before the show, while Sharon and I were setting up merchandise, a man from Huss & Dalton came with Dar's new guitar. We took him down to where she was having dinner with the band in the lower level of the building. Hugging us when we walked in, Dar invited us to talk for a while. As Sharon and I played with Dar's son, Stephen, while Dar spoke with the Huss & Dalton guy, I thought about how different things were since two years before. I thought about how I didn't need a plan to get into this higher circle of the community, but that it happened spontaneously. I wished for Stef to be there with me because - once - she had wanted it, too.

Even though so much has changed, I can still see Stef and me dancing in the last abandon of adolescence. While Stef and I have both seen Dar without each other, tonight

feels different. Those were solo shows in venues that didn't matter in the way Starr Hill does. My mind wanders, and I realize this is one of the only times I've seen Dar and not been right up front.

Exploring traces of blues and jazz, Dar's latest CD shows growth in her songwriting. She's married now, has Stephen. Her new songs allow for changes in the audience, letting us follow her. Other singer-songwriters in the folk community have been doing the same thing as they tread into middle age. I think about Stef's latest interest in emo music, in its passivity and its crybaby reputation, how she hasn't gotten past the second track on Dar's new CD.

Dar begins to play a song from the previous tour; I can hear it in the muted strumming of the guitar and the soft tats on the drum. As she sings the lines "If your sister or your brother / were stumbling on their last mile / in a self-inflicted exile / you'd wish for them a humble friend," Sharon leans over and says, "That's what Stef needs from you right now."

The tears appear with quick force. I should call Stef, like we used to do, let her hear the song through the muffled sounds created by distance. Instead, I push the feeling away and think about how she doesn't want to be here, no longer wants to be a dancing girl. How she would

rather learn the rules of football to impress a boy who doesn't want to love her. How it used to not be a problem to drive half the night just to see a two-hour concert.

When Dar plays "As Cool As I Am," I dance with Sharon but without the intensity as before. I see the energy in the rest of the audience as they sing along, throw their arms up in the air. Sharon and I don't bump hips or hold hands; we aren't the dancing girls. She's Sharon, the merch lady, and I'm just Amy, a girl who goes to a lot of concerts.

The summer comes, and I make the six-hour trek from school to King of Prussia, just outside of Philadelphia. I sit with other people from dar-list near the stage, at the bottom of a small slope of hill. We celebrate a birthday, passing around cake and watermelon, chips and dip. One of my friends and I split a Cinnabon that I picked up earlier at the mall.

It stops raining in time for Dar to play, but the water remains collected on the tarps, sloshing into the thin grass. Between the rain and sunset, summer disappears into a wet chill. We find dry blankets to huddle under, rain jackets pulled over our heads.

The same thing happened so many summers ago, and Stef and I danced, letting the mud splash up our legs, squish between our toes. We once squinted to let raindrops bounce from our eyelashes, run down our slick skin.

Now Dar says, "I could use a dancing girl up here" and nods toward a small open space to the side of the stage in front of a large speaker. The grass looks trampled from the memories of many dancing people. She strums her guitar, pulling out chords and notes that send a familiar twitch down my spine.

I duck my head as dar-listers look toward me. I want to yell, "I'm not a dancing girl anymore, you don't seem to understand," but someone already has my upper arm in his hands. Someone else shoves me from behind.

Pushing me, alone, into the empty space, they all say, "Go!"

And I do.

Like Bonsai: Susan Werner at Odette's

"Some trees were meant to reach, you said

Reach up for the sky

Some trees we trim to keep them pretty

Like bonsai" - Susan Werner

My grandma tells a story of the early months of World War II. In the suburbs of Scranton, Pennsylvania, even the factory jobs couldn't support everyone who needed work. A group of her friends had all gone out searching for work together. "No one would give you a job without experience," she says, "but there was no way to get experience without a job. I finally had enough of that nonsense."

So, in the spring of 1942, my grandma answered a newspaper ad for generic office work, but it didn't say for whom she would be working. She heard back from the Army Air Corps in May. "They wanted me to come right then," she says, "but I didn't have the right clothes or a place to stay." She convinced the federal government to give her a month to prepare, and in June, nineteen years old, my grandma took the train to Washington, DC to start her adult life - alone.

My adventure today doesn't rank quite so high on the get-up-get-moving scale. At least not to my mother. As I swing my backpack over my shoulder, she asks, "Where are you going?"

"Philly, sort-of," I say, edging toward the front door.

She asks, "For what?"

As if the answer isn't always the same.

I dig my fingernails into the strap of the bag, catching the threads in the seam. "Concert. Susan Werner."

"Amy Marie," she says, giving me the look she used to give when I would come home covered in mud and creek water, "this is getting ridiculous."

Perhaps. I think about how my sister got up at five this morning for Black Friday shopping with her best friend and how, at two, she still is not back. I consider telling my mom how ridiculous that is, but then I come up with better examples.

"You know, you never have a problem with Stacy going to Mexico for Spring Break or Florida for a football game. I think a twenty-dollar concert three hours away is far less extravagant." I don't add in dinner, gas, tolls, or the coffee I'm sure to find along the way. My mother's

smart enough to do that on her own. And, before this, it hadn't really occurred to me just how equally dumb traveling for football is. But, now that it came up, I feel justified in opening the front door.

My mother sighs.

I turn back around and flash her a big smile. "Want to come?" I ask.

She makes a face and gags. "No thank you," she says and leans over to kiss my forehead. "Be careful."

I run down the front lawn. Freedom. Well, not entirely. At twenty-two, she can't exactly stop me, but I try not to get into too many scuffles with her - someday, there will be bigger and more important things to fight about. She and my dad also bought the car I am driving, and I prefer they don't take it away. No thank you, indeed.

Every once in a while, my mother tells me that her mother disapproves of these adventures of mine, that she doesn't like me traveling alone, driving at night, or being far away. I never met my grandma's parents - they both died by the time my mother was ten - but I'd wager they weren't too pleased with their daughter moving so far away. My grandma also doesn't like the concerts I go to because

she thinks all folk singers are Communists. At least I always come back.

I settle into my car, a '96 Camry I named Special Ed because it's slow to pick up, and everything takes its place. Cell phone and cigarettes in the space between the seats, purse and directions on the seat next to mine, mini iPod in the cup holder, coat and backpack on the floor.

Tonight, I have plans. Big plans. Solitary plans. I've never been to a concert alone before - I've driven alone but always with the intention of meeting someone. In honor of my going alone to a place I've never been before, and for fending off the one person who volunteered to go with me, I plan on having dinner alone as well. Everyone tells me that I should eat by myself in a restaurant at least once in my life. In the little town of New Hope, Pennsylvania, a reservation sheet exists with my name written next to a six-thirty spot. After I called and got a seat for the show, I inquired about dinner. Venues that offer food beyond bar standards always seem to be the best, the coziest. "And how many will this be for?" the nice-voiced woman had asked on the phone. Just me. "Just one? All right, we'll see you then."

I am going to Odette's, a place I had never heard of until I found myself searching Susan Werner's website for something to do over Thanksgiving weekend. I started listening to Susan four years ago during my sophomore year of college. I saw her live for the first time a year later. She walked on stage, right next to my front table seat, and I slid down the back of my chair. "You okay?" my friend asked. "You need a change of underwear?" I smacked my friend's arm. It never occurred to me to look up Susan's picture, and I hadn't bought any of her CDs at that point. Maybe then I would have showed up at a concert sooner.

I remember her pants the most. They were black and had little zippers on the back near the ankle. She started her set with a song that had the lyric, "I've got nice legs," and I felt compelled to see if she was telling the truth. She was. Everything about her, I later told people, exuded sex. Because of this, I started calling her the sex goddess. Even with her hunched shoulders, an effort to downplay her height, she still looked and sounded confident in everything she did. Since then, I've seen her at least a dozen times. Every time I talk to her, I stutter and can't complete a full sentence. The real stuff of seducers.

Jane, Susan's road manager, teases me for my crush. "She's a real person, you know," she says. That never makes a difference, even when she tells me Susan farts and talks to herself. "You wouldn't feel that way anymore," Jane always says, rolling her eyes, "if you spent fifteen years on the road with her." But I can always tell that Jane would never give up Susan's friendship or the time they spend together. I remain jealous.

My grandma tries to tell me that, as a child, she was too shy to speak up to anyone. But, once she arrived in DC, she moved into the YWCA and became a hall leader. At work, she eventually earned a Q Clearance, one of the highest security clearances. She joined a duck pin bowling league when she later changed jobs to the Department of Defense, which put her in a building right across the street from the White House. To me, she's always seemed outgoing, starting conversations with everyone from my friends to the woman who ran a Russian kiosk at the mall. "I had to learn to stand up for myself," she says when I tell her I can't picture her as shy. "I was by myself in a strange city. I had no choice." Eventually, in her early thirties, she found an interesting man who sold her a pair of shoes. My family teases my grandpa that, if it wasn't

for my grandma, they would never have gotten together. He always agrees that she was quite persuasive.

As I drive, the traffic to Philadelphia remains light despite the holiday. I planned for the parking lot of I-95 and, in its absence, arrive an hour and a half before my reservation. As I drive down a narrow, winding road that a teenaged gas station attendant assures me is correct, I decide I can take a nap in the parking lot. The gate tells me otherwise. Valet parking. Of course. No one ever offers valet parking when I need it, like when I'm in the crowded streets of DC, but a small gravel lot? Sure, they'll do it for you.

I unhook my key and gather my book bag and purse, deciding to leave the coat in the car. "Is there a bar inside?" I ask the attendant.

"Yes, ma'am," he says. "To the right."

Ma'am. I look like I'm twelve, even in a dress pants, sweater-with-a-collared-shirt-underneath, hair done, grown-up make-up ensemble. I give him the key. "The door doesn't always close all the way," I offer. So awkward. My twenty-one-year-old sister does these kinds of things much better. She also doesn't skid along the ice as she walks in heels, which I promptly do as I make my way to the

front door, clamping my arms across my chest. Stupid pointy, clicky heels. Stupid cold weather. Who leaves her coat in the car when it's almost December? The building looks beautiful, though, old, with stone front and wine-colored shutters.

The original building for Odette's went up in 1794 in the Delaware Valley as a place for boatmen to dine. It remained popular through the Civil War, at which point it closed. The 1930s saw the restaurant rebuilt into the town's first tourist hotel. Today, the family-owned venue offers fancy dining, cabaret shows, and a piano bar.

Okay, so I can sit at the bar and work on my short story revision for class. Maybe someone will think I'm important with my pensive look and pen jammed in my teeth. I slide my way through the front door and run into Jane. Sweet.

"Hey," she says, "I didn't know you were coming up here."

"Last minute thing," I say, trying to come off like I'm not looking around for Susan.

"Have you eaten?" She uses the palm of her hand to push back stray bits of her dark hair that blend with her all-black outfit.

"No, I just got here. I'm a little early for my reservation." I run my fingernails down the groove of my bag's strap for lack of a better habit.

"We're going to eat at the bar if you want to join us."

I am going to pee my pants a little. I love Jane; I could hug her for asking me this, but I'm nervous at the same time. The whole point of the sex goddess, really, is that they are aloof and perfect from afar and, every once in a while, grace your life. You do not, however, eat dinner with a sex goddess.

But I do not say no. I am not that attached to the distance theory or the dining alone theory.

I wish I could remember the details of what we talked about over nine-dollar spinach salads. But that would require me actually processing the conversation, rather than concentrating on not spilling anything or saying something dumb. I can meet Katherine Graham, Joan Baez, can do a radio interview with the university president about deodorant and underwear and remember every hand gesture, every fluctuation in voice. Dinner with Susan Werner, however, will be my downfall. I can't even remember what she is wearing. We cover grad school and ice hockey, writing and performing, and how my apartment at

school doesn't have heat yet again. I eat about four bites of salad and take the smallest possible sips out of my iceless soda. I manage to remain sitting. I also make sure our arms don't touch; I understand the need for personal space.

During the meal, Susan does not do anything to decrease her sex goddess status; I remain a creepy fan.

As Susan and Jane go off to prepare for the show, I check in with the hostess, who shows me to my seat for the concert. The room is off to the side and small, maybe sitting only sixty people. The tables have the whole nice tablecloth, cloth napkins, and candle thing going. On the walls, poster-sized pictures hang; they look straight out of Vaudeville with flappers and upright pianos.

I pull out my notebook and press and peck my way through parts of my short story. Even with dinner at the bar, I still have a required minimum, so I toy with coffee and chocolate espresso cake. Eventually, the hostess seats an older woman at the table with me.

The woman introduces herself, and we shake hands. She, like everyone else here, is dressed nicely in slacks and a sweater, her white-ish-blond hair short and curled. "Oh, are you a writer?" she asks. I smile. Most awkward question ever. "I like to write, too," she says. "I keep

a journal, mostly for the hard times." She tells me how one of her sons died and how she wrote to get through the pain.

I have nothing to say that isn't lame. "Well, that can help."

"My son, Andy Prescott, plays here at the piano bar. He'll be playing after the show. Will you be staying?"

She reminds me of my grandma, mostly because she's an old woman who talks to strangers. Also, in my experience, old women like to treat me like I'm their own granddaughter. They tell me I'm sweet and polite when I smile at them and ask about their lives - nothing that really takes an effort on my part.

I tap my pen against my notebook. "I don't know, maybe," I say. "I have to drive home tonight." I consider whether or not my continued writing would appear rude. It's not that I don't want to talk to her, but I really need to get this work done. Grad school guilt, I suppose.

The waitress reappears and gives Mrs. Prescott a white wine. "My son plays here," she tells the waitress, who also smiles. She turns back to me. "Where is home?" she asks.

"Just outside of DC," I say, DC always being the buffer point before I tell someone I'm from Virginia. "And

I go to school about three hours from there in a tiny town in Virginia."

"You drove all the way from Washington, DC?" she asks, raising her eyebrows. "By yourself?"

I stare down at my coffee, contemplate drinking it, and then look back at Mrs. Prescott. "Yup. I like to travel alone. I drive to concerts all the time."

"Well you're quite the independent young lady, aren't you?"

Independent? I haven't heard that one before. Stubborn, misanthropic, bitchy - those I hear quite often. Whether or not those translate to independent is beyond me. Something tells me, though, that Mrs. Prescott means independent in a Mary Richards-let-loose-in-Minneapolis kind of way. Rather than get into a discussion of semantics, I giggle. "I guess you could say that."

During the show, I can't stop thinking about the idea of independence. For a while, I watch Susan's hands stretch across the piano, the guitar. She plays songs from her American Songbook collection and a few from her upcoming gospel project. Even Susan's new songs seem familiar and safe. I slip my eyes over to Mrs. Prescott who catches me and smiles. "She's just fabulous," she says

each time this happens and points her head toward Susan. I nod in response.

My mind, though, goes straight for everything that makes me feel clingy and childish, things that an independent person would never do. Under my sweater and pants, Mrs. Prescott can't see the waves of scars along my arms, my hips, my legs. She probably can't imagine the straight blade tucked inside my checkbook, discolored and dulled with age. I wonder what she would say if she saw me clawing my sheets at night in fits of anxiety or if she sees the shadows of nothing as they dance along the walls. Would she ever believe me if I tell her that sometimes I sleep after I eat in an attempt to keep my finger out of my throat? That I go to concerts just to settle the spinning in my head, the scattering in my chest?

Of course she wouldn't.

Rather, she introduces me to her son, who I think sounds like Alan Sherman, even though she claims she doesn't know who he is. After the show, she wishes me the best of luck with my writing and with school as she takes her second glass of wine over to the piano near the bar to listen to Andy singing "Piano Man." I hug Susan goodbye, give my best to Jane, and slide my way back out into the numbing cold.

Months later, while searching the Internet for the Odette's website, I see that the heavy storms of early summer have overtaken the restaurant and the surrounding area. One-hundred-and-eight years, to the day, before the flood, Odette Myrtil was born - a woman who would later add her personality to make the venue what it became. In the Internet pictures, muddy water floats toward the roof, just hints of the building arching above the destruction. President Bush called in the National Guard and declared a federal disaster for eight counties around Philadelphia. The owners of Odette's have plans for rebuilding, even though they had just finished renovations before the rain. Six weeks, they said once the waters receded. Six weeks to rebuild broken windows, replace hardwood floors, carpeting, drywall, and insulation.

I consider this information and then I find myself sifting through my grandma's life, as I always seem to do, thinking of her ability to find independence when all I can find is a concert ticket. Talking to elderly women at a show hardly matches anything my grandma did. But I'm not part of a working-class, immigrant family during the country's hardest struggles - I don't have anyone to support but myself, and I don't even do most of that. I

wonder, though, if I don't have something else to offer,
something that will emerge, unmarked, when I'm sure that I
can't possibly find anything else.

This Is Me - Girlyman at The Alternative

"You never knew because I never told you" - Girlyman

I don't want to go to Louisville. At all. I don't travel well with others, don't deal well when other people have needs that I'm forced to meet. I like to drive alone for endless hours and miles, ticking my fingernails against the steering wheel as the hood of the car passes each dotted line on the highway. Alone, I listen to one song on repeat for an hour, chain smoke, stop only for more coffee and gas. I drive alone to calm down, to spend time thinking, if only about what I would do if Susan Werner and Jane Paul showed up unexpectedly at my apartment - no lofty goals for enlightenment, no modern-day, high-tech spiritual quest.

Going to the annual Southern Humanities Conference - set this year in Louisville - has become a cornerstone event to creative writing at Longwood. I appreciate the idea - giving us a chance to present in a low-pressure environment, to meet people who maintain the fun side of academia. The people who go to the conference act as a family. The executive director - always dressed in a suit, bowtie, and sneakers, though he's cut off his long ponytail - jokes that they have presentations so that schools will

pay to send everyone to drink together and visit. But the ideas they share - both during scheduled sessions and throughout the stretching hours of night - show the risks they are willing to take in their work and in their lives, the vulnerability of questioning.

But I'm in between again, hovering over the kids' table as a graduate student, looking after the undergrads, and wavering toward the adults' table with my professors. With just three months remaining in my program, I still haven't crossed that important line of the stage. Gray areas frustrate me, especially when there's nothing I can do to force myself into one category or another.

Then, about a week before we leave, a friend from my folk life informs me that Girlyman is scheduled to play in Louisville during the weekend I'm there. Girlyman gives me an escape into the one place I feel safe - folk music - and they're even playing at a gay bar. I win twice. I allow myself more leeway at concerts, especially with a band that I am only vaguely familiar with. Being out in Louisville also means I won't see anyone I know from shows at home or the New York area.

I dance around school, telling everyone about my new plans. I bounce, shake my shoulders. "I get to be gay," I sing-song. "Folk music and gayness."

Even though I'm annoyed by most people, I have a compulsive need to create gatherings. Hostess with the mostest forms the center of my public persona - a direct contrast to my other reputation as a curmudgeon. Ed Harris's character in *The Hours* sums up my plight when he tells Meryl Streep, "Ah, Mrs. Dalloway. Always giving parties to cover the silence." I grasp for control and have a thick rush of jealousy in most situations. I am one of those people who can't pass up on the things that will create inside jokes, I-can't-believe-you-missed-that stories.

This leads me to invite all eight of the other students and a few of the faculty members to the concert. "Come be gay with me," I tell them. "It's going to be a blastie." If I go to the concert alone, I'll have my peace, but everyone else will drink together back at the hotel, or go out to a bar, do dumb things, talk about the night for the entire drive home and for weeks after the conference. I'm not okay with this. So I cheer when my friends and several irritating acquaintances concede. A few of them even get excited. "I can't wait," they say, and I even start to believe them.

My almost-pleasant attitude lasts until dinner on the night we arrive in Louisville. People I don't care for keep appearing at my back, asking about my each move. "What next?" "Where next?" Their constant questions give me the perfect opportunity for the control I crave, but, as a rule, I don't micromanage. I like making the big picture, getting irritated by the details.

I'll admit to the many needy, unsure moments in my life. But I also know that my neediness wears thin and that I need to spend time alone. My friend Amanda and I glare at each other every time another person comes up, inquiring about dinner or when we'll meet in the morning for presentations. Amanda used to look much scarier when she had four piercings around her mouth and had stronger gothic makeup. When I first met her my sophomore year of college, I thought she was too cool to ever be my friend. But in this last year we've started hanging out. Even though her face has toned down as she's made the transition into adulthood, she still has an ice stare that usually makes her point, but it goes unnoticed - or ignored - by the undergrads for most of the weekend.

On Friday, Amanda and I dawdle so we can have dinner with our professors in the hotel restaurant, a long table of, well, grown-ups. By Saturday morning, the two of us

take to running to the side of the hotel to smoke, so we're not seen from the lobby.

I tell another sort-of friend that maybe I won't go to the concert after all, that the idea of hanging out with everyone is just too much for me to handle.

"You're going to disappoint a lot of people," she says.

"How?" I ask. "I'm not leader of the free world. They can go without me."

If Susan Werner or Dar Williams were playing, I'd probably still go. I've only seen Girlyman as Dar's opening act, so I lack the investment I might have otherwise. It occurs to me that, for the most part, I keep my concert life separate from my school life. I make people listen to folk music in my car, talk about it all the time. Only twice, though, have I taken anyone on a trip with me; the second time, I got so frustrated that I vowed never to do it again.

Saturday afternoon, I crack during my presentation on social class and growing up in Fairfax County. As people argue from audience to panel about Southern versus Northern, rich versus poor, stereotypes everywhere, I grow frustrated with my inability to make myself heard. I give up trying to talk, and I can feel my chest and face flush

red. Sweat gathers along the lines in my palms and the groove of my back. My friend Shawn sits next to me on the panel, scribbling angry notes on his paper. He, however, is willing to fight back, while I just imagine all of the things I could say. I pinch the skin on my forearm, check my watch under the table and jump from my seat when the allotted time ends.

Amanda and I go back to our room, and I ask Tanner and Shawn to join us. With all of the frustration as I melt down, I know that it's best to keep a few people around than to let myself be alone. I also know that Shawn will need to vent as much as I do, and I won't leave Tanner to the others. Tanner sits on the edge of one bed with me. He's become one of the few people I feel physically comfortable with, accepting hugs from him without so much as flinching. He's a guy's guy, unlike many of my more effeminate male friends with his scruffy hair, goatee, and affection for drinking in the woods. Amanda leans against the headboard of the other bed, and Shawn sits across from Tanner. I tell them I don't want to see anyone else for the rest of the night. If the rest of the group wants to go out, I don't care, but I'm not going. As soon as I say

that, I know that I've made myself sound more important than I really am.

I hang lengthwise across the scratchy comforter, my arms stretched out into the space between the beds. "I get tired being me," I say. In truth, I'm exhausted. I've tried before to count all of the versions of myself that require so much energy that I don't leave much for anything that's actually productive. That exercise, too, is counterproductive.

Shawn throws his hands in the air and says, "Oh, you have no idea. It's exhausting having to come up with the perfect witticism all the time. Be on the ball like that."

We sound like pretentious assholes. "Now I know why Dorothy Parker drank shoe polish."

I think about the first time I met Shawn, four years ago when he was a freshman, I a junior. Tanner had joined the school newspaper - of which I was editor - as our opinion editor. He said he had a friend looking to fill the empty news editor position and, could he come in and meet me? A boy appeared later that night, dressed in a suit and tie, his head bald, skin pale, while I stood on the loading dock outside of the office. He was at least a foot taller than me, making me feel small and young.

"What's the occasion?" I asked him, pointing to his suit with my cigarette.

"I'm looking for a job," he said, and I took that to mean a real job. Our newspaper didn't have a very good reputation, being on staff didn't afford any prestige. He gave me some esoteric qualifications from high school, many of which mirrored what I told the editor when I was a freshman.

I told him he didn't have to wow me, that we would pretty much take anyone. We talked more and he said he was from Alexandria, living on a hill that overlooked the poor people.

"What high school did you go to?" I asked.

"West Potomac."

When he said that, I assumed he thought I knew nothing of Fairfax County, though I had lived there since I was two months old. While no school in Fairfax is particularly terrible, West Potomac didn't rank within the county's high standards. "We Po?" I asked. "Good Lord. I thought you were going to say something impressive." Later in our friendship, I saw where he really lived: Alexandria, yes, but in a small condo off of a shady part of Route 1, not in the expansive million-dollar McMansions I imagined and that his Banana Republic wardrobe suggested.

Shawn is abrasive when he meets people. The larger the group, the grander his life becomes. His speech grows more philosophical and erudite. When he walks away and people grumble, I tell them to give him time. "Get him one on one," I say. "Call him out on his shit. He really is a good person, I promise."

I like Shawn because he is smart and because he understands growing up in Fairfax County, unlike so many of the other people at school. He's the only person who says, "Hey, did you read that article this morning in *The Washington Post*?" - a little question that means more than it probably should. If we went to one of the larger state schools, like many of our high school peers, we wouldn't need each other. I would probably ignore him because he went to a high school so far down on the Fairfax chain, but survival makes me do funny things.

Some of the other students try to filter into our room behind another peer who is staying with us. I think about how they are absolutely the last people I want to see. "So what are we doing?" they ask, bundled in their coats and hats and scarves.

I don't meet their eyes. Rather, I stare at the corner of the bed by Shawn's knee. "I'm not doing anything. I'm tired and cranky."

"Well are we going to dinner? What's the plan then?"

I consider where I can hide if they won't go away. Then I repeat what I've been saying all weekend. "I don't know. I don't make plans." I hoist myself up from my Superman pose on the bed and grab my jacket. "I'm going outside."

Amanda, Tanner, and Shawn join me outside and we do, in fact, make plans while we try to smoke in the power-driven wind. We walk over to McDonald's, checking to make sure no one's following us. We make fun of some of our fellow classmates. Mocking one boy, we shout, "Cheers, mate! Hollerrrr!"

"God, I hate everyone," I say as we wait to cross an intersection. I don't know when my frustration with people started. Even as recently as high school and freshman year of college, I was still really nice. In the past several years, though, cynicism, sarcasm, all of those synonyms have staggered into my public persona. Dismissing people for no good reason proves just as exhausting as anything else.

Eventually, after dinner and card games back in the hotel room, the four of us slip up to the hospitality room. We go with the intention of getting more alcohol to take downstairs, leaving our professors space with their friends in the hospitality room. But then Tanner starts talking to Mary - our program coordinator / resident mom at school - and Greg - a former Longwood professor who now teaches in Boston. Mary often reminds us that while Greg looks and sounds like an academic, he's still a "Tennessee hillbilly." Amanda gets into a conversation with another faculty member.

I sit down on the floor, leaning into Tanner's legs. I prop up my right arm so we can hold hands against his knee. He and Greg discuss deities. Mary shares how she found God in physics. Shawn lurches over to give his theory of infinity. Everything all of them say makes me feel stupid, my thoughts not capable of making such grand connections. I can't even think of a smartass remark. Instead, I imagine my brain as having steel doors and watch as tennis balls bounce off and back into the air.

Amanda, Mary, Tanner, and I go outside into the blustering, icy dark night to smoke a cigarette. Mary talks about a day when she'll leave Longwood, the wind

raking her thick black hair into itself. She tells us how proud she is of all we've done, the things we need to do to continue on our paths. Amanda's eyes glisten, and Tanner fiddles with his goatee. I stay quiet, find the conversation awkward and embarrassing. I loathe emotional moments and the honesty they should require. Instead, I concentrate on how cold I am. Feeling my back and legs clench, shake in the bite of mountain winter, I wonder how long I have to stay outside until it's polite to go back upstairs to my room. I rub my hands as one cigarette turns into three.

When Mary says she doesn't want to leave any of us, I give her the only thing I can, advice that is more practical than anything else. When she keeps interrupting me, I stomp my foot against the sidewalk, the hollow heel of my shoe clicking against the cement. "Listen, dammit," I say when she calls me bossy. "Where I come from, everyone leaves," I say, finally forcing her to listen. "Being gone doesn't mean anything." I think about the friends in Seattle I visited during the summer, how I still consider them like family though they haven't lived in Springfield in over ten years. I think about the folk friends I've made. We've never lived in the same city - our relationships depend on e-mails and phone calls,

meeting for concerts. That doesn't make us any less close. "If you want to remain friends, then you'll remain friends. You do what you've got to do."

Shawn comes through the automatic glass doors to join us. Mary tells him the same things she's told us but calls him out hard about lying to himself, about hiding. She tells him he has a Pulitzer waiting for him if he could just own up to who he is.

"You have people who love you unconditionally," Mary tells Shawn. She points to me and Tanner. "These are the friends who will hold you accountable."

Shawn wants none of this. Even with Tanner and me beside him, he still sees Mary as a challenge, the one person who will never understand him. The one person who scares him the most. It takes him several tries to light another cigarette in the wind. His feet drift from side to side, his hand waves close to my face. When he asks Mary what he lacks, I tell him, "Space between your cigarette and my eye," which elicits only a small chuckle. I curl my fingers and rub them against my thighs, then tuck them into the crooks of my elbows.

I listen to all of this, nodding, though I know that I am not much different than Shawn, that I am no better. My manipulations of groups and individuals exist to hide every

void and every fault. Part of the allure of the folk community is that none of the people in it have to see me on a day-to-day basis. I imagine that many people feel this way, though I can convince myself that Shawn and I stand apart. I wonder what graduation will bring, if I'll ever be able to grow up the way I need to, if I'll ever stand against another Shawn when I'm a professor, what I'll be able to say to him.

"You have to find out who you are," Mary says to Shawn, though I take the words for myself. Her voice stretches into a dramatic Southern lyric. "We all have our ways."

And, for a moment, in the quaking cold, I stop shaking, stop trying to escape. I just listen.
