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TAVI GEVINSON

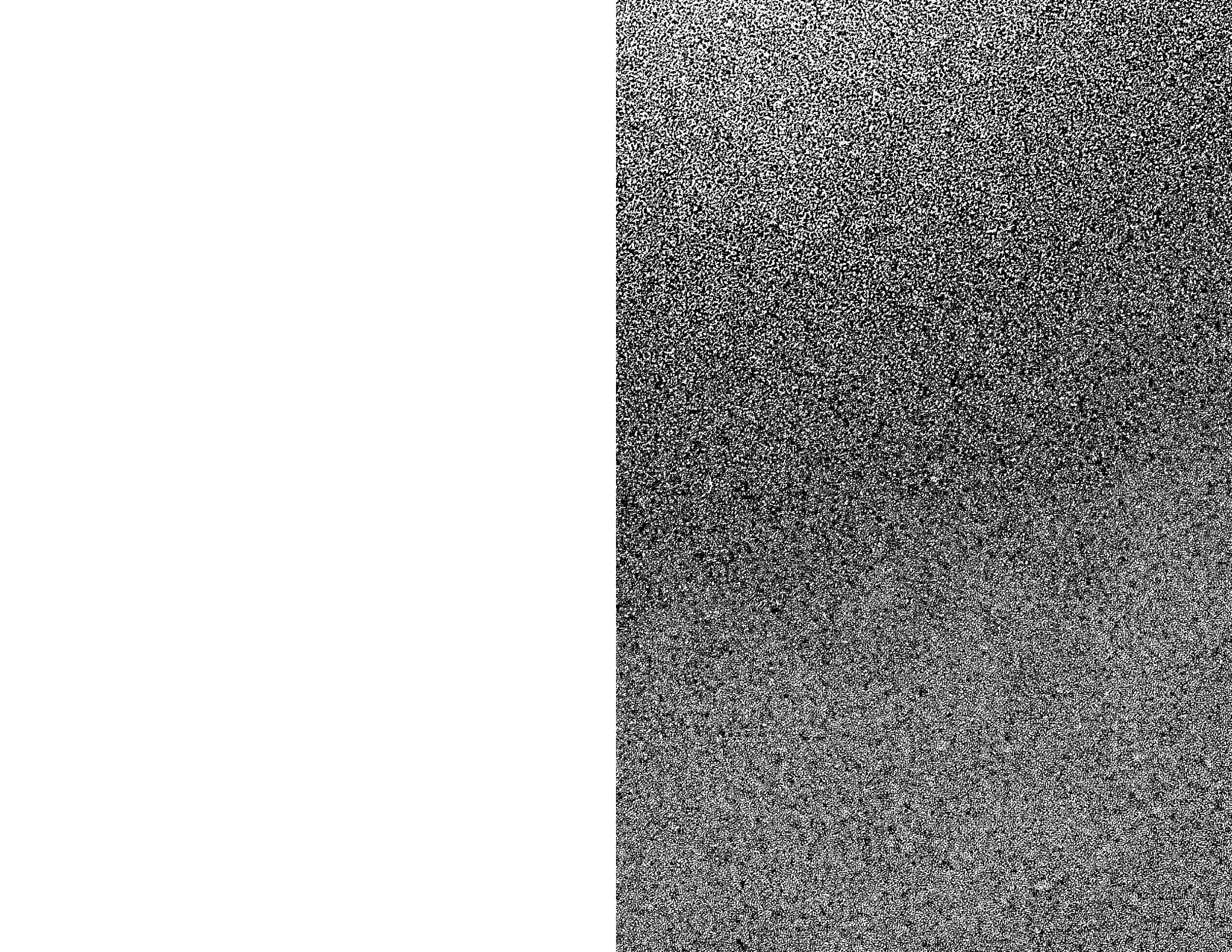
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"The calendar says I had known ~~her~~ him only for a few months but there exist friendships which develop their own inner duration, their own eons of transparent time, independent of rotating, malicious music."

-Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* ♡





Part One: New Romantics

“I don’t care about anything that happened to me when I was 19,” Taylor Swift announced. She was standing in the center of the U.S. Bank Stadium, smiling and chill, guitar at the ready. It was June 2023, the first stretch of Swift’s Eras Tour, and she was about to perform an old song for the first time in over a decade. She was also about to release a new recording of it as part of her project of rerecording her early albums. Her other new-old albums had driven internet mobs to fixate on the old flames who’d inspired those songs. She did not want fans to think that releasing the newest-old album was an act of vengeance that needed backup. And so:

I’m 33 years old. I don’t care about anything that happened to me when I was 19, except the songs I wrote. So, what I’m trying to tell you is that I’m not putting this album out so that you should go and feel the need to defend me on the internet against someone you think I might have written the song about 14 million years ago.

A shockwave went through my phone. “Should I not care about anything that happened to me when I was 19?” texted one friend, also 33. “NOW she tells us,” another joked but also meant. We knew Swift was asking us to focus on her music,

not her personal life. But her music's thesis might be that hanging onto something that happened 14 million years ago is no choice. Her narrator is typically either haunted or haunting. While her ex moves on, she unfurls a scroll of grievances. What her crush never knew, she's here to confess. Hopeless before the past, she turns over her memories, drawing on them as sources of beauty and truth. Carefully arranged, they form each song's story, each album's arc. Once the music is released, the fans' own memories are unleashed from their own vaults; her voice dislodges our furies' silent screams. When Swift's public conflicts resolve in her favor, such fixations are doubly affirmed. A popular tweet I can no longer find but never forgot said, "I relate to Taylor Swift because I too have never gotten over anything that's ever happened to me." For Swift to even utter the words "I don't care" felt like a betrayal.

Another shock to the fandom: the Swifties are forgetting. That same summer, a brief news cycle seized on a pattern of fans claiming that they were unable to remember anything from the night they attended the Eras Tour. All that anticipation, the suspense, the Kafka-esque Ticketmaster waiting rooms, finally three perfect hours of 17 years of songs, at last an odyssey of memories and catharsis, presumably a heart full of new memories to hold dear—but then, somehow, nothing.

Theories abound—overstimulation, emotional blackout. Mine is that forgetting concerts is normal but that Swifties are more likely to notice forgetting than anyone. We are so trained in the act of holding on. Not just to the slights, the conflicts, the Easter eggs. But to the moment. "I love writing songs because I love preserving memories," Swift once wrote, "like putting a picture frame around a memory you once had."

In his essay about Joseph Cornell's dreamy, diorama-like boxes, Michael Chabon observed that their true content is never the objects inside. "The important thing, in a Cornell box, is the box." And the important thing in a Taylor Swift song is the frame; that is, the moment of writing; the words: *I remember*.

Hi Tavi,

I hope you're doing okay.

I am fine for you to publish the book. I only require that you take my edits and include our email exchange. It just works better for me if I'm clearly in on it.

Also. I want you to know that I remember the night in my apartment somewhat differently. The moment that told me it was time to go to sleep.

You talked about your connection to the album, yes. But then you told an anecdote from your own life to illustrate it. It had just happened to you. "Anecdote" makes it sound harmless, but it wasn't, it was horrible, which took me a second to realize, because you told it like an anecdote.

When you were done, I didn't know how to respond. In the silence, you said, "I just thought that was the most amazing story." I can still see you, perched at the island, staring into the marble as though it were the cosmos.

I admit I was unsettled by your enthusiasm. It was an odd way to describe your own pain, almost fetishistic. And yet, you were right. It was an amazing story. Romantic, devastating, human.

Once I became aware that I was observing your sense of remove, I understood this meant that I was removed, too. I saw us for an instant as two satellites, floating very far apart.

Satellites, maybe you know, don't communicate with each other directly. They can only send signals down to Earth. Then, a ground station relays the data to the receiving satellite, above.

At the time, this image made me sad. But the satellites do communicate. They just need a third thing to deliver the message.

Love,

Taylor

Well, well, well, well, well, well, well, well, well, well, well, well, well, well.

*

Look who wants to DELETE LETTERS AND SCARVES now!

And simply because, for once, you do not wield the pen? I'll say it, Taylor: *coward*. COWARD! Practice what you preach, goddammit—support another woman's autobiographical art—protect the sanctity of the mystery of the impulses of the written word—LET GO FOR ONCE—not just for me, but yourself!

You know that this is *literature*, right? That it will get a tasteful cover, chic blurbs, a classy rollout, a humane selection of press outlets, a distinguished tour—maybe you can even be *my* onstage guest sometime! :-D Then after completing whatever tour stop/IG Live/*Vanity Fair* video where we answer questions about each other, we can go out for dinner, exhale, and finally *be ourselves*. The masks will be off, the defenses lowered. If not a rekindled friendship, we could at least foster some mutual admiration—fellow travelers, “Strangers” by the Kinks playing. Gingerly sipping a Manhattan, I'll transform before your eyes. It will dawn on you: *This woman has a whole life*. You'll ask me questions. You'll want my takes. You'll keep consulting me in your day-to-day, slowly bringing me back into the fold—*only closer this time!* Perhaps you'll tell people, “Yes, she's difficult, but she's *brilliant*,” or, “Of course she's insane, but do we really want our geniuses to be realistic?” Maybe you'll even write a *song* about the whole experience. About *me*. Then *you'll* be the one needing *my* approval. While we're in the midst of a notes session, you'll interrupt—“Wait, say that last part again”—and suddenly, a line of *mine* will complete a work of *yours!* Yes, yes, *I can see it now!*

Run away with me, Taylor—escape the inscrutable self-inflicted gaze, half-male, half-“Danie,” also fans and haters—let me publish my uncut masterpiece! Give up the power struggle, surrender, *submit*, and just let your nation-sized fanbase come for me later! I CAN HANDLE IT! I've handled enough before! And what was it all for if not to make exactly what I want? Why would *anyone* tolerate the coldness, the audience, the too-much-change-too-fast?

Artistic freedom. Uninhibited impulses. The chance to return to a childlike state.

Do it, Taylor. Release your grasp. I've built you such a gorgeous sky for falling.

Your *so-called friend [who'll] write books about [you] if [you] ever make it,*

Tavi

Swift's early music did not just reflect my feelings; it scripted them. She laminated my high school hallways with marks to hit, gazes to hold, pauses to read into. Did a glance linger a hair too long? Did a backpack brush my shoulder on purpose? *Obviously* there was no way to know; the point was to *wonder*. I journaled about such encounters with a level of detail so precise that it was almost clinical, even when the sense of potential was infinite. This was the best part, being suspended in mid-air; I wanted any crush to last as long as possible before much interaction could take place; life was not allowed to happen faster than I could write it down.

In Swift's narrator, I saw a fellow obsessive. She throws rocks at boys' windows and waits by their back doors. She is awakened by nightmares and possessed by day-dreams. She refers to “forever” as a plausible duration of time. She collects souvenirs from relationships and immortalizes them in song, creating souvenirs *of* the souvenirs. She hoards them in a prepper basement strewn with conspiracy theories about emotional subtext.

She embodies the adolescent as defined by psychologist G. Stanley Hall, back in 1904. The first to identify adolescence as a developmental stage, he described it as a state caught between the realms of childhood and adulthood, always looking either back or forward, “haunted by automatic presentations that take the reins from the will and lead us far away in a rapt state, now reminiscent, now anticipatory, into a world of dreams or ghosts.” Or, as Swift sang on her debut, *I'm takin' pictures in my mind so I can save 'em for a rainy day*.

Her nostalgia is not just personal, but cultural, for things she didn't experience in eras she did not live through. She has said her early albums were based on ideas of love from movies and novels, as she had not yet been in a “real relationship.” Her music inherited not only these forms' fantasies of love, but their narrative devices. Starting

out in country music also taught her how to spin a yarn. When I say “Swift’s narrator,” I mean to reflect this gap between her life and her performance of it; to suggest not that the performance is *false*, but that she has long known, as Roland Barthes wrote, that “the one who speaks (in the narrative) is not the one who writes (in real life) and the one who writes is not the one who is.”

A handful of songs start with *Once Upon a Time* and end with *The End*. Others have *flashbacks*, *fast-forwards*, *montages*, and scenes that *fade into view*. There are Polaroids and film reels and it hardly matters if they’re literal or imagined.

Note how often her narrator compares love or her lover to a book, movie, song, story, poem, or “the radio.” Note how she mimics the wistfulness of analog communication but codifies experience at the speed of an iPhone camera. Note when a gauzy scene is halted by a thought as plain as a text message. Note where the poet’s ornate metaphor gives way to the teenager’s run-on sentence. Note how many notes, photos, and phone calls drive the action, creating frames *within* frames. Note that Swift has described many of her early songs as diary entries and unsent letters. Note that Janet Malcolm wrote that the author of a love letter falls in love only with her own epistolary persona. Note that when I wrote letters to boys in high school, I made copies of them first.

Swift’s signature is a self-interrupting lyric that folds time in on itself to cinematic effect. “All Too Well” starts with a cute scene, she and a guy came in from the cold, it *felt like home somehow*, she left her scarf there—*and you’ve still got it in your drawer, even now*. Wait, what? What YEAR is it! And WHAT WENT WRONG! This isn’t just a time jump; it brings you into the moment of her composing the song. Swift is performing the act of writing. By pointing to her own authorship, by letting us in on it, she fosters a greater intimacy with her listener than with her male subject.

even more with every draft, letting the story define my life? I guess you were there the first time I told it, the night I confessed what “Wildest Dreams” meant to me, bolted upright, eyes ablaze—was that what you were reacting to, Taylor, when it was suddenly time to go to sleep? Not my sycophantic need, but your excruciating recognition of a writer *reaching*, falsifying her life, parroting wisdom about endings and “nothing lasts forever” while her future... *fifth* draft hovered just behind her, clutching a scythe? Could you already see it? How the endings would prove endless? How I’d circle them forever? The gulf between my intellectualized sense of acceptance and my actual desperate need for life to stop happening, for time to stop moving, so I could stay an ingenue, or go back to being a kid, too much changed too fast, and—the people all just—went away—

NEW THEORY!

I wrote in the book that our respective insights might be borne more of writerly compulsion (the very act!) than of experience itself but now feel myself winding further—the surreality of our exchange lights my way—I PROPOSE that not only did the many rules, micro-economies, and superstructures of our overlapping professional worlds (*Think about the place where you first met me*) (Soho House) lead us to so thoroughly preserve our “normal” teenage memories; not only did an unnatural volume of validation allow us to take our feelings so seriously that we could write about them in prodigious detail; but perhaps so much attention and its accompanying dissociation made us so cold that we came to view other people with as much distance as we view ourselves. *I don’t know about you*, but I can write as though from beyond the grave! And so whenever anyone is mad at me for writing about *them*, I just think *C’est la guerre!* or *Grow up!* or *If I could deal with it at 12, you can deal with it now!*, and sometimes I blink around at the state of the world, of the internet, I hear echoes of the old pearl-clutching over tween-me and my *public platform*, I look around and I want to scream: *All your kids have iPhones!!!!!!!*

We are united, I’m saying, in our coldness—and our condition is spreading. So, what’s a role model to do? Convince people there is some healthy way to live with the constant presence of an audience? Or pry open our brains and let them see the human cost of storytelling? How for all we gain in wealth and cultural currency, we cheapen our very existences, the only ones we’ve got?

But oh, it’s not just money and clout! It’s writing! It’s art! It’s truth that we touch, the stuff of eternity. I am not trafficking in gossip, Taylor. I am treating celebrity as my medium, exploiting public knowledge of private relationships to create the illusion of reality, committing to a postmodern performance of the self in the style of my chief muse. And yet you want to *cancel* me, to pander to the overly literal readers, the very same people who make “careful or she’ll write a song about you!”-type jokes. Well, well, well.

It's not cynicism, Taylor, it's delight. I just now realized that we only met mere months after I became obsessed with *Speak Now*, meaning that I have known you (or been estranged from you) much longer than I had loved you from a complete remove. Those were a good few months, Taylor. But what followed was even better. Because in writing this I've realized that thinking about you as both an institution and a person (as much as I could) has not taken away from my love for your music; it's enhanced it. The intellectualizing is no less an expression of enthusiasm than a fan screaming at a concert. Please don't be offended, Taylor. Be proud! Be wicked! Use it! Like you always have!

I must object to the idea that I am trying to control the whole thing—I hope there are surprises in it, wrinkles I'm unaware of, I would be happy to be telling on myself, finally, for once, that's humility to me, that's the unknown, that's God. There is so little in this highly surveilled world that is truly mysterious, and since music mystifies me, as you so mercilessly observe, I get my kicks from writing things and seeing what happens. Now you have intervened—how appropriate!—and I, too, have stirred up a bit of mischief for you and ole Tree. I think you're intrigued, Taylor. I think it's why you've indulged me this long. And I think we all do it—artists, and public figures, and female public figures—repeatedly recreate the conditions of an early humiliation to see if this time we can “beat it”—control the response—feel only the good and none of the bad—as though our bodies won't act as wounded as they did when we were 12 and 19, as though we won't hear the same old critics and trolls roaring back, as though (this one always gets me) there will somehow *be no* critics or trolls this time! All we can really do is surrender—to *stop* seeking power and fame and trying to “maintain” them for their own sake.

That part of your email struck me, Taylor. I actually can't stop thinking about it. You write as though fame is a good thing other people ruin. Don't you get it yet? FAME IS OTHER PEOPLE. We can't have what we want without them and so we must live with their moods, their changing appetites, however sexist and ageist and delusional, however conveniently but inconveniently racist and fatphobic and -ist -ist -ist, their demands, their needs, however cruel and desperate, however our nerves might fray, however we might retain their handprints on our skin—did you know that when I was 15 I interviewed one pop star and one model and they both said “when I see pictures of myself now, I think *that's her*”? Did I ever tell you about the dinner party where a series of lingerie models, one by one, admitted they had never orgasmed? Women whose jobs are to get men off? Women with power, wealth, beauty—disembodied, undesiring? We have lost the plot, Taylor! The Young-Girls have lost the plot! We have lost the plot because we have worked so hard to find it—to star in our own movies, campaigns, careers, but not in our own orgasms!!!!

And what about me? How many times must I write about my heavily plotted move to New York? The ingenue wish-fulfillment, the men, the parties? Freezing myself

Sometimes the interruptions remind her to remember a moment as it is happening. She describes the most ecstatic courtships and kisses, but if you're stoned enough, you might hear a lonely voice wailing from the center of experience. Consider 2008's “Fearless,” which narrates a date in the present tense: *In this passenger seat, you put your eyes on me / In this moment now, capture it, remember it!*

Is our protagonist “in” “this moment” “now”? Let's rewind: A car. A glance. The thrill of being looked at. And then, a split-second dissociation. Unlike a winking Fleabag who feels nothing, Swift's narrator turns to the proverbial camera and goes, “Okay, HOW COOL is this?”—that everything is going *right*. That the moment resembles *a real relationship*. Barthes might say that in her eagerness to capture, the narrator is already mourning. She goes on: *'Cause I don't know how it gets better than this.*

In 2010's “Never Grow Up,” she recalls a series of gleeful scenes from childhood, then suddenly: *I just realized everything I have is someday gonna be gone.*

By 2014, Swift's narrator was embracing endings. In “Wildest Dreams,” she implores her lover in a doomed romance: *Say you'll remember me / Standing in a nice dress / Staring at the sunset, babe / Red lips and rosy cheeks.* This is a generic image, except that it's actually a self-portrait. She now takes pictures in the *guy's* mind as the moment unfolds, combining her usual anticipatory nostalgia and camera moves with a male-gazing, body-swapping witchcraft. The ingenue is the writer and the director, too.

*

In 1926, Virginia Woolf wanted to understand what made subjects of the cinema feel so novel, writing that onscreen subjects are “not more beautiful, in the sense in which pictures are beautiful, but shall we call it (our vocabulary is miserably insufficient) more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life?”

We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence. [...] Watching the boat sail and the wave break, we have time to open our minds wide to beauty and register on top of it the queer sensation—this beauty will continue, and this beauty will flourish whether we behold it or not.

This kind of omniscience seems almost quaint now that cinema has become a state of mind, more than a bounded realm—shorter, internalized, fluid with daily life, not just trying to mimic dream logic but dictating the logic of our waking psyches. Most photos are now taken through a screen, rather than a viewfinder, with an awareness of the image built into its taking, leaving no room for surprise or risk. The subject is more and more often oneself.

And so, if frames and documents make life real to Swift's narrator, she can only know she herself is real by creating self-portraits, too. As John Berger famously put it, women are constantly accompanied by their own image. A 2013 study found that young girls *are* more often complimented on how they are ("You're so smart!") while boys get compliments on what they *do* ("That was a hard math problem you solved!"). Apparently, kids who get the more active compliments end up being more resilient, which makes sense, because thinking that much about *how you are* might make you too afraid to do anything. Except maybe pose. And craft moments worthy of omniscient-seeming approval. And savor any indication that *how you are* is acceptable.

Love can be one such indication, if only it would stay one way forever. When Swift compares a relationship to a "masterpiece" in "All Too Well," she invokes perfection, not a thing that changes. When I revisit her earlier breakup songs, I hear the shock of people being themselves. The betrayal of a story revolting. A frustrated auteur. I am reminded of a line by Sarah Manguso: "Perhaps all anxiety might derive from a fixation on moments—an inability to accept life as ongoing."

Dear Tay-lore >:P

Greetings from not one but two strikes—no writing, no acting allowed! Losing it a little, haha. Well, it goes without saying that the show was amazing, and I hope you're having an amazing time doing it, it really felt like you did, I really mean that, and can I just say how cool it was to watch among all the fans for once, way better than fronting in the VIP tent, the energy out there was so wholesome and electric, and all the little lights and screams and palpable tears, it felt like floating in a sky full of stars!!!!

I see we have some conflict. I was not anticipating so many notes nor a fundamental misreading of my work. There is so much I want to respond to, but I'll get to the heart of it:

"...what feels inauthentic to you feels inauthentic because if it were you...it might be inauthentic."

Exactly. That's what's so amazing. If it were, say, Bob Dylan creating a social networking app for fans a la The Swift Life, it would feel like he was being propped up and operated by some shadowy manager. But with you, these moves always feel genuine—orchestrated perhaps, but never not an expression of your own desires. (I mean what would "The Dylan Life" even be? A blank screen that says "go away"?)

My point is that we wouldn't have this remarkable body of work if you were not also an entrepreneurial genius. My point is that you can't separate the art from the Mastermind and that that's not a bad thing. So as much as I may have my cynicism (which is really about capitalism, media, my own baggage based on childlike notions of a career in entertainment as a Faustian bargain based on having joined the rat race when I was a tween who saw money and all adults as evil, etc.), I am not suggesting that you should be any other way. Nor do I mean to say that the artifice required to create the effect that we are close to your "real life" is artless, immoral, or fake. To believe you can connect with more people than is possible to crowd in your mind's eye at a given time—that's star power, and thank God for those who know how to use it. *And also*, it's hard to disentangle a supernova. Like, recently my neighbor's daughter defensively said, "I don't have a *parasocial relationship* to Taylor Swift, I just want to be her friend." If you sing "just between us" to millions of people, they get confused. And look at me! Trying to act cool and removed when you know my truest self exists in a photo like at the end of *The Shining*, a black-and-white snapshot with doe-eyed Zoey and cheersing Sheerans, and me, in the front, *beaming*, just so *happy* to be included.

Won't you let me frolic in these intellectual pastures, caught between critic, fan, and friend, the same way you are caught between person, artist, and brand?

Young-Girl? A walking embodiment of patriarchal, capitalist ideals? Do you know how condescending that is? How close you are getting to the sexist argument that any feminized expression is inherently inauthentic, a product only of cultural conditioning? Where is my agency here? And why not be glad that a woman's inner life means this much to this many people for the first time ever? Because I've monetized it like everyone else on earth?

My music is more popular than most movie franchises. Should *Star Wars* not have merch? Yes, it is often about my personal life. Should I stop writing about what inspires me, because I'm irreversibly famous? Yes I have played into some rumors and left clues, but people were going to write about who I was dating and all that anyway. Yes I have referenced paparazzi photos in my songs, but they were already taken. Stolen, really.

It's fair for me to try and control the narrative the best that I can. To claim my experience and repurpose such attacks and turn them into something positive. I have dealt with so many backlashes by now—very few people know what this is like—and other than short attention spans, sexism, and ageism, I don't know how exactly I can be on top of the world one moment and universally loathed the next. It's easy to gain power and hard to keep it. It's easy to gain fame and it's hard to keep it. I just do what I can so I can keep entertaining people in the long run.

Maybe the cynicism is your need for control? Your way of knowing how you come across in the writing. Dictating the moment, the scene, as you might say.

I also find it interesting that you wrote nothing about the music, only lyrics. It's like that part of my process hasn't even occurred to you. A glaring omission if you're talking about giving oneself over to something bigger.

Mostly I am shocked. I had no idea you harbored so many judgments toward me. What I find especially heartbreaking and lonely is that we could've found each other again, could've had a real friendship. Instead, you have chosen the story.

I am reminded also of Frankie Addams, the 12-year-old protagonist of Carson McCullers' novel and play *The Member of the Wedding*. In one day, she meets her brother's new fiancée, misses them both as soon as they leave, and gets rejected by the neighborhood girls' club. Realizing she does not have a "we of me," Frankie grows enraptured by her memory of the couple. She becomes determined to join their fast-approaching wedding, and their life forever after. She will marry them both, she says, and then, the throuple will marry the world. "And we will meet them. Everybody," Frankie screams, circling the kitchen table:

We will just walk up to people and know them right away. We will be walking down a dark road and see a lighted house and knock on the door and strangers will rush to meet us and say: 'Come in! Come in!' We will know decorated aviators and New York people and movie stars. We will have thousands and thousands of friends. And we will belong to so many clubs that we can't even keep track of all of them. We will be members of the whole world.

Even in the songs when she is not interrupting a wedding ("Speak Now"), Swift's narrator is using love to be a member of the whole world. Her performance is feminized—obsessive, attached, "emotional"—but the approval she seeks does not feel *male*, not really. She is after a sense of acceptance from an idea of real life, more than the love of one other person, though he will be made to represent all of the above—to deliver a happy ending, if life could just end right there.

This pursuit is one possible reason why the men in her songs are often the least detailed part. The narrator describes them as "beautiful" and "flawless," like they're works of art, or models. She marvels at how one of them "shines." Another is her "muse." I don't think she's *just* leaving room for the listener to picture their own lives (as dutiful pop stars do), because she also makes you aware, if you're interested, of who exactly she's singing about. While Swift once refused to explicitly confirm the identities of her subjects, she used to leave clues in her liner notes by capitalizing key letters in each song's lyrics to spell out names or known biographical details of

famous men. Listening with this added quality of reality made me feel like I could hear her experience crying out from behind the music. Not a secret message like *Paul is dead*. Just the truth: *Taylor is alive*.

Such hints nourished listeners' fantasies of romance, yes, but also fame. Another songwriter could tell you what it's like to be picked up by a guy in a fast car in the middle of the night, but only Taylor Swift could tell you what it's like to be picked up by *Harry Styles* in a fast car in the middle of the night. Her memory becomes our big-budget fanfiction. It is, Harry Styles might say, "like a *movie*."

And here is where Swift's movie becomes our lives. We don't *need* to be able to picture ourselves in the song, because we can just picture what we are sure is her reality—which is so much realer than ours—and sublimate our own desire and frustration into the narrative of this ultimate, ideal protagonist.

I have many friends who find this exchange distracting from the music, even alienating. This mode of listening, this deep awareness of celebrity, is not for everyone. But it sure is for a lot of people. Millions and millions of friends. *No one wanted to play with me as a little kid / So I've been scheming like a criminal ever since / To make them love me and make it seem effortless.*

*

This brings us to the other hallmark of adolescence: the belief that how you feel now is how you'll always feel. In 2013, a New York magazine story called "Why You Truly Never Leave High School" argued such permanence from a physiological perspective. Jennifer Senior explains that as a teen, your brain is buzzing with more dopamine than at any other point, which intensifies feeling. Neural connections have yet to consolidate, meaning that the brain's emotional regions have more influence. The researcher Laurence Steinberg says, "During times when your identity is in transition, it's possible you store memories better than you do in times of stability." (In 2023,

- That leaves just a few scenes, which I can be okay with if you exaggerate them simply so they are not just directly lifting from our actual lives. You can amplify the emotional essence but change the specifics.

- I love including the kid at the 1989 Tour who was dressed as the Statue of Liberty. But I don't get why you have to call him "pimpily and bespectacled" and juxtapose him so viciously with the friends I brought onstage. I honestly think you are projecting your own shame onto the situation. Who are you to say that he was pained that we were all 'so close, yet so far'? That we didn't hear him scream 'you're so beautiful'? And why in any case is it somehow tragic for a sweet kid to be happy to see people he admires up close?

That kind of gets at my issue with the whole thing. You say you are trying to retrieve a pure love of my music but your perspective remains cynical throughout.

This stuff is not that deep. I try to make music that I think people will love. Just because this book is "ultimately about you" or you keep saying "Swift's narrator" doesn't mean you aren't pushing this idea of me as immature, scheming, even diagnosing me with PTSD and insinuating everything I do is about trying to maintain control and film some kind of void.

The irony also gets a bit tired. You can just like music. It's fine.

I understand that my life is extraordinary. Sometimes I feel I've inherited it from my younger self and wish that I'd used different methods to achieve my success. But what feels inauthentic to you feels inauthentic to you because if it were you telling 80,000 people that you love them, it might be inauthentic. Maybe there are things you do as a writer and actor that another person would find too vulnerable to be believed, but that doesn't mean you're being fake.

I have had a long time to get used to these conditions and to learn how to function within them. To have meaningful relationships and protect my creative spark and autonomy and yes, even make choices that are not about what's best for my image. I am sure this all sounds improbable, even impossible, to you, but then, my life is kind of a miracle.

I also think my entrepreneurial instincts have struck people as deceptive because for a long time I had to pretend I was not pulling the strings of my own career. People don't want young women to have agency, they want them to be victims of a giant system (Britney) or else somehow pure and removed from it (indie). Now there is a pop titan who *doesn't* have a Svengali—who is her *own* boss—who *isn't* pressured into doing anything she doesn't want because a conference room of men told her to—and instead of celebrating this for the achievement it is, I'm a

- Delete paparazzi scene. You did not look like an owl :)
- Delete “matchmaking” phone call.
- Delete Nora Ephron convo.
- Delete “You’re So Vain” story.
- Delete ride upstate.
- Delete motel bar.
- Delete dive bar.
- Delete cafe.
- Delete Coney Island.
- Delete takeout coffee.
- Delete note I left you.
- Delete letter you sent me.
- Delete ring you gave me.
- Delete voicemail I left you.
- Delete secret language.
- Delete polaroid.
- Delete film reel.
- Delete postcard.
- Delete locket.
- Delete cardigan.
- Delete dress.
- Delete key.
- Delete scarf.

another researcher who surveyed people on what age they feel inside found that many said the same age at which they experienced a trauma.)

Teens are also chemically primed to develop a lifelong commitment to a fandom. The prefrontal cortex is newly able to fold stimuli into a sense of “self” or identity, meaning the cultural stimuli one is exposed to makes more of an impression. Such fierce self-definition also serves the developmental need to separate from one’s parents.

But you still need parents, or role models. Enter the idol.

But the idol cannot be a parent. The idol is herself a teen.

In the 2019 documentary *Miss Americana*, Swift repeats the cliché that famous people “freeze” at the age that they become famous. She wonders aloud how her public gains and losses may have defined her, to herself.

Remember: “I relate to Taylor Swift because I too have never gotten over anything that’s ever happened to me.”

The follow-up tweet: “I don’t write songs tho I just have PTSD.”

Swift was maybe saying, in *Miss Americana*, “The songs didn’t necessarily take care of everything!”

And so we are stuck in a slow dance at ghost prom: Swift, myself, and all the other heartbroken teens.

No artist has represented this dynamic as aptly as Swift with her rerecords. In 2021, she began releasing rerecorded versions of her first six albums to devalue the originals—she doesn’t own them and was reportedly unable to buy them, the

result of a shady deal with her first label. With fans incentivized to stream only those tracks she owns, the authorship trope has evolved from lyrical motif to political cause. These albums' titles are framed by the parenthetical (*Taylor's Version*), and their production attempts to replicate the first recordings entirely. These are not reinventions, reinterpretations, or an 80-year-old Bob Dylan changing the time signatures of his greatest hits. Taylor's Versions say, "Do look back."

There is some gender poetry to the idea that Swift is trying to perfectly replicate the songs of her relative youth rather than deconstructing and reimagining them. Also, that this backward-looking comes much sooner than most career retrospectives, as did the Eras Tour. *You see, all the wisest women had to do it this way / 'Cause we were born to be the pawn in every lover's game.* But the recordings have another resonance for me, too. It's quite the non-sensation to press "play" on a new album, quaking with excitement, and hear...songs I have heard one zillion times, to a T. Still, I listen closely. Not for artistic choices, but for time. *Mystical time, wondrous time...bottled time.* Not a time that moves forward. It's the sonic analog to conjuring a memory to see if you can really send yourself back, *re-feel*, testing the limits of your mortality, and of the present.

As many have noted, the irreconcilable difference is Taylor's voice. It cannot be as high as it was. It's hard to recreate emotions, illusions, to un-know years of experience. On the rerecords, I do not hear the smiles and heartache from back when the words were urgent. Sometimes the perspective is a relief. Sometimes the inability to go back is depressing. (*I don't know about you / But I'm feeling 22!*) Sometimes I hear newfound wisdom in her detachment.

Each song offers a different take on whether it's better to process life through art with more hindsight, or when the experience is fresh; to document when you're *in it*, or when you've had time to reflect. Swift's revisiting can feel hopeful and expansive (time heals or at least changes all wounds) as well as damning (trauma is never healed;

- This is more of a copyediting thing, but sometimes you use the first- and second-person interchangeably, even over the course of a sentence.

- Also thought of Joni's line "love is a story told to a friend / it's second hand" if you feel like finding a place for that.

- I don't get why you're making it seem like we only ever talked about guys. I remember us talking about work a lot, whether you should go to college, friendships, our families, movies, books, music...we definitely passed the Bechdel Test.

- As for the impact my work has had on you, I wonder about the more positive aspects of this. What about the way you documented your life on Rookie, inspiring other girls in turn? Was writing only ever a cannibalizing act for you?

- So much condescension around what teens are capable of, intellectually and emotionally. Fascinating since you talk about being underestimated when *you* were that age. Could be interesting to explore, like is this just what happens in adulthood.

- While I understand keeping me blurry and out of focus to show that you're projecting, I am kind of flat as a result. Maybe there are small ways to show I may have also been trying to connect, needed someone to talk to, etc.

- In that same vein, I don't experience a change of any kind. Is there a way to hint that more was going on with me? Reading this also reminded me how one thing I found disorienting about becoming famous was how often I changed (like any teen) and how slow any publicity or marketing was to reflect these changes, if at all. Maybe you can relate? Meaning there could even be a way to zoom out and be like, btw, our "selves" are ultimately incoherent, our identities are unstable, our experiences are fleeting, our memories are malleable, our words and photos can obscure as much as they can clarify—so like, who knows what really happened?

- Delete my first text to you. Too close to the bone.

- Delete NY lunch scene. This is basically all gossip.

- Delete bday scene. We don't talk anymore.

- Delete Grammys party. Not quite relatable.

Hi Tavi,

Per your talk with Tree...

First of all, you're an amazing writer, duh.

You have identified some facets of my songwriting that I'm really proud of and which sometimes get overlooked. Thank you.

Then here are the changes:

- Add that I have songs that are meta and self-aware about the controlling/obsessive quality—Mastermind, Blank Space, mad woman, Picture To Burn, a lot of *reputation*, etc.
- Also songs that champion privacy like Dress, Sweet Nothing, etc.
- And songs that are about me getting in my own way, *not* playing the victim—The Archer, a lot of *1989* and *reputation*, Back To December, I'm sure you know all these.
- Some of my songs are about how love *isn't* a movie, e.g. White Horse.
- I think your interpretation of All Too Well is incomplete. Of course the narrator is naive and hopelessly romantic compared to her ex—the song is about an age gap, a power imbalance, made explicit in the long version but hinted at in the short one via the scarf which “reminds [him] of innocence.” Her unrealistic expectations should only emphasize the gulf between their experiences. Her capacity for remembering, compared to his, is a symptom of youth. And her need for control, to tell the story, might also be seen as a trauma response. The line “The idea you had of me—who was she?” indicates that *he* was the first to dehumanize-by-idealizing. It should be unsettling to relisten to the 2012 version with the understanding that they had been living in *his* fantasy.
- No one's ever noted that “wind in my hair,” “down the stairs,” “running scared”—these are all in-motion, creating a time-traveling effect once they all come back in a sequence. Something to add maybe.
- I don't know if Invisible String is the right title for the section about our relationship. If it has to be a song title then maybe Blank Space, Labyrinth, or Mirrorball.
- On the title of the whole book: I'm not confident in its nuances and think it will just read as instantly infantilizing. Pitch me a few alts?

long live adolescence). Either way, she's doubling down on the long-standing critique that she just can't let things go, reframing her capacity for obsession as her greatest asset. She is also showing us a way forward through our own nostalgia, zooming out from individual heartbreaks to the real arc.

*

“Are you ready to go back to high school?” Swift asked the crowd at MetLife Stadium.

The eight-year-old next to me screamed.

“You Belong With Me” kicked in with its optimistic banjo and I briefly felt 16, like I'd unrung some bells. I thought about high school, yes, and boys, of course, but I also became a character in Swift's story, reminiscing about the early days of our courtship. When she sang *You belong with me*, she gestured to the crowd. When she sang, *Who could ever leave me, darling? But who could stay? **You** could stay*, she gestured to the crowd. Unburdened from the plotlines that used to structure each album cycle, she could finally just sing to her narrator's one true love: the listener.

She pranced through her catalog, her old selves, reviving such dance moves as strumming-while-strutting and forming-a-heart-with-her-hands. She did not over-commit to emotional performances as though still distraught over a guy she dated at 19. Rather, she beheld her younger self, with all that talent and insight, and pointed: *Okay, HOW COOL is this?* Anticipatory nostalgia, I thought, can also entail anticipatory wisdom.

I'd never cared much for “All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor's Version) (From The Vault),” the 2021 rendition which includes verses that had been left on the cutting room floor back in 2012. The shorter one is so perfect, a superior work of art. But experiencing the 10-minute version live, repetitive and trancelike, I finally heard

the line, *It was rare*. The narrator is referring, of course, to the short-lived relationship that she is burdened with remembering, pleading for her ex to confirm that it marred him, too. Sung over and over, the lyric broke my heart. It sounded like denial. The more you hear the word *rare*, the less special it becomes. When 80,000 people are also crying, you become less special, too. The Swift of the Eras Tour seemed to accept what the masterpiece-maker couldn't: the relationship was not unique. Other people could relate to its story. Find solace in it.

“I don't care about anything that happened to me when I was 19, *except the songs I wrote*.”

This framing was once viewed as sociopathic—“She dates guys just to write about them!”—and now it holds a simpler truth: meaning outlives experience. And meaning grows when it is shared, when it's a connecting force, as with music, as with fandom. We were characters in her story, yes, but chiefly so it could support our own, the need to make narrative sense, to track our growings-up, to hold on till it was safe to let go, to remain frozen till we were ready to thaw. With each Era, she gave us the chance to relive our own. By dressing up as different Eras, we also played our younger selves. When we sang along, we imitated the voice we know so well from the recordings, *and* the people we were when we first heard it sing our prayers. And this of course was the story all along: not life as a movie, not relationships as a story, but the story as a new relationship—with the fans, for the fans, the “longest and best relationship [she has] ever had.”

Here's another way of looking at Swiftie amnesia: they lost themselves. They do not remember the tour because they were too present to collect and capture as Swift had once encouraged. Maybe this was not a loss, but a bracing act of surrender to oblivion—the ultimate sacrifice a Swiftie can make. Maybe this oblivion is true love, real experience. Maybe it is more lasting, more rewarding, than the image, the movie, the memory. *You know the greatest films of all time were never made.*

*Tavi, sorry! Autocorrect!

Sent from my iPhone

Taco what's your number?

Sent from my iPhone



Part Two: MIRROBALL

OK, that was my smug little “culture critic” attempt at talking about some aspects of Taylor’s music that I think get overlooked, as if one of the most famous people in the world isn’t talked about enough, or more like I just need to plant a flag in whatever unique (God willing) contributions I can make to a subject that I, as a Swiftie, feel competitive about, which is ironic because if I am really being possessive, if I really feel a desperate need to insert myself into the Conversation, then what I should lead with is that I know Taylor, I knew Taylor, we were friends, maybe we are still friends, if you can be friends with someone without ever talking to them, I mean if there is maybe a distant mutual respect or even—eek—*wistfulness*; I mean if she ever wonders what became of the drunk “multi-hyphenate” with the incoherent career who spun like a top (really dreidel) through her homes and parties and one time insisted I didn’t need a ride home before being spotted by Taylor on the street—here, here was her text to me: “We drove around yelling TAVI for 15 minutes till we found you clinging to a light post, like a chic Dickensian orphan. You curled up on the floor of the car and said ‘I just need to be a cat right now’ and that you were afraid of the seat. We parked and I told you stories till sunrise, when you looked up and asked to be taken home. Then we drove you to your address, which turned out to be the diner from Seinfeld.”

I sorely hope she still remembers that chic Dickensian orphan—*standing in a nice dress*, clinging to a streetlamp—but as a scholar of Taylor Swift, I also know that remembering means *The End*, and so I must now retain what I can, put a frame around it, write our song—*I just realized everything I have is someday gonna be gone*.



~~(Tavi's)~~ ~~(Tavi's ver)~~ ~~(Tavi's version??)~~

(Tavi's version?) (Tavi's version!!!) ☺



Hi Tree,

Hope you're doing well. We met a long time ago, when I interviewed Taylor for *ELLE* in 2015.

I'm not sure if she told you, but she and I had been emailing about a novel I wrote, based on her music. I would imagine she doesn't have much time right now to read weird fiction or answer emails, so I wonder if you have any sense of her preferred next steps with this. She is aware we're on a deadline though we can continue to push it if need be. Kindly let me know if I should pick this up with you or her or what. Thanks so much!

All the best,

Tavi

Hi Taylor,

Thought I'd check in one last time before proceeding. If I don't hear from you I'll assume I'm good to go. Please let me know if you feel otherwise.

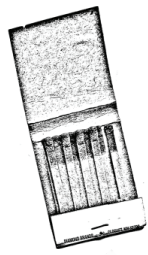
Thanks,

Tavi

I am using the genre of fiction as insurance—Swifties are among the most well-organized grassroots movements of our time; I don't need their wrath—and I am told (I've never written as not-me before) that the plausible deniability of "fiction" makes it that much easier to be truthful, as I can free myself of protecting both her and me—not that I want to denigrate her, at all—nor find and tell the truth of *who she is* (impossible)—but so I can more honestly document how it all *felt*, with her as my *blank space*, my *mirrorball*, my guy in a Taylor Swift song. Like, erudite Swifties understand that when Taylor said *folklore* and *evermore* were written from the points-of-view of characters, she was really just describing what she was doing all along but now explicitly, liberating her from the demands of autobiography, from having to fold every goddamn lyric into some public narrative or worry how the virgins who annotate Genius might be projecting *this time*. Like, when *1989* came out, Taylor said she wrote some of it by pausing John Hughes movies and trying to guess what the characters were thinking, and then some tabloid ran a headline that said she "Wasn't Sad Enough to Write 1989, Borrowed Fictional Emotions," as though 1) emotions have any rational, linear relationship to experience, or as though 2) this is not what Dylan and Springsteen did, draw on the culture's armchair nostalgia and let it seem lived-in some of the time. Like, is the expression itself not true enough? Must we limit artistic process with some literal, 1:1, trauma-plotted idea of *the muse*? If I say that our friendship is no more, you might be led to think that we had some kind of conflict, when really all that occurred was the fissure between her spirit and her physical form, between reality and my teenage heart, leading me to now ask, as her narrator so often does: *Was it all in my head?* Leaving me ashamed, estranged from the music I once held dear, desperately needing to retrieve the purity of my earlier fandom, my imagination, my



TGS!!
TS



This Journal Belongs
To
TAVI
Taylor Swift





youth; forcing me to look back, and back, and back, past the memories, beyond the events, before even her music's capture of my soul, to the precise suite of psychological issues which would prime me to hear the God in it.

My narrator :-) started a fashion blog as a kid at a time when it was still novel for children to use the internet and got a lot of attention for it, from magazines, news stations, and, less chicly, news sites. Fun/sad: some people thought I did not exist. That the blog was a hoax written by my parents or by a grown woman who just looked very small, like the movie *Orphan*, but for a blog. This brazen lot of lazy skeptics included not only anonymous gray avatars but alleged journalists, and while I was told to take it as a compliment that my writing passed for a-hoax-by-adults, I heard only *hoax. Fraud. Impostor*. Nobody ever doubted the existence of someone who clearly belonged.

In the face of such doubt, a new pattern was formed: feel like a loser, go away, write something vulnerable and thorough that proves some people wrong about something, post it, receive praise, and ambivalently return to "the work" while waiting for the other shoe to drop. (In my head, the sky is full of many pairs of shoes.) For my inaugural edition of proving-people-wrong writing, I dissected the adult impulse to underestimate children and took photos of myself in front of a wall I'd lined with newspaper (a spiritual predecessor to the artwork for Taylor's *reputation*). I also could not help but include evidence as to my existence: other bloggers had met me, my parents hated fashion, I used a tripod and a self-timer so no there was not some grown-up behind the camera.

Starting at age 13, I was flown all over the world for my writing but also my image-double; I reviewed fashion shows and



Hey Taylor,

Just checking in on the below. I want to make sure there's time to address anything that raises flags for you as we'll be sending out advance copies in the coming weeks.

Thank you again. I can't know how exactly this feels for you, but appreciate you being supportive of my work.

And I will be at Eras! My friend is getting us tickets through her manager. My Shabbos goy. Can't wait!

Best,

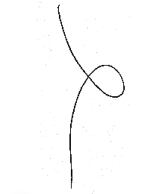
Tavi

Hey Taylor,

Hope you're having a good week. Wanted to see if you've had time to read what I sent you, whenever you have a chance to let me know.

Thanks so much,

Tavi



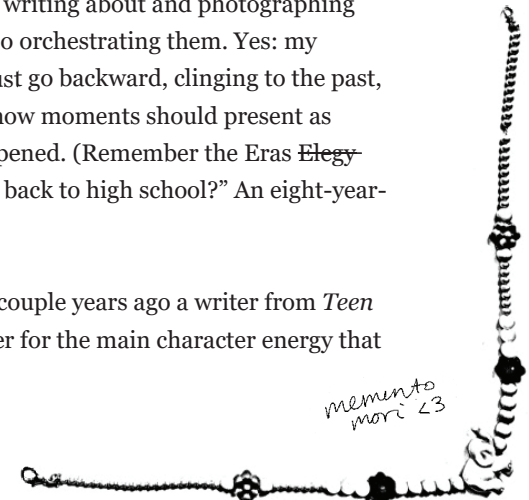
interviewed designers, and I was photographed a lot, because of what I represented to people—youth, prodigious skill, enthusiasm, youthful enthusiasm, a period of seeming meritocracy in the then-youthful internet, authenticity, youth. The world was my oyster, and then it clamped shut while I was inside. *You'll never be a kid again!*, the oyster bubbled. This isn't wholly true; it's just how it felt sometimes. The world I speak of was not quite or only adults and celebrity, but also a life online, constant documentation and relentless comparing between my selves old and new, and sometimes it included the feeling of wishing that I could delete them all, also known as *adolescence*. I actually think the internet has turned all of us into perpetual teenagers—defined by what we like, very tribalist, irrationally ascribing morality to taste because IDENTITY!!!!!! But—another time.



I'm skipping over a bunch of stuff, but between taking photos of myself and my outfits several times a week (including many intended to look like film stills from made-up movies), and eventually starting an online magazine for teenagers, Rookie, and also using Instagram since its inception, and keeping a list of "Moments of Strange Magic" which could be either from life or movies or a movie in my head while listening to music, I became very practiced in writing about and photographing myself and my life, and also orchestrating them. Yes: my attachment style did not just go backward, clinging to the past, but forward, anticipating how moments should present as though they'd already happened. (Remember the Eras ~~Elegy~~ Tour. "Are you ready to go back to high school?" An eight-year-old: "YAAAAAAA!!!!!!")

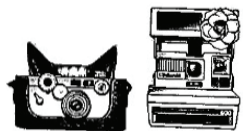


memento mori 43

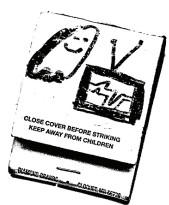




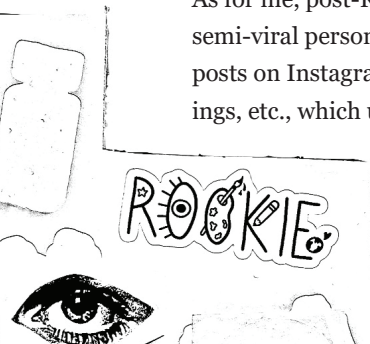
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has taken over TikTok today,” for how it encouraged a mode of aestheticizing your life that made some readers feel like not-enough (like their lives were boring or they were uncool) and made others feel like more enough than they’d realized, like every day was a creative outlet, like just getting dressed and making playlists were ways to live in your own movie. Now AI automates this process. The Spotify CEO says they’re “not in the music space—we’re in the moment space.” A feature of theirs called GetReadyWithMusic (gesundheit!) asks what you’re wearing (perverts...) and generates a playlist to match (ugh). It’s enough to make me romanticize my teen self’s more analog (though often digital) modes of curation, but I have to remember these habits were also predetermined by cultural memory, inherited fantasies. Notably, the photos most associated with Rookie’s aesthetic were taken by Petra Collins, who has since written that, having dropped out of high school, she used these photos to live vicariously through me and her other subjects, to forge her own “normal teenage experience.” Even though I was often the one in the photo, I also lived vicariously through them, for while I did go to school and enjoy my “normalcy,” I also had like, a job, and worked closely with adults, and whatnot. Recently, a journalist for the *Harvard Crimson* wrote a lovely piece about the combined pleasures and alienation of striving to make Rookie-like content of her own life. I offer a line from an email Jeffrey Eugenides wrote Sofia Coppola about adapting *The Virgin Suicides*, one of teen-me’s most-cited touchstones: “Remember: the girls do not exist.”



As for me, post-Rookie, I continued to write about my life in semi-viral personal essays, and I also used to do sponsored posts on Instagram and go to events and panels and screenings, etc., which unless they were paid had little practical



Hi Taylor!

Haha yes! Finally a member of the 27 club :-)

And totally—this is something I’ve struggled with before, people’s eagerness to take art literally. It’s part of why I’m so grateful for the philosophy of subjectivity-in-art-and-memory modeled by your work, which I try to use in the book to set the reader’s expectation.

For example, I loved in the *reputation* liner notes when you decried the impulse to try and unbox a song’s spark “as if the inspiration for music is as simple and basic as a paternity test.” I have long been curious about the reference to fatherhood there, if you care to expand. Like maybe this linear conception of *life event* → *art* is patriarchal. And maybe people most crave such simplicity when the inspiration might have been one evil famous man they can then obsess over (and thereby reify) in an extremely online, True Crime-ish way.

I also find that writing by women across genres is basically judged by *Do I like her?* rather than *What is she saying?* (See also: presidential elections, defamation trials around allegations of domestic violence...) I even hesitate to publish this book because I don’t want people to think I am *complaining* by trying to depict the neuroses of fame, or that I feel them at a consistent pitch. Thankfully, *you* have made audiences smarter by mainstreaming the idea that any work of art—a song, a sentence—might just be an expression of a single feeling on a single day. An expression sometimes of nothing other than itself.

I hope that even if the book is taken as completely true, you only look thoughtful, generous, and supportive of me.

Thanks,

Tavi

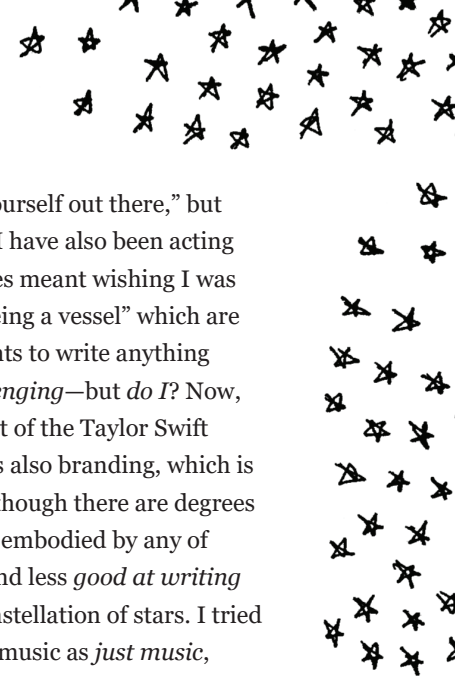
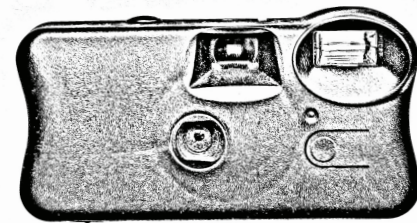
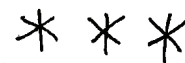
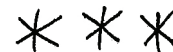


Cool, thanks so much! I'll let you know when I've read it.

I am worried also that even if it's fiction, people will assume it's true—that's kind of how these things go. But I'll read it first. Thanks Tavi. Also isn't it your birthday?! HBD friend!



application beyond a vague “putting yourself out there,” but which I guess made me an influencer. I have also been acting since I was a teen, which has sometimes meant wishing I was better at things like “likability” and “being a vessel” which are sadly a nightmare for a writer who wants to write anything autobiographical and most of all *challenging*—but *do I?* Now, yes, hoping that “fiction” is one way out of the Taylor Swift Problem, where everything you write is also branding, which is also the Life Right Now Problem, and though there are degrees at different scales, it is not so perfectly embodied by any of the less autobiographical, less savvy, and less *good at writing* artists among our culture’s current constellation of stars. I tried so hard in Part One to write about her music as *just music*, *just art*, as though she were just plunking away in a goddamn coffee shop all this time; as though her songs act merely as songs and not also public statements; this was disingenuous of me, fanciful, to vacuum-seal the message away from its medium; you can hear in the writing that I’m looking over my shoulder—but at you or her? I am desperate to tell the Tavi’s Version of my relationship to this cultural empire which is also a human being, but disregarding her humanity would be cruel, plus feed the audience’s more prurient appetites, whereas being withholding and coy makes me feel like a class traitor, the class being fans, Swifties, people who grew up on the internet; this may sound phony coming from someone whom cultural gatekeepers have long allowed inside the world-oyster, but that’s the thing about “freezing” when you were a teen/ became famous/were maybe a bit traumatized by the sheer volume of harassment that seemed somehow objective rather than manmade: you might be very self-conscious, but not quite self-aware—reasons to sympathize with Taylor (*s narrator*), but also to write honestly and with a populist spirit about the horror of fame; of course, if this is honest, then I won’t be



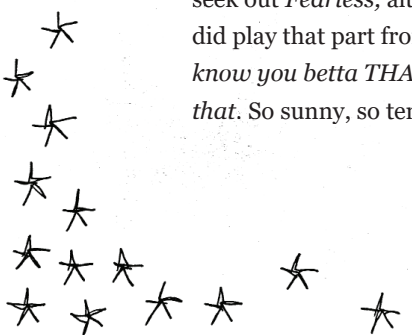


likable, but that becomes another way of being liked, via quality work. I call these contradictions the Taylor Swift Problem but she seems to be doing just fine; it is I who casts a cynical pall over a cultural phenomenon quite worthy of celebration, who sees a *vacuum into which is drawn [my] own gift for deceit* (Philip Roth, not Taylor)—and now, snake that I am, I come to find my tail staring me in the face, forcing itself down my throat. *It's me. Hi. I'm the problem. It's me.*

*

Taylor Swift was once a simple subject for me. My first song was “Our Song,” from her first album, released in 2006. My sister showed me the video when I was in sixth grade, pre-blog, on the computer in our basement. I tried to place Taylor on my matrix of female celebrities in which I could see myself. I thought I was too edgy for her, as I had recently started wearing a H&M hoodie printed with neon cassette tapes, but she wrote songs and played guitar, which meant she was smart and artsy. Most of all, the song made me feel so happy. My friend and I uploaded a video of ourselves singing it to YouTube under the inexplicably asymmetrical name KAG (Kate And Gevinson), which I then deleted without comment one time when I was mad at her.

When Taylor’s second album came out, I was in 8th grade, had blue hair, and fell asleep every night to Hole’s *Live Through This*. I made feminist zines and read old issues of *Sassy*, and had begun to imagine its online descendant in *Rookie*. I didn’t seek out *Fearless*, although its hits were ubiquitous. I guess I did play that part from “You Belong With Me” over and over: *I know you betta THAN that. Hey watcha doin’ with a girl LIKE that. So sunny, so tempting. I could be the kind of person who*



Hey Taylor,

First of all—that photo!

Thanks for getting back to me and for being so open. Take your time, of course. I want to make sure you’re comfortable, or at least tolerably uncomfortable.

Also, omg, it’s fiction!!!! Should’ve said that right away, jeez. The reader should feel as though everything they’re reading may have been a non-event. Was thinking a lot about the Neruda line you quoted in the *Red* liner notes (“love is so short, forgetting is so long”) and also Henry James via Graham Greene: “a young woman with sufficient talent need only pass the messroom windows of a Guards barracks and look inside in order to write a novel about the Brigade.” (Have you ever read *The End of the Affair*? It’s very us.)

Re: extrapolating, I actually did try writing it as just cultural criticism at first, but it felt disingenuous given that our relationship is publicly documented. I also think I was overlooking a much more interesting phenomenon, which is that you as a figure and as a person I knew/know are inextricable from the songs—which sort of echoes the music’s autobiographical element, its references to your persona, and the trappings of fandom. Few artists play with that tension with as much success. Really, there is no artist of any kind whose work has captured my imagination enough for me to move with such dexterity through their discography, lyrics, motifs, poses, etc.; nor who has created a mythology so resonant that it is even possible for more than a few readers to pick up on minor references—who has come to own so much of the collective consciousness. I’m not trying to blow smoke, though I do think it’s a compliment.

If I do a good job, it would be impossible to like this book without also deepening an appreciation for your music and even sympathy for the challenges of being a young female artist, particularly at a mass scale.

But again—let me know what you think.

Yrs,

Tavi

Hey Tavi,

It's so nice to hear from you. I hope you're continuing to kill it in your work and are thriving in all other ways.

Your book sounds exciting, though I admit it makes me a bit nervous. If you are extrapolating as much as it sounds, maybe you don't need me in there as a person? Maybe it could just be about my music.

Just my initial reaction. Will for sure read it when I have a bit of time. I have always appreciated your perspective on my work and I'm glad to hear it's inspired a longer project.

Xo

Taylor

P.S. I just found this photo (attached) from...the night we met? Were we ever so young!



could like this music, my brain said, while my heart burst open, full of longing and joy—they somehow went together! Explicitly, however, she still felt too normie, boy-obsessed, vaguely Republican.

Then, the summer after my sophomore year, I was sitting at my family's kitchen table alone, poring over pdfs of all 350 pages of the first *Rookie Yearbook*, which was indeed an anthology that resembled a high school yearbook (I'm not in my actual high school yearbook from that year—missed picture day—working). I was cramming to meet a publisher deadline before flying to New York to start a national tour of Rookie reader meetups that would last three weeks. Something prompted me to torrent Taylor's third album, and it carried me away to a teen movie of the mind.

I spent hours catching up on years of music and interviews, including a *New Yorker* profile by the same journalist who'd written one of me, trying to compare the generosity of her gaze on Taylor versus my 14-year-old self; suddenly, we were kids united against "Danie," who was actually fine, but whose name goes in quotes out of...a delayed act of aggression toward adults who *observed* me when I was young? A need to show that I know it was absurd, that I'm "grounded" now? An impulse to distance myself, as I can barely touch how isolating it felt to be so singled out at an age when the vastness of the world has just begun to register, even though stockpiling such prestigious coverage also made my unique career possible? Anyway, I became familiar with Swift's detractors' arguments: *She doesn't REALLY write her own songs. She only dated that guy for six months. No one this young could have this much nostalgia.* I heard echoes of comments, nay, op-eds!, on my own work: *An adult is doing all this for her. A tween writing about life is*



Speak Now





a form of emotional ventriloquism. No one this young could have this much nostalgia.

I watched the *Fearless* tour documentary, still at our kitchen table, getting chair sores, and leaned in during the performance of “You Belong With Me.” Taylor was on a stadium stage and behind her was a large screen showing a backdrop of a set of lockers. With the camera this close, I could see the image crudely broken up into dots like a Lichtenstein. Taylor was wearing a marching band uniform, singing about her unrequited love for her best guy friend, and, I assumed, drawing on the one year of high school that she attended before becoming a full-time country music star. A classmate had recently messaged me on Facebook to say that he had seen me smoking in the alley north of the school and that I was “really trying to force the whole ‘teenager’ thing.” I defended myself by saying that was “physiologically impossible”—you can hear my panic—but after seeing Taylor’s jumbotron lockers, I felt my performance was validated. I decided that posing was the most teenage thing you can do. When I got time to catch up in my diary, I wrote:

TAYLOR...Some point before leaving I'd been working nonstop all week (before I got to NY I hadn't slept in 36 hours, yaaaay) and decided to download all her albums and listened to *Speak Now* over and over and over and fell in love...and watched a ton of videos and fell in love more...part of it was wanting to feel normal—not weird; part of demented girl culture; not someone who consistently isolates herself, but just like a normal girl whose world is less complex and exhausting (I really hate my brain a lot these days), but someone whose life is not work + responsibility the way mine is...obviously I love what I do but my God...it's not the fantasy fairytale stuff that sticks out

Fearless ♥



Hi Taylor,

I hope you and yours are all doing well. I know it's been a long time since we've been in touch, but I'm always happy to learn what you're up to and excited by the work you've been putting out.

I'm reaching out because I wrote a book inspired by your music that is coming out with FSG this winter. I wanted to share with you now so you know what'll be out there. And while we're already in copyedits, there is time to make changes if anything feels seriously problematic to you. The narrator is a heightened, unreliable version of me, and while I draw on time we've spent together, you're really there as a mirror for my thoughts about fame, fandom, and writing.

I've attached it here. The title, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young-Girl*, is a reference to the book *Preliminary Materials For a Theory of the Young-Girl* by an anonymous (*must be nice*, lol) philosophy collective. It puts forth a theory of an archetype who has learned to commodify every aspect of her life and view everything in terms of currency and her personal brand. Patriarchy and capitalism have shaped her values and her notions of real experience. Their aims have been sublimated into her desires. I have some issues with the book, but it works best when you think of the Young-Girl as a mode of being rather than a type of person. I don't think any human being really is a Young-Girl, but I do think the world wants us to be.

The reader might first think the title refers to you, but the piece ends up being a self-portrait. My character is such a Young-Girl (*sad*) (*beautiful, tragic*) that I can't stop thinking about the “Story Of Us” till I'm *lost in the memory*.

Sorry. See? If you found that joke intolerable, this might be a hard read. But, it's here.

Thank you for humoring me, and I hope this doesn't feel too much like discovering I have several dead bodies in my basement. Please reach out if you want to talk about it. I know this must be strange for you, but I don't want it to be a source of stress. My number is still 708.xxx.xxxx.

Warmly,

Tavi

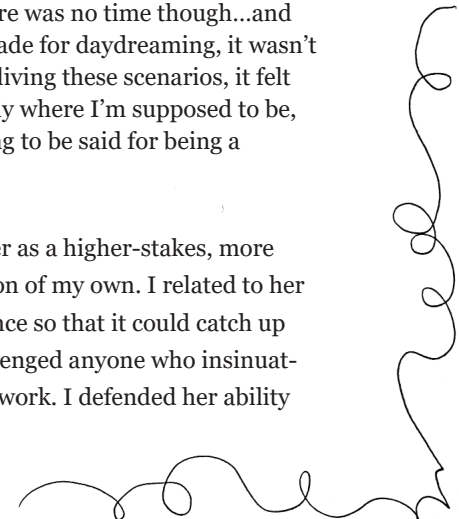
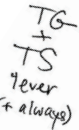
Part Three: Mine



to me in her songs, that I'm so charmed by, as much as the normal, clichéd high school stuff. And when I listen, I'm not even imagining all this stuff happening to me, it's just her, and I just like, want good things to happen for her. Her music must be similar for her, no? She started homeschooling at 15...her NYer profile has you imagine this delicate angel who could fall apart from stress at any moment...and besides the desire for normalcy, and liking things without having to just PICK THEM APART TO BITS to JUSTIFY it, I just really love her music...

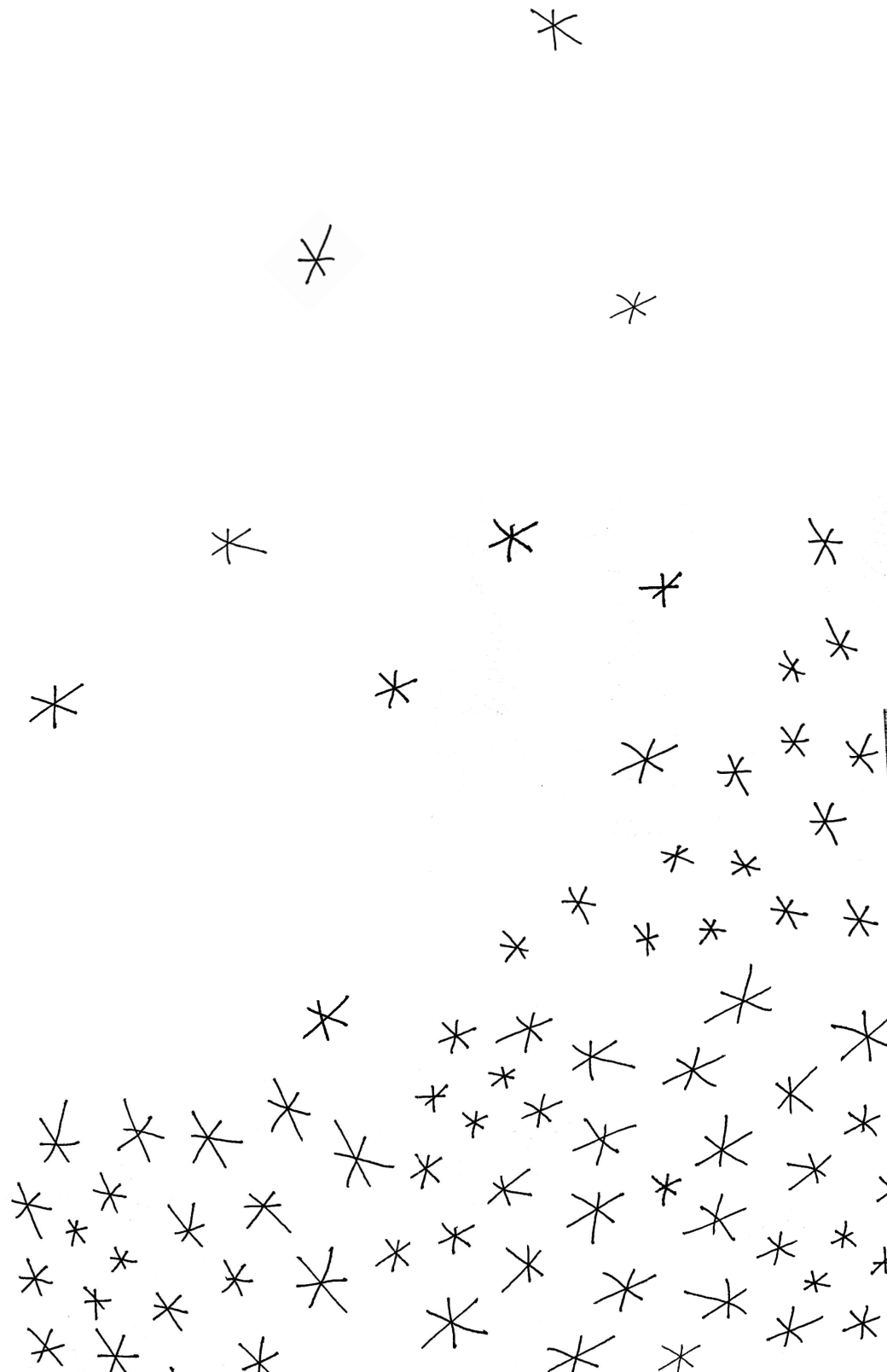
The beginning of "Love Story" sounds like footsteps in the woods...I like when I can hear her smiling as she's singing. When I first really listened to her, when I was tired & working, I cried, but it wasn't just because of my state at the time, she still makes me cry because she gets emotions so accurately...her music just makes me feel hopeful...the fairytale stuff makes new teenage feelings feel like a safer transition, and I don't think that in itself makes her or her music BAD and ANTI-FEMINIST, or even the other stuff people take issue with...I have a lot of thoughts on that but would rather write & organize it on my computer...man, I really wish I'd written in here when I first realized how much I love her because it was so overwhelming and emotional...there was no time though...and because her music is made for daydreaming, it wasn't sad to me that I wasn't living these scenarios, it felt instead like I was exactly where I'm supposed to be, like there was something to be said for being a dreamer, too...

I started following Taylor's career as a higher-stakes, more famous, more mainstream version of my own. I related to her need to magnify limited experience so that it could catch up with writerly compulsion. I challenged anyone who insinuated that she didn't write her own work. I defended her ability



to blow up brief chats into epic ballads as the mark of a true writer, and a true *teen*. Sure, she was a mega-famous pop star, but wasn't it, like, *very* adolescent that she would use writing to temporarily turn away from her career and be just some girl trying to figure out the meaning of love? And if it is adolescent to believe so much in your own subjectivity that you think everything happening to you has never happened to anyone before, wouldn't this belief only be exacerbated by the unique circumstances of fame and/or uncharted professional territory, so that even if her sense of scale ever seemed off, her work was at least an authentic display of delusion? And if this delusion resonated with millions of "normal" teens, what did it matter if her teendom was "forced," her emotions "fictional," her concerns "myopic," her worldview "naïve"? If your worldview is affirmed by the world, maybe it just *is the world*? If your worldview is affirmed by the world, maybe...*you* are the world? Like "We Are the World," but you, alone, in a recording booth, singing out your *negative emotions* and *bad experiences*, for a cause!, knowing they will not just resonate with "normal" teens but pique the curiosity of the *New Yorker* set, perhaps so successfully and vulnerably (making you even *more* invulnerable to critique—"so brave"), that you might never again know the sting of being trolled or criticized or feeling like a loser; as my boyfriend recently said of much trauma art: "not so much processing the event as killing it and mounting it on a wall"? *That's right, "boyfriend" ...the ugly duckling has become kind of a swan...!*

Yes: there was the compulsive need to save the good memories, the need to prove authorship, and the use of writing as a vehicle for revenge and control and finally mass approval, achieving the kind of success that would prove those strangers wrong and show that my life had worked out; that whatever



self. And in that way, “Nothing New” carries more wisdom than those songs of hers that turn losing into winning. It doesn’t have an enemy or story. It conquers nothing. It is just about a feeling.

*

When I was 22, I played Frankie in a production of *The Member of the Wedding*. She is typically played by a woman in her twenties; my mom says it’s the role I’ve played that is most like me. During the run, I read my diary from age 12, in which I had written, “I would like to start a club. I don’t know who will be in it or what it will be about but it will be very good and good for me.” When not consumed with the show, I was exploring the grim options for Rookie’s financial future. It would fold a few months later.

One matinee, I did the “members of the whole world” monologue, running around the kitchen table, and when the other actor stopped me and put me on her lap, I noticed I was crying, just streams of tears, no jags, for pages, through my last line in the scene:

I wonder if you have ever thought about this? Here we are—right now. This very minute. Now. But while we’re talking right now, this minute is passing. And it will never come again. Never in all the world. When it is gone, it is gone. No power on earth could bring it back again.



“normalcy” had been sacrificed had been, in fact, worth it.

Sometimes I think ambition is not drive so much as an intolerance for unhappy endings.

I wasn’t too in touch with my anger as a teen. *Compassion* was closer to the surface. When I saw hateful comments about me, I imagined the kind of pain one must be in to feel burning hatred for a stranger. I promised myself I would never become the kind of person who felt hatred for people I did not know. In fact, I would be so good at what I did, and so friendly and generous to anyone who ever wanted anything from me, that *that* would show those fucking assholes who hated me, that would show them that they were wrong and I was good, fuck those assholes, fuck them, god I hate them, ow, ow ow, owow ow owow wowow oq wqowow owwwwWWWWWWHHHHH-HLLLLLLLL!!!! PAIN! PAIN! I’M IN PAIN!!!!!!!!!!!!

What, you thought *parasocial relationships* went just one way? That millions (Taylor) or thousands (me) of readers could offer up terms of endearment or hatred and the two of us would not also become convinced that it is possible to form a genuine relationship with more people than you can crowd in the mind’s eye at a given time? Whose humanity you can process as real? As not a reflection of you? That we would not out of some primal instinct give way more weight to the haters than the fans, and so come to see *people in general, the world*, and finally *life itself* as our adversaries, entities to win over, to conquer, one big scalable mass of Not Me? *We will be members of the whole world!*

It’s interesting—everything about Rookie was more wholesome than my previous experiences with the internet. If my middle





school bullies were internet trolls and fashion editors, then my high school friend group was a global community of sweet nerds who revered me. Our meetups were full of tearful teens attending in such good faith that they practically glowed. And yet, I was still “on,” still responsible for making the events life-affirming, for making content the rest of the time, too, even in the van—my *Easy Rider* but with wifi hotspots paid for by Urban Outfitters—and so when I made it back to a hotel room, or even just the farthest backseat, I listened to *Speak Now* and wept.

Within months, my obsession manifested a meeting. By the time the Rookie Road Trip made its way to Los Angeles, I’d posted enough about my love of Taylor Swift that a friend’s friend urged Zooley Deschanel to introduce us. I say “friend’s friend” like this is all so casual; the first friend was a screenwriter I knew because she had been hired to write a movie based on my life when I was 14 (another time), the second worked with Zooley on the now-defunct website for millennial women, Hello Giggles, and had spent hours talking my dad and me through the business side of Rookie. It was so generous of them all. Now that I am an adult, I can confidently say that I would never spend social capital to make a near-stranger feel good for no reason. Or did Zooley think I was a Make a Wish kid? But my illness was fandom, and she was feeding my condition. What a bizarre wish for the Foundation to approve.

On a glittering L.A. evening, my dad dropped me off at Zooley’s house. She drove. The landscape was lush and golden-hour green, each tree already gilded with memory’s light. Zooley was a generous conversationalist and helped to ease my nerves. I was starstruck, but tonight, Taylor was the star, and Zooley was reviving her role in *Almost Famous* as the cool older sister

Fans give love, fall in love, are completely overtaken by the feeling of love. None of these is the same as loving.

I could not love Taylor. I was too much of a fan.

*

There is one facet of the (Taylor’s Versions) I neglected to examine before. Not the rerecords, but the “(From The Vault)” tracks—brand-new songs that she wrote or recorded at the time of the original albums but never released.

Hearing new songs from the old Taylor is like watching alternate timelines in her cinematic universe. Also, deleted scenes. Nostalgia, *and* novelty, *and* the intimacy of the artist’s process.

My favorite is “Nothing New (feat. Phoebe Bridgers) (Taylor’s Version) (From The Vault),” written when she was 22 about aging as a pop star.

*I’ve had too much to drink tonight
And I know it’s sad, but this is what I think about
And I wake up in the middle of the night
It’s like I can feel time moving
How can a person know everything at 18,
but nothing at 22?
And will you still want me when I’m nothing new?*

Multiple friends have compared it to “My Back Pages” by 23-year-old Bob Dylan: *Ah, but I was so much older then / I’m younger than that now.* Dylan’s narrator, however, sings from a place of acceptance. Aging is predictably simpler for him. His song is about humility, while Taylor’s is about humiliation. Feeling like a loser. Loss. Of time, her audience, her sense of

number of Taylors multiplied. Also: her magazine covers, her album art, her music videos, her interviews and talk show appearances and taped performances and jumbotrons and tour buses plastered with her face and all the photos we concert-goers took and countless photos of her leaving grocery stores that I had not even *sought out* but which were just *ubiquitous*, much like, of course, this tabloid cover, then the photos on her walls, then the photos I saw in my head while listening to her music, then the posts and memes and pull quotes and the way everyone I knew had an opinion on her and how my personal relationship to fame and money shaped the dingy magnifying glass I tried to gather her life into, and—this wasn't a triangle, this was the multiverse!

I was typing my feelings out to a friend when two texts from Taylor appeared:

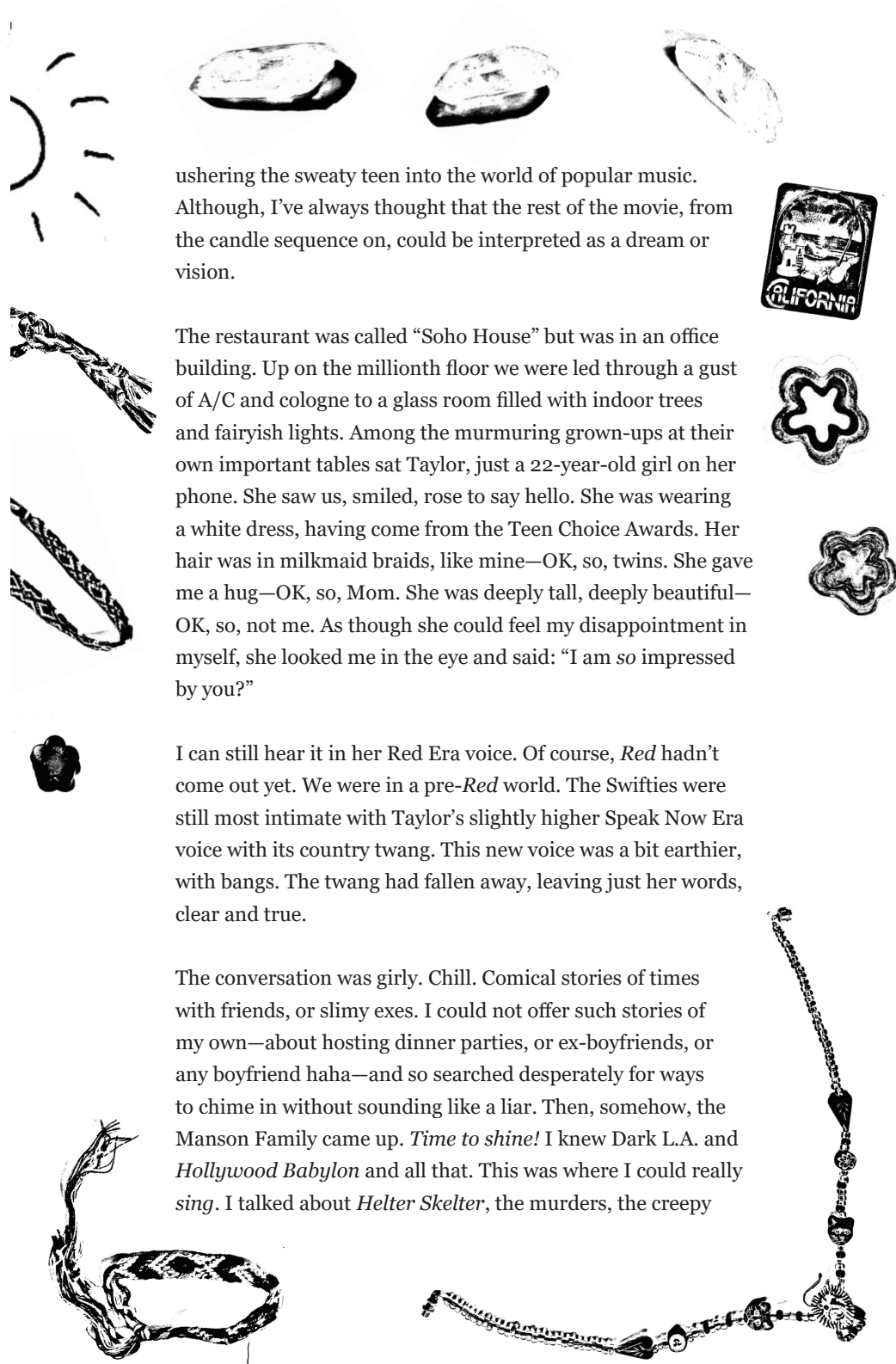
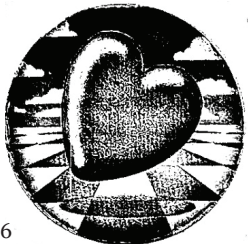
OMG

I just woke up!!!!

*

“Love is the extremely difficult realization that someone other than oneself is real.” Iris Murdoch.

And bell hooks advocated for seeing love as something you *do*, not a thing you attain or a state you achieve: “To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility.”



ushering the sweaty teen into the world of popular music. Although, I've always thought that the rest of the movie, from the candle sequence on, could be interpreted as a dream or vision.

The restaurant was called “Soho House” but was in an office building. Up on the millionth floor we were led through a gust of A/C and cologne to a glass room filled with indoor trees and fairyish lights. Among the murmuring grown-ups at their own important tables sat Taylor, just a 22-year-old girl on her phone. She saw us, smiled, rose to say hello. She was wearing a white dress, having come from the Teen Choice Awards. Her hair was in milkmaid braids, like mine—OK, so, twins. She gave me a hug—OK, so, Mom. She was deeply tall, deeply beautiful—OK, so, not me. As though she could feel my disappointment in myself, she looked me in the eye and said: “I am so impressed by you?”

I can still hear it in her Red Era voice. Of course, *Red* hadn't come out yet. We were in a pre-*Red* world. The Swifties were still most intimate with Taylor's slightly higher Speak Now Era voice with its country twang. This new voice was a bit earthier, with bangs. The twang had fallen away, leaving just her words, clear and true.

The conversation was girly. Chill. Comical stories of times with friends, or slimy exes. I could not offer such stories of my own—about hosting dinner parties, or ex-boyfriends, or any boyfriend haha—and so searched desperately for ways to chime in without sounding like a liar. Then, somehow, the Manson Family came up. *Time to shine!* I knew Dark L.A. and *Hollywood Babylon* and all that. This was where I could really sing. I talked about *Helter Skelter*, the murders, the creepy

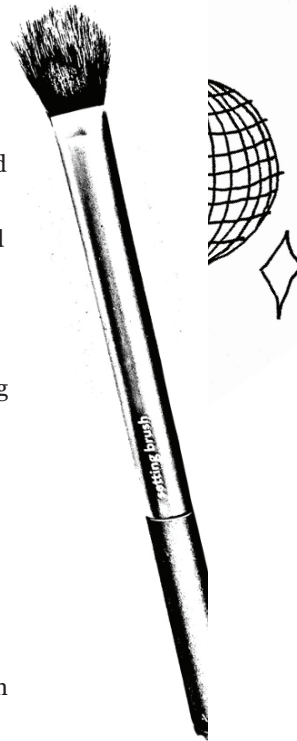


crawls—when the Family would break into people’s homes and rearrange the furniture just a bit and then leave, imparting to their victims a sense of uncanny, psychological unease—and then I talked about the girls, how they were all runaway teens living with this cult leader guy who gave them acid every day, they were basically brainwashed, “I mean I’m 16 and I can easily imagine being taken in by a charismatic figure and doing whatever they say.” The entire restaurant was silent for five minutes straight. Taylor—such poise, such tact—segued into a less disturbing subject.

I kept wanting to marvel, but I worried that I would miss something. What was I trying to wrap my head around, anyway? How could you comprehend the fact that the person whose diaries you’d read and memories you’d traveled through was sitting right next to you, eating fish? Maybe you weren’t supposed to comprehend. Maybe you were supposed to just talk and listen, and in exchange for your marvel, you might get connection. But I wasn’t ready to trade in my marvel. I wanted Taylor Swift to be my friend *and* my imaginary friend. I couldn’t think this through right then, just follow instincts around the proper way to behave, which moments to snapshot, and which to set free. *Capture it! Remember it!*

As though she’d read my mind, Taylor suggested we get a photo before parting ways. From my diary entry written later that night:

She said we had to take pictures in the photobooth and we joked about how it said ‘Boudoir.’ At one point she said she + I needed a twin shot so we took one and I got to keep it. There was a small moment that I find myself in a state of wonder about. When we sat down she did that thing girls do where they like, cross their



DO YOU
like me?
YES NO

The morning after, still walking, I got to a gynecologist appointment. My feet were in the stirrups when an orchestral cover of “Blank Space” came on over the speakers. I couldn’t stop laughing during my breast exam, first because I was ticklish, and then because the doctor was not reacting to my laughter. I asked her to look at something and she—I swear—groaned as though she was my teenage daughter, then peered and said, “It’s literally just a vagina.” I felt like I’d failed the appointment. Then I walked to CVS. As I sat in the pharmacy waiting area, still waiting for a text back, Taylor’s face met mine from a tabloid cover under the counter.

I wanted it to be difficult to square this tabloid version of her with the person from the night before, but I sensed that even observing such a thing was not the act of someone who saw her as a person. If I saw her as a person, the tabloid wouldn’t be in conversation with our friendship. My fascination gave me away, to myself. Even the distress I felt over her not texting me back meant that we were not equals; if we were the same, the text (or absence of a text) would be a non-event; I would be thinking about my own life, in that moment, not her. Jesus. It seemed exhausting to have to absorb so much meaning on behalf of those around you. I needed her to be so many things: down-to-earth, saintly, human. God! One time we were at a store where a woman approached and said her daughter was a big fan and could they get a picture and then a toddler waddled up to me and went, “Are you Taylor Swift?” and I thought, *Yikes!* But now I had been that mom, triangulating with some *idea* of Taylor, and I had even sort of been the toddler, like conditioned to think differently of someone because she was mega-famous while overlooking the person standing right before me, and I was also, tragically and still, myself—a bootleg Taylor for little babies. After the mom took the photo, the



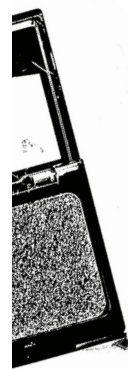
In the morning, I let myself out in the freezing cold, distantly suspecting I deserved punishment of some kind. I texted her a coda and waited for a response. Walking against the wind, playing back the night before, I recalled a chilling moment in which I got too comfortable and stopped the conversation to say how much 1989 had meant to me, especially “Wildest Dreams,” explaining all the correlations to my dramatic new love life, the play I’d been in, the act of acting itself—“like being present, like not trying to constantly find the story, and how things are more special if they’re not meant to last, because then you can actually give yourself over and like, maybe that’s the essence of life? How *nothing lasts forever*?” A line from the song.

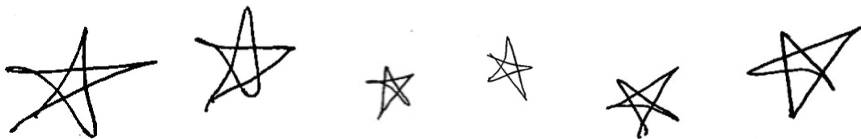
In my current memory of that hungover memory of that drunken moment, Taylor is eager for the moment to pass, because it puts us on different levels, or asks something of her, or turns her into a cipher, made even worse by the fact that I am talking as though it’s the opposite; as though by having a personal connection to the song, I am really *seeing her*. In my current memory, there’d been this elephant in the room—her fame, my fandom—and I rode in on it like a circus performer. In my current memory—which actually no longer exists, I’m working from a document I drafted years ago—this is the moment that signals the night must end, and I am already lagging in what should be a joint move out of the kitchen. Then, I am in a guest room with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, all closing in on me. I blink around from the middle of a king-size bed at framed photos of her friends and family that she has also posted on Instagram. Is it weird that I know that? To observe it? To take pictures of the pictures, in my mind? To wonder if I’ll write about it? Can you out-Taylor Swift, Taylor Swift?

legs all over each other, to me. That thing which is part of this larger girl culture that went on in middle school about Maggie Schwarz and her friends when I was excluded. I’ve always been sure that female friends like Maggie, Gabby, Jessie never acted like that with me because I’m just so...repulsive? Nerdy? I seemed too serious for that? I didn’t smell like Pink perfume? (Ugh, middle school flashbacks.) Anyway, suddenly I felt accepted and liked and included. Not that I’m such a victim of not having friends or whatever normally, or that we don’t all spoon all the time... this was just different. It was fun to sit like that and make OMG faces nonironically.

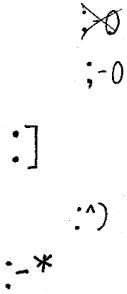
She was just so nice and funny and smart and sincere. When we were saying goodbye she said I was “beautiful” and “flawless” and that I “shine” !!!!!!! and that we needed to hang out. She put herself in my phone as ‘Twin/Mother/Soulmate.’ We all hung out for three hours! Also I was relieved that I never said anything weird or talked myself into a corner. I even made everyone laugh at times. Zoey is a saint. Taylor was everything I’d hoped for and more. It was the best night of my life.

It was clearly validating and, in hindsight, somewhat erotic to take BFF-y photos with the most popular girl in the high school of the world. Then there was my admiration for her work, her personality, but also, for sure, her beauty; a kind I longed for myself, envied in my peers, knew I shouldn’t value, and couldn’t see my proximity to through the miasma of internalized antisemitism and feeling generally “gross.” I was so close, yet so far: thin. Pale. Blonde, though mine was bleached. Similar aesthetic leanings, referencing a fantasy of innocence, with our braids. But Taylor was a foot taller than me, internationally famous, and wearing a red-carpet dress. Taylor knew how to put muddy feelings into three-minute songs. Taylor possessed





the comfort it must require to pull someone into a photo-booth, spill your legs over theirs, and pose with your hand over your mouth as though God is telling a special little joke that only you can hear. I imagine all the minions inside my brain started pulling emergency levers and flipping through reference books to find the most relaxed body language to respond with before melting down. In one photo, I am mimicking her faux-shocked expression, my real shock whispering *help* with my eyes. In another, I have found some compromise between the performance and my discomfort via a scowl that strives for self-awareness rather than beauty—I *know what I look like, thanks*. In a group photo, I seem to have surrendered to my rank completely: the adult women pout or laugh while looking gorgeous; I am making what I can only assume was meant as an impression of a pirate, with my brow furrowed, one eye twitching, and my mouth a toothless slant. Still, my diary insisted this was all “fun,” that I “never said anything weird”—the way I wanted to remember it.



After that night, Taylor and I occasionally exchanged texts, which you can bet I agonized over phrasing and deciphering. *Red* came out, introduced the rest of the Swifties to a new Taylor, and I told her how much I loved it, and she was so gracious in return, like my opinion meant something. I drew a map of where all its songs take place and mailed it to her. I made a diorama of the dancin’-round-the-kitchen scene but then hid it under my bed, forever. Backstage at the Red Tour, she asked me which deep cut to play that night, and two hours later, she launched into “Our Song.” When the fans screamed, I felt like their puppet master, a genius, a god. Back at the Holiday Inn in Columbus, my friend’s mom ordered us Domino’s and we recorded an hour-long recap on my computer before the show could leave our veins. When I uploaded the audio to iTunes

RED
RED



It was in this fragile state that I went to a screening of *Nashville* at MoMA. I had never seen it before. It was so epic, so well-written, its cultural significance *so*—why was I crying? Geraldine Chaplin, the amateur journalist, was in bed with the musician, Keith Carradine. He was still sleeping, and she was staring into space, her head on his chest. His record was playing. She was repeating: “I love you. I love you. I love you.” Absolutely not. I belonged. I would belong.

I texted Taylor. A spontaneous hang? She invited me over. I told her I saw the movie. She went, “That’s the one where everyone wants to *make it*, right?” My heart winced. What she described sounded tragic to me.



We talked in her kitchen for hours. I don’t remember what about. I think that, like the other hangs, we pretended we were normal young women with normal problems—problems that revolved mostly around men, our tenuous connections to the earth. I wanted to ask more, to share more. I wanted to say that I was lost, that it made no sense that I was there, that I made no sense anywhere, there was nothing inside—couldn’t she see? Why did she even like me? What had I done other than seem culturally relevant and pass for normal? Instead, we stayed in the clouds: stories about men. She put on music. We danced around the island like clumsy ballerinas. It was like the kind of slumber party where girls listen to Taylor Swift, the ones I’d once been jealous of. We took turns choosing songs. “Everybody Loves Somebody.” “Everybody Wants to Rule the World.” “Beautiful Girl” by INXS, which I’d never heard.



We talked so late that she insisted I sleep over. She lent me a nightgown and helped me into a fluffy white bed.



and I'd learn what kind of adult I was.

Once the play closed, I wasn't so sure, just that I was less likable than my younger self. The psychological issues announced themselves but with a limited vocabulary. There were panic attacks. Vices and enemies. I no longer needed my parents to access any spaces, and so searched for them without knowing. I tried to write about the play; I have been writing about it ever since. If you go to 48th Street, you'll find me pacing, pointing at the theater's marquee: "That was my youth!!!" It makes no sense for a 27-year-old to feel like Norma Desmond, and even less sense that I felt this way at 18, but sense is for adults, and I was—am—still a teen.

To make things extra ghostly, I was outgrowing Rookie's audience/subject matter/purpose, and the professional world beyond it terrified me. Like, it was simultaneously a social world, with undefined boundaries and unspoken expectations. My personality, appearance, and writing would no longer gain points for their teenage earnestness and authenticity, but I also could not crack the code to adult socializing, dressing, and dating, unless, I figured, some man was grinning at me with approval. And so, my nights were spent trying to recreate the play—its highs, through booze and romantic tumult and parties that woke you up just a bit more because they featured extra-famous people whose basic politeness could feel like other-worldly generosity, acceptance. And, I wanted to recreate the sense of freedom the play had given me—to feel like just a girl in an apartment, the way I had used Rookie to feel like a teen in her room, the way I had used Taylor's music to escape Rookie, the way that real life is never enough.

for posterity, it misidentified the file as one from the iTunes store, and automatically titled it "Open Heaven." Presumably a sermon of some kind.

Meeting Taylor did not dispel any illusions; it only made my obsession grow. She had been even more perfect than imagined and now the Red Era—though back then we called it "2012"—provided countless new objects for my fixation. I was possessed by a kind of madness, one I'd not felt before or since, of checking a website that posted multiple times a day with any Taylor-related updates—today we call this "reading the news." I'd come home from school, unfold my laptop, and let the paparazzi shots wash over me: the idyllic pastures evoked by her riding boots, the leathery smell emanating from dark SUVs, her flawless deer-in-a-spotlight expressions. I don't know why I did this. Every day, for two months. An escape, perhaps, from my professional responsibilities? Who knows. Back then I called it love.

The following summer, my dad and I visited colleges on the East Coast. Taylor invited us to stop at her beach house in Rhode Island. I'd trembled before the iron gates of Brown, gasped at the *Great Gatsby* manuscript in its library. Neither felt as sacred as the historic Holiday House of Red Era publicity. We pulled up to a security booth, then drove through a gate that made Brown's look ornamental. We were welcomed by Taylor, her dad, and the friendly Sheeran clan. The house was full of white wood, stars and stripes, antiques, mementoes. It was so much nicer than the McMansions of middle school friends but way less pretentious than the modern abodes of fashion/media/showbiz sharks. Which holiday was it even named for? Just every day, because here, life was perfect? I probably saw the aesthetic as "Americana" or "East Coast"





more than high-WASP and vaguely understood that my full identification with it would be rejected by the stewards of Gatsby Vibes in some split-second unconscious fantasy. Although, the Vibes couldn't have been *that* inaccessible to me, because, well, there I was.

With my dad, of course. I was used to needing him to access such rarefied spaces even though the access was meant for *me*. Sometimes I was grateful for his protection and sometimes it just embarrassed me. Also, his khakis from Goodwill. Not that such modesty did not work to my advantage. No one who met my dad would suspect that his daughter was so attuned to hierarchy and half-imagined social codes. When Taylor later wrote "The Man," she was not thinking of guys like Steve.

The dads went fishing. Taylor and I talked about boys. We all went water skiing, and my dad fell in the water and lost his glasses (*goddammit*), and Taylor lent him her glasses to wear for the rest of our road trip (*or, bonding!*). She woke up early to bake everyone their own cake. She told me to put on "Pictures of You" by the Cure if I ever wanted a date to feel like a movie—confirmation that even if she was the most popular girl in the high school of the world, she was still a moment-hoarding squirrel, like me. One morning, we climbed a ladder to the house's widow's walk, just the two of us, and she said that a widow's walk is where women would stare at the ocean and wait for their husbands to return from war, then that she saw songwriting as sending a message in a bottle, and it was like a Taylor Swift song—both her musings, and the two of us looking out—and then I was so emotional that I got out her thank-you present: a vial of my baby teeth. She gasped. Then, we just enjoyed the silence.



tour again. Then then then. I stopped texting people I always felt like I was bothering. I met people who'd had the same friends since childhood. *Imagine!* How transient, the lives of teen professionals; how flimsy our bonds—surrounded by praise, fans, and fairy godmothers who introduce you to your idol just because they think you deserve it, and yet, few people who can tell you who you were before you were also your image-double. Maybe we were no one at all, Taylor and I, before our flatter yet richer doppelgangers came into being—unreal to ourselves until our image-doubles could speak for us. But at least they did *speak*. At least they were—are—writers, too.

Her narrator's failure, when I revisit those early albums, is only that she is young. Unrealistic. Idealistic. She was bound to get intercepted by real life at some point. So too did I stumble in my own brain's gummy pink terrain the night that I think I might've blown it—our friendship.

It was my first year in New York. I'd decided not to go to college and to keep working instead. Taylor had also just moved to the city, and her new album *1989* was actually about my life, which was then mostly spent acting in a Broadway production of the play *This Is Our Youth* as a girl my age who finds herself in a guy's New York apartment. Every night, 800 sets of eyes watched me play a (yes) normal person and be on a date. I had to give up on orchestrating moments and learned how to listen and talk instead. It was the most fun I'd ever had, the most pressure I'd ever been under, too much stimulation, adrenaline, anxiety; I was scaling higher and higher stakes (for failure, humiliation) at the same time that I was insulated from real life—repeating the same story eight times a week, feeling the impact of fictional emotions; the ticking clock above constituting my biggest problem, which was that the story would end,



◆◆ 1989 1989
 1989 1989 (1996??)





beds, all to myself. A selfie in the mirror. Taylor's cat on my ladder. I posted one on Instagram with a caption that played it cool. Taylor and Ed were referred to simply as "yesterday's crew," which is fucking stupid, basically propaganda for my nonexistent chill.



The rest of the photos went on a new, secret account. It followed no one; no one followed it. It was just a place where I could post more photos from the weekend, satisfying an urge to see them all stamped with the app's filters and interface—a frame—which would make them, of course, real.



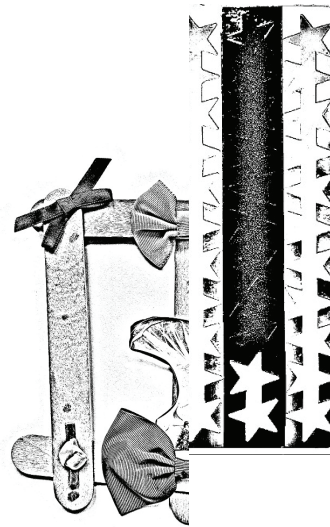
The posts felt amazing. I beheld them like jewels, like blue check marks, things of beauty and power, which on Instagram are the same. I tried to imagine them as public documents, shiny and new—and popular. But I could never post like this on my regular account. That would be fan behavior, tacky, uncouth. No one who truly belonged in that weekend would do such a thing. Then again, no one who belonged would create a private Instagram solely to method act a public Instagram, either. I was sick. Disgusting. Ashamed. I deleted the account. The public posts, too. Having lost all my phone photos pre-2016, I now have neither the originals nor their secret doubles.



So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past :-)

*

I hope it is accurate to say that Taylor and I faded away, lost touch—nothing dramatic. I hope I was merely immature and not unkind. If I think about it, we really only hung out alone one fateful time. The rest were in groups. Then she went on



These moments of unity were important. Reminders of our differences were cause for despair. I didn't know how to react to any reference to fame or money which were all indirect and innocuous, like mentions of her recent tour, or of me applying to school. Was I supposed to pretend I didn't know she was rich and famous? Or pretend that I was, too? Or try to project a grounded awareness of our differences but without sounding bitter nor hysterically self-deprecating nor suspiciously sycophantic?

My Hell: she had a book of blank Proust questionnaires for guests to fill out, and my dad asked what a Proust questionnaire is, and Taylor started to explain who Proust was, and I watched my dad, a 60-year-old English teacher, make a split-second decision between letting a 23-year-old pop star explain Proust to him or telling a 23-year-old who was hosting us at her mansion that she didn't need to explain Proust to him. He gave a little laugh and said, "I know Proust, but what is the book?" My soul prolapsed. Taylor responded as though nothing had happened, which probably, to her, it hadn't.

For the next stop on our college tour, we stayed at an America's Best Value Inn. Our room had two prints of the same painting above each bed—a beach house on a shore, much smaller than Taylor's. I woke up twice in the night, first because someone in the next room was loudly vomiting, and then because there were sirens in the parking lot just outside the door. My dad and I joked about the contrast to the night before. Back to reality, am I right?! There was a whiff of superiority—for having our feet on the ground, for the sense of humor only outsiders can access. Yes, I could tell this story later, in writing. I could own it, the way Taylor had taught me.



I just called him up to ask: "What was it like to wear Taylor Swift's glasses?"

He laughed. "Why?"

"Just curious."

I thought I heard him frown, then shrug. "Let's see what I remember. I've told the story so many times that I don't really know what I experienced."

Perfect. "So what's the story?"

"Well, we got back to the house, they all knew we were driving for the rest of our trip, so anyone who had a pair of glasses they could do without, I tried them on, and out of everyone, her prescription was the closest to mine, so she went, you know, 'Take them.'"

I waited. "That's it?"

"Yeah!"

"Oh."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's not much of a story."

"Well, I'm just telling you what happened. But it was pretty cool that out of this big group, it was *her* glasses."

"Right, okay. So when you wore them, did you feel like you were *seeing as her*?"

"No."

"Did they *look like anything*? Was life more *beautiful*, perhaps?"

"You know...they weren't perfect. The prescription was not exact. So I was mostly focused on the road and trying to not get in an accident."

"Oh...kay."

"What are you using this for?"

"And you still have the glasses?"

"No, no. I asked where I should mail them after, and she went, 'Just hang onto them,' but I sent them back."

"*Really?* I thought they were the pair on your desk all these years." In the little giraffe-printed armchair-shaped cell phone holder.

"No! I wasn't gonna *keep* them."

Totally. And thank God, by the way. Good old salt-of-the-earth Steve. No souvenirs here! If he were any less trusty, I might have never stood a chance, although I guess the jury is still out re: my hold on reality. You see, *I* kept souvenirs from that weekend. Photos, of course. Taken with the group, and of the view, and of my guest room of choice: three different bunk

