



# GRRRLS IN CARS

a zine about women & travel

volume 1

october 2015

Welcome to **GRRRLS IN CARS.**

**GRRRLS IN CARS** is a zine about women and travel.

**D**uring the summer of 2014 I was twenty-two years old and I went on a road trip, across the country, with my friends. We drove a white eleven-passenger van from Massachusetts to the Pacific and back again, and it was exhilarating. It was not my first travel experience, but it was an important and powerful one. Yet, on each day of the trip, I was painfully aware of my gender — at every truck stop at midnight, on every solo walk to a bathroom at a campsite, at every meal, in every posed photograph, in each crowded sleep in the van, in each attempt to make my opinion heard. Each day grateful my body didn't rebel against my desires by menstruating, or "getting emotional," or taking up too much space, or smelling bad, or being ugly.

Being a woman is hard work. Traveling through this world in a body that is classified and qualified in unflattering terms because of its femininity is complicated and messy, but we do it every day. But when I reflected on the narratives of travel that I consumed growing up, I realized that more often than not, they were stories of men.

Where are the stories of women in motion? We have been living them and telling them, but they aren't projected onto the big screen or stuck into university literature syllabi the way men's stories are. We want that to change.

We want more and more of these stories to exist out there in the world in a tangible form. We want women's travel stories to flood our cultural narratives. These stories may not protect us or save us but they will normalize the truth that women are voyagers, just like anyone else.

When I set out to create this zine, I could never have imagined such a lovely breadth of experiences as you have here before you in Volume I of GRRRLS IN CARS. This zine contains a multitude of voices from a beautiful cross-section of female experience. My hope is that you enjoy their contributions as much as I do, and that they might inspire you to tell your travel stories, too.

xo  
marissa

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## Don't Forget

- The tiles in Lisbon on every wall and that tiny little restaurant where you communicated only with hand signals and had the best fish of your life
- Cultural difference are immense and miniscule and unquantifiable
- Sitting in the hostel room holding Aarin's hand, watching Phil and Alex sleep, crying because you are so damn lucky.
- First impressions can be huge
- Las Ramblas the night the Barcelona team won and the crowd and the firecrackers and that monument you climbed. And how you went back the next night and it was kiosks and tourists and you bought your first pack of cigarettes and smoked them outside a church.
- Don't assume your background is anything to anyone
- When gay marriage was legalized in Ireland and you to a bus to Dublin to celebrate. And you met up with the gay couple in a gay bar and their friend with the sides of her head shaved. And you all watched the news and cheered at the announcement even though it was made in Irish firs because you knew. And you drank slightly to much and and Irishman showed you pictures of a rainbow over a rainbow flag in Dublin. And you felt like you could vomit rainbows and it felt fucking beautiful.



“i drive”



I started driving when I was 16. Not because I really wanted a car, but because my dad told me it was about time I started driving myself to places. I haven't really stopped ever since. It's easy, it's private; there's less catcalls but there's hours stuck in traffic; there's the freedom to go wherever but the gas prices have been going up. I've been in several car crashes; some light like a small bump into the car on front, some more severe like the time I crashed the car against containment posts in a curve, so I avoided falling into a pit to my demise. I drive everywhere, even if it's a little far; I take my friends back to their houses, even if they live in the margins of the city. I drive back and forth to my boyfriend's house. I drive mostly alone to places –school, work, parties-, to the distress of my parents that would rather have someone else drive me. There were a few seasons in which the City was terrified with drug cartel battles –Los Zetas vs Cartel del Golfo vs the militaries-, and they dreaded I go out alone. That time has passed and everything's better –now you just have to be careful to not being hit by a drunk driver. There's the ever-present “don't come back too late” and the “text me when you get home”, in fear and worry that the late hour would show a grim face.

The thing is, it's ok to have a car and drive yourself everywhere, except out of town. You shouldn't drive when going on a trip. It's ok to have a car and drive yourself everywhere, except if you're going out with your guy, 'cause he's the one who should pick you up, even if he doesn't have a car. I never understood this. After all these years driving, I feel passive and soft if I'm in the passenger's seat, as leaves being blown away, and I hate waiting for someone else to pick me up. I'm the owner of my time, and driving to meet him somewhere makes me feel like I'm not wasting it. My relationship is of equals, not based on the old, misogynistic chivalry dominant in Northern Mexico.

Sometimes we skip town, and I drive. Whenever I go out with friends, the one who drives is the one that has the car. Sometimes I wish this City would have a proper public transport system so I wouldn't have to depend on the car to move. Driving gets tiring, too. Yet, driving gives me a sense of control, of faint equality to the rest of the men, that can't be compared to anything else. I'm driving; I'm in control of where I go and how I get there. It's one of the few true freedoms a woman can get in this City.



*"I've attached a few photos that I just got developed from my travels this summer in NYC and CO. Some of the photos don't explicitly have females in them, but they're all taken by me, and I was able to take them because I'm a pretty unthreatening presence (normal-sized, asian female), and I usually don't get questioned in public spaces."*

I have been struggling to write this, whatever it is, for some time now. How do I start this story? How do I begin to discuss all of the emotions I felt and thoughts that crossed through my head while driving across a portion of this country that has, honestly, always scared me?

I spent two months living in Austin, Texas this summer. I loved Austin. The Whole Foods headquarters on North Lamar became a sanctuary of sorts – offering me free yoga, a place to sit and charge my phone, and food (of course). Irie Bean Café, Thunderbird Café, and Opa became a refuges of sorts whenever my roommates became too much to handle. It was hot, often lonely, and I loved it. Austin was – as everyone assured me – not really Texas. I think having lived there for two months and realizing that people were, mostly, right and that Austin was not the Texas of Salon articles or SNL jokes gave me a sort of comfort and safety that was very abruptly shaken as soon as I left.

Though I drove my car down to Texas the following will not be an account of that trip but rather of the return home. The itinerary went: Austin to Hope, Arkansas (with a lunch break/visit of Prez Billy Jeff's first home because duh); Hope to Nashville, Tennessee (where we spent the night); Nashville to Roanoke, Virginia; Roanoke to Hershey, Pennsylvania; Hershey to Providence, Rhode Island.

Now that you have a basic outline of the path taken, let's begin.

I did most of the driving because of my incessant need to be in control. Also because I have a new lease and my very loving, very caring partner is not the most comfortable at the wheel. Anyways, I took the first leg of the trip. It wasn't too bad. We had plenty of snacks and yerba mate sparkling drinks to keep us energized. We laughed an appropriate amount once we came upon signs for Texarkana because it's such a ridiculously amazing name for a town on the cross-section of Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. We got bored. The usual road trip shenanigans. It wasn't until we reached Arkansas that I started to get this sinking feeling in my stomach. For those that are not aware, the Arkansas state flag is like a lazily plagiarized version of the confederate flag. They literally kept the main elements of it there but just moved things around a bit almost as if to say "hey we're racist as fuck but, you know, trying to be lowkey about it."

**Except it's not lowkey. At all.**

## **This is the part of the story where I get mad.**

At first we just discussed how ridiculous and not at all subtle the state flag was. Dan took over the wheel from Hope, AK to Nashville, TN and I read out trivia about Arkansas (not only is Arkadelphia a real town that actually exists but the apple blossom is the official state flower!) And then we had to stop for gas.

We weren't far from the Tennessee border when we decided that maybe we could make it to Memphis before filling up but 100% didn't want to find out, so we signaled for the off ramp. It was a Shell, I think and it was late. There was no one around except another sedan that pulled up soon after we did. I got out of the passenger's seat and went to go fill up and Dan asked if I wanted water or anything from the gas station and then decided he would just stand with me at the pump. I didn't think anything of it really. He probably just decided he didn't want to drink water and have to make another stop for a pee break. I clicked the "yes" button when the machine asked if I wanted a receipt and it flashed, "please see the cashier inside." I started to walk over before he stopped me and I figured it wasn't worth it (it shows up on my bank statements anyways) and got in the car. That's when I noticed a small confederate flag by the door. Dan said that's why he didn't want me to go in there.

And that's when the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach got a lot bigger.

It's not like I should have been that shocked. I mean, it's Arkansas. Their state flag is an homage to the symbol of hate that is the confederate flag. Still. I was shocked.

A little thing about me – I'm bi-racial. I was born in Brazil, to Brazilian parents and while my father is white my mother is light-skinned but afro-descendent. Her family members proudly identify as Afro-Brazilian but my mother, well, that's complicated.

Another little thing about me – I'm white-passing. Though not enough to escape the "what are you?" questions and "you're so exotic!" comments, my racial ambiguity affords me a certain amount of privilege. However, it's dependent upon the person identifying me (and their motive for doing so).

As we drove away I started to think about how the clerk inside the store and the man who drove up to the pump and went inside, I might still just be “ethnically ambiguous.” Still enough to feel very unsafe walking into an establishment that proudly displays the confederate flag on their window. I also thought about my parents. Their relationship and the byproducts of said relationship (my sister and I) are (one of many things) that proponents of white supremacy loathe. Just knowing that my existence, the interracial relationship that spurred my being, is exactly what they advocate against was... I don't know. I don't know how to describe that feeling.

From that point on we encountered many confederate flags. The Tennessee state flag is also a poor attempt to cover up their confederate-leanings. And what do you see as you leave Tennessee and enter into Virginia? Oh yeah, a giant confederate flag, up on a flagpole, on top of a hill. And every time it seemed to serve as a warning. You are not welcome here. As a Brazilian immigrant who was, at one point, here illegally, that message was not lost on me. Though my racial identity is complex (especially given how the social construction of race in Brazil differs from that of the United States) the feeling of alienation at the sight of such a potent symbol of hate was

**crystal.  
fucking.  
clear.**



*climbing the firenze duomo is crowded. yet rewarding. felt like i'd float off the marble*

## Taking the 36 to Eastern Market

On Saturday, I walk down Massachusetts,  
a slice of brick suburbia with headphoned  
runners and student apartments, and get to the end.  
Leah & I board the bus and ride  
down Wisconsin, where blonde parents push strollers at a sunny street  
fair and couples on brunch patios get tipsy before noon,  
and Leah tells me about her love life.  
She's been dating more, and hasn't found anyone  
great but it's okay because men (she means boys)  
our age are usually down to mess around, which is all  
she wants, too. Someone to touch the small of her  
back during dinner while she talks enough for both  
of them. She's happy, and pointed when we pass  
the bar where Nick remembered her name  
and she wants to go back to have the chance to  
remember his, faces close enough to taste the drink  
on his breath. The bus turns to Pennsylvania  
and the city explodes in fluttering pink: like white would in the frozen  
north. Leah can't stand the spring here,  
doesn't like the crowds, she says as she nods at the restaurant  
where she got mussels with James who has a mortgage and  
and looks like a red-headed Bill Nye.  
I laugh because what else is  
there? I imagine gulping shells of salty flesh with a man  
whose leg touches mine under the table and I get lost in the thought.  
By the time we get to Eastern Market we've already glided back  
onto Pennsylvania, and it's incredible  
how fast Independence comes and goes, we never even  
saw it.

## In Knots

If she went home now she'd be hurrying  
to nowhere in a city where streets were now strings  
laced and tangled, tumbling over each other,  
forging a foreign state. Where there had been bridges,  
  
she'd be tapestries of thread soaked lifeless  
in murky water. Alleys she hadn't been scared of  
twisted to webs, ensnaring and inescapable  
  
like spider silk. She'd look up, for a map  
and find heavy, dull masses populating  
the bright beyond. Jaw tilted skyward, she'd be  
mesmerized by the confusing bruise  
  
of sapphire and onyx. She saw even with closed eyes,  
an imagined omen glittering behind shadows  
she couldn't shake. If she went now,  
  
the streets would never unfurl nor the sky  
turn. Clouds would not drift nor burst  
but remain suspended on clear thread  
above a metropolis brimming with snarled yarn.





*Lo siento. Lo siento.*

We landed in the jungle. I wasn't prepared for the jungle.

The panic seeped in a week before leaving. Stories that were vaguely familiar where people go crazy from their malaria pills, giving one disease for another. The subsequent over-packing that occurs when you have no idea what's going on. I filled my front pouch with the cotton and plastic I was going to need. Too much to close the zipper, enough to deter the male security agent.

*Please just wait. You've done it before.*

I wasn't prepared. My uncle picked me up from the airport in Villahermosa. He warned me while we were in the car. *This is why we drink.*

We drove past the cows with their skin clenched so tightly to their bones and the dogs with pieces of their skin missing. Dogs aren't meant to live in the jungle. Past the speed bumps locals make to slow cars down enough to entice people into buying their plastic bags full of lychee fruit or a nice wooden coat rack. We drove past the migrants stumbling out of the brush. We drove past the AK-47s and the pictures of El Chapo posted on checkpoint walls.

Three days later and we are taking a break from filming to observe. I was told to wear pants. I can only wear pants. The men get patted down and I show my passport. I'm the only asked to show identification. The tables can hold a couple of bottles of beer, a basket of chips, and the cow stomach pico de gallo that is served on a small saucer. Each one just meant to sit two. It's only noon. The women start working at noon. Our friend tells us they weren't trafficked. It's supposed to make this place okay. The women sit in twos or threes around the perimeter of the room wearing skin tight clothing and bright makeup on their eyes. They fold paper napkins. Our order is taken. *Si, gracias.* Twenty pesos, a wedge of lime, a pinch of salt and I am having my first beer.

*Tell her she is pretty.*

I don't remember how to tell someone they are pretty. *No hablo español. Lo siento.* She walks away. Our friend puts some money in the jukebox. *Si, gracias.* We have another round.

My eyes go back and forth between watching the women try for patronage and the Guns N' Roses music videos playing on the big screen hanging on the wall.

*Si, gracias.* We have another round.

Opening a stall in the bathroom to look down into the familiar dilution of red. I go to the other and remember not to flush the paper. My body is still taking care of me. Mine is waiting. I wash my hands and look at the mirror. Just me in a dimly lit bathroom in a brothel in southern Mexico. *Everything is okay.* I remember the blood.

*Si, gracias.* We have another round.

The woman carefully wraps paper napkins around the mouth of our bottles before giving them out. We buy her two more rounds. Better us than the guy buying for the clearly uninterested woman with the discomfort on her face. Two out of the fifty beers required a week. Their quota. Behind me each table is full. It's only 1:30pm.

I remember the blood. I look at their eyes. Everything changed.

## Copenhagen Morning

We are offered nothing, not a map or paper cup of coffee or hello  
until a side of jumbled letters is pushed into our palms. Empty minds bob  
between doors that open automatically and headlines  
that don't mean anything.

Passing schoolyards and seeded fields, we stop at a station, across from a crumbling  
stone house. We see the owner most days, his ashen dogs trace the route  
of boots, and we feel sorry for him because he only sees sky and dirt and train and  
metallic drops that soak his shoes, and we don't think that should be enough.

As we grind into the city, electricity builds. We're children rubbing our socks  
on the carpet and the energy has to go somewhere, if not to the man who  
shakes his cup and plainly asks, change?

We look away from him and see honest-colored rain,  
summer sheets over the line in grandmother's garden.

We wordlessly tell our neighbors, space. We need to come up for air.

We like that they shift, eyes on shoes or devices that mirror  
their faces back in the glare. We can now leave, be free  
of our train, embraced by the humid street

where we pass by bookstores, imagine we can  
read through glass and cardboard covers, taste  
the sweetness of yolky custard on pastries we won't buy, not today  
because it's a workday and a Monday at that.

We're so busy driving our heels into chipped stone  
(which keeps out the worms & water) that we don't even look out  
from under our flimsy nylon shields to see  
what the earth is delivering to us today.

It whispers down now  
and we see it in the shape of the alabaster dogs.  
The sky's tears stick to our skin  
and roll.

## Air Heart

There's nothing like being lost  
that sinking gray  
confusion  
of not knowing

that most people feel  
is the whirl that lifts me,  
yellow and buzzing, into the clouds  
until I can feel the currents  
under Canary's wings.  
What they call lost  
makes my air heart  
spark  
with the burn of discovery.

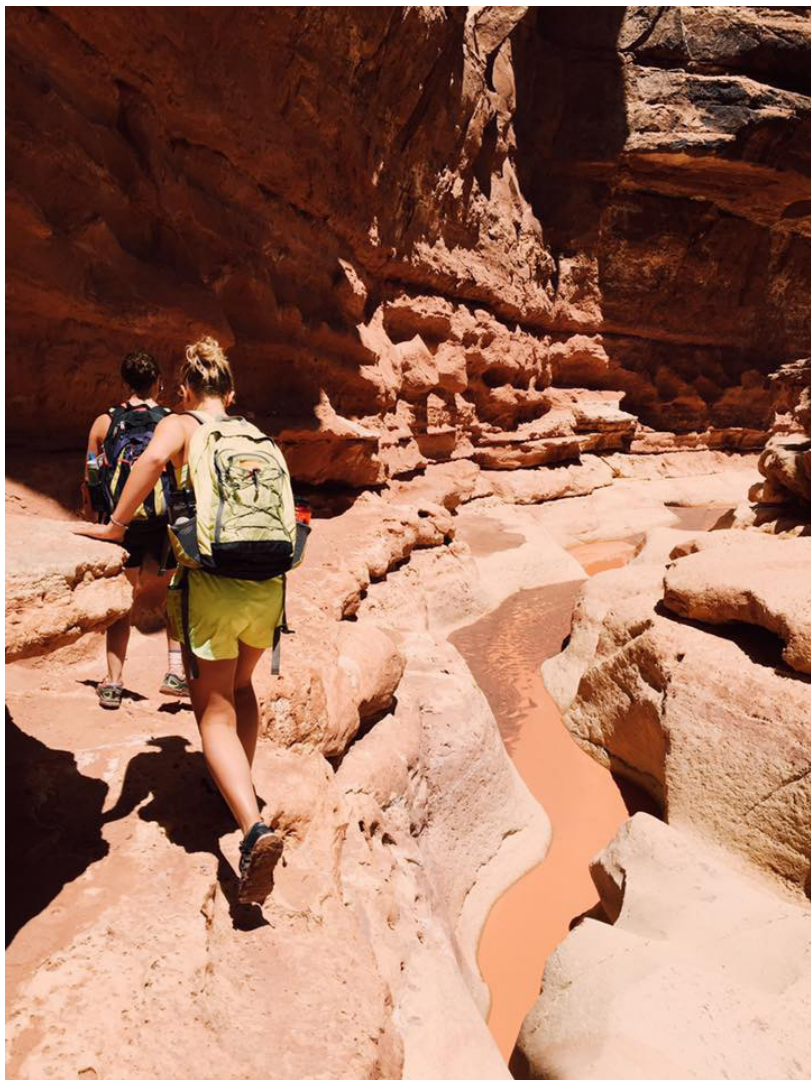
At the helm,  
the endless horizon of ocean is a magnet  
but the same sides repel  
and here I am, above it all.

There's nothing like being lost  
when the fuel gauge is my coalmine  
canary and Point B  
isn't in sight.  
I take a breath,  
can taste the spark  
rising up  
in my throat.  
With this I'm a phoenix  
about to burst  
into flame.

i wrote an 80 page thesis on road trips and this is what i didn't write about:

- i was scared
  - that it wouldn't live up to what i had hyped it up to be
  - that i was being unoriginal
  - that my hpv was going to be a big deal
  - of being alone
- i did feel alone
- i had my period for 36 days in a row on a road trip with me and my dad
  - we never talked about it
  - i wondered if he thinks all women go through so many tampons?
  - thank god we had to stop to put water in the car to stop it from over heating so often
  - my dad never had to use the bathroom until the end of the day
  - we joked that he was a camel
  - what the fuck was wrong with me
- i got a cold from the air conditioning in the hotel rooms every night
  - my thighs stuck to the leather seats in the car
  - i got tan lines on my feet from the heat of the car engine (NOT the sun)
  - in crater lake there was over 10 feet of snow in june
- the bathroom was the only place i had complete privacy
  - I started taking nightly baths for precious alone time
  - and so I could take naked pictures to send to people who didn't really care about me
  - and I would see if i could feel my cervix (because being able to touch it would help me know if I had cervical cancer)
  - i ate kumquats in the tub
- the internet was my second home
  - the space of the car was one transient, intangible space of being and the internet was a familiar place to retreat to
  - like silence
  - i would text him, or if not him than another him, or sometimes another him
  - I spent hours losing myself in other people
  - navigating narratives
  - unfolding on my screen
- the road running beneath us became my friend
  - the blur of red and peach and brown and green a soothing meditation
  - the lines down the middle, making me feel centered
  - a constant, winding through a rapidly changing country
  - i stared at the center lines and blank roadside signs for 56 days in a row
  - now i understand what is to be an american
  - was that convincing
  - i haven't even read On The Road
  - Who Cares?

- we ate hummus and cheese and bread and carrots and kumquats
  - every day
  - my dad thought this was healthy and i thought this was hilarious
  - his perception of healthy food as a grown man
  - versus mine as a girl
  - i sat for two months straight and my muscles deteriorated
  - it fucks me up now to think about my body then
  - the skinniest i have been in my adult life was when i ate whatever was in front of me
  - wasabi peas in the front seat
  - pie everywhere there was pie
  - and sat sweating for days and days
  - i was tan and thin and then we fell in love and don't you think i ever wonder if that was why
  - i know its not why
  - but it probably propelled things in the right direction
  - i can't remember how i felt
  - did i feel better then?
- people thought i was my dad's wife
  - fucked up but pretty unsurprising I guess
- i went to LA and didn't see a single celebrity
  - what a bust
- my dad and i forgot what it was like to be with other people
- i found the perfect pair of pants in Santa Fe
  - my dad and I fought that night and I fell asleep weeping
  - the second time my dad and I walked away from each other
  - opposite directions in an unknown city
- i read seventeen pages of Love in the Time of Cholera in Spanish
  - sometimes coupled in our journeys
  - but our lessons are our own
  - we are all alone
  - endless roads
  - i'm still writing
  - its getting somewhere
- nobody cares about your road trip story
  - no one wants your road trip
  - they want their own
  - everyone wants to forge their own way
  - there is nothing not done
  - there is nothing not cliché
  - you don't know any more
  - its about the journey
  - not the knowing
  - because what more can you even learn
  - what hasn't been said
- the center lines
  - two, solid, together
  - one, with the other wisping away
  - one, single, dotted line, forging off on its own
  - we are all alone



"mount boglia"

i awoke to a dream.

i cannot write words that are not true.  
i did not wake up climbing a mountain  
in Switzerland,  
covered in sweat and  
sweating,  
exhaling sharp  
ly, my hair tied back neatly,  
flies buzzing around my face,  
my arms,  
my ankles.

i cannot deny my limits:  
the ache in my chest. my heart pumping  
too little blood too quickly.  
a proclivity for anxious mapping.  
the lack of patience it takes to climb  
a mountain.

and you,  
disappearing out on the horizon,  
then coming back into focus.  
taking the camera from my neck  
and closing the shutter on me  
some distance ahead.  
my neck long, my head thrown back  
in exhaustion.

and you,  
following swiftly,  
lungs corroded by tobacco but  
breathing easier than I,  
sneakers worn down by daily use  
but picking quickly over pebbles,  
settling on the summit.

and you:  
you can write words that are not true  
you can invent the future, make plans  
you intend not to keep.  
and you,  
drenched and sighing,  
held me against you,  
my breaths slowing,  
the Swiss air cool.

so, an ocd girl walks onto a plane-

i  
wish that  
i could apologize  
to the man sitting  
in the seat next to  
me. a tiny bottle clicks open  
and the smell of alcohol and artificial,  
cloying cucumber melon floats up into the air,  
now once, now twice, now again, again, again, again.

i  
have to  
count in airports.  
i touch every single  
pole that i pass, self-impeding.  
i check for my ticket, again-  
it's location is unchanging. so am i.  
i do not want to count in airports,  
clinging to this like others squeeze hands, scared, queasy.

i  
count because  
it's preventative, preclusive.  
the plane could crash,  
yes, but wait for detonation,  
wait for coughing, wait for the  
crinkle of opening airsickness bags, perennial fixtures  
hiding in every pocket, there to remind me  
that everything here is contained, that nothing gets out.

i  
have never  
once encountered anything  
scarring at all, in-flight.  
all my fears, irrational, delirious  
proven wrong consistently. i whisper to  
myself, "you did good, kid." my reward  
is a stricter regimen. more pressure. more numbers.  
all's well end's well – now repeat that. now, again.

i  
am down  
one bottle of  
hand sanitizer, two pills  
and a liter of water.  
i've moved, point A to B.  
at baggage claim, i wait patiently, normal.  
feet on the ground, my world has settled,  
i tell myself. the bags circle round. one. two.



## Kefi

For four months I lived in an apartment in Athens in a windy little neighbourhood called Pangratti. The streets rise up and down so quickly they sometimes turn into staircases. Everything was and is and will be that quintessential Greek whitewash color. Every apartment was ringed with balconies that encroach on each other and the street below. But my one friend had this balcony that beat all balconies. It was small but could fit four chairs and an ash tray and maybe a pigeon. It looked out into this great cavern of balconies entirely isolated from the outside world. We would spend hours on that balcony with lukewarm beers making kefi.

So there's this Greek word- κέφι. It's one of those words that doesn't translate into English that I began collecting the way the Greeks collect coffee cups. (Because my Greek is poor and halting and piece-meal and I can only really collect the words, rather than use them.)

Kefi is that moment when you're sitting around a table with your friends and the conversation is just kind of hanging. Everyone has had maybe a glass or two of ouzo and feels a little warm, or maybe it's the gas-fired heat lamps they light in every bar or coffee shop. And you all look at each other and have a very slow and still moment where you realize how wholly and fully content you are. These moments are best outside, especially if you can see the acropolis and all its scaffolding lit up. Or it can happen on a dingy balcony where you can't see anything but cigarette butts and hand movements once the sun sets.



## From Bithynia

Hush it's alright now.  
The chocolate milk  
They claim is recovery for the miles  
I've swam from Bithynia, down the Thames, the Hudson, the Schuykill,  
Warms my tongue with syrup.

My trifles you think they are something.  
I am accustomed to think  
You are something.  
Someone please give me  
Generations of miles to swim.

In ancient Rome dear you found me  
Sick from travel and wishing.  
And you smiled waiting while I ordered a caffe con latte  
Grasping for a language generations  
Too young.

Sunshine we've trekked miles.  
Voyages made up of car rides, discourses,  
Trifles.  
Our wishes we hold like lightening bugs,  
Fugio, fugere, fugi, fugitus.

Chocolate milk reminds me  
Of childhood.  
I am told it will strengthen my muscles.  
Our voyage, it is ancient.  
And we have generations of miles to swim.



A woman from the audience asks: ‘Why were there so few women among the Beat writers?’ and [Gregory] Corso, suddenly utterly serious, leans forward and says:

“There were women, they were there, I knew them, their families put them in institutions, they were given electric shock. In the ’50s if you were male you could be a rebel, but if you were female your families had you locked up.

— Stephen Scobie, on the `Naropa Institute’s 1994 tribute to Allen Ginsberg

*My experience on the road was not like Kerouac’s.  
For one thing,  
I am a woman.*

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*Providence, RI:* C. tells us that his girlfriend, A., will be joining us on the trip. I am thrilled about the idea of no longer being the only girl living out of the van this summer. Every time I see A. after that, I tell her how excited I am to have another girl coming with us. “I really needed another lady,” I say, over and over to her, drunk at parties or absentmindedly in C.’s living room. She smiles politely every time, presumably having grander goals for the trip than being “another lady.”

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*Lansing, Michigan (or en route there):* K. — who I have only known two days — makes a joke about the kinds of assholes who tell women to smile. It surprises me when he says this, and then I am surprised at my own surprise; what did I expect? In my mind, the box labeled ‘Feminist?’ next to his name gets checked off, a tangible marker of relief.

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One night, A. and I are getting ready to go out to a bar. It is just the two of us in the guest bedroom, fixing our hair and trying to look cute in clothes that have been stuffed in the bottom of a backpack for the better part of two weeks. We talk about abortion. A.’s candor is so beautiful to me. There is a resoluteness, a strength hardened over time in her conviction but I can sense the weeks of fear and confusion that led to it, in the way her tone shifts, and that makes it all the more beautiful. But I am buzzed off cheap whiskey and can’t figure out how to tell her this, so instead I say she is brave and her work and her words are important. The room seems to shrink until the world is just us, two young women several thousand miles from home, talking as if they are braver, more sure than they are. This may be the moment when I feel the most comfortable on the whole trip.

Later, when there is tension between the two of us, it makes me ache inside. I just want women to take care of other women I write in my notebook.

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*Yellowstone National Park:* A woman – a Park Ranger – hands us each three citations, with a court date in September.  
*I don't generally like to say negative things about other women, I say, but good lord, that woman is absolutely awful. And I hope she is very unhappy. For a long time.*  
*I think all people are equal, I mean I don't generally like to say negative things about anyone, one of the guys says, but yeah, she's a bitch.*  
I think to myself, does that extra twenty-three cents on the dollar fund your ability to “think all people are equal”? Does it pay off the hypocrisy of bragging about your egalitarian mindset while using such a clearly gendered insult?  
Sisterhood (and my pathetic attempts towards honoring some idealistic sense of it), I realize, is threatening to the system that depends on women bringing each other down, and to the men who benefit from it.

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*My boyfriend*  
*read Kerouac for the first time*  
*in college, and*  
*Beat Literature was what made him*  
*finally (finally)*  
*fall in love with literature*  
*(and presumably*  
*with the American Road Trip Narrative)*

*It was around this time that he*  
*watched every documentary on the National Parks*  
*he could find*  
*and started to long for the kind of nature*  
*he couldn't experience*  
*just outside his decaying Baltimore*  
*one-bedroom apartment.*

*“Kerouac's journey is a historical construct,”*  
*my friend*  
*(a scholar of the American Road Trip Narrative)*  
*tells me,*  
*and I am inclined to agree with her*

*yet how many eager white boys*  
*find a way to make it across the country*  
*East Coast to West Coast*

*each year,*  
*chasing that narrative*  
*chasing a sense that they*  
*are Men*  
*are American Men*  
*whose journey*  
*whose experience*  
*means something?*

*How many women's stories are untold?*  
*What historical construct am I chasing?*  
*And if this trip makes American Boys*  
*into American Men*  
*what does it make me?*

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Portland, OR: The music scene here is cool, we hear.

Guy #1: *Yeah but like it sucks sometimes too, 'cause like there's this venue in town and there's a sign there that says you can't take your shirt off because not everyone has, like, the privilege of doing that. And it's so lame and I'm just like, girls can take their shirts off, guys would probably be pumped!*

Guy #2: *Yeah, dude, I think that's the problem, though.*

I laugh.

Later: Four of us sit on P's back porch. We are very drunk. I sip a cheap beer and keep asking to borrow this one guy's lighter. We are talking about feminism. I am the only girl there, debating with three men who keep cutting me off, over and over. Eventually I start to laugh at it; I let them talk at themselves, for themselves, to feel better or justified or exonerated. That one guy with the lighter keeps cutting into my arguments. *I was a Women's Studies minor*, you know he tells me, sneers *So I know who bell hooks is and shit*. I laugh but I am three parts shame: one part, for myself, for backing down over and over; one part, on behalf of this guy, betraying the education he apparently cherishes; one part, for bell hooks, whose legacy is being reduced to a bargaining chip in a drunken argument.

K. defends most of what I'm saying, especially when I am being interrupted. *This kind of proves what she's saying*, though he explains to a group of guys who do not realize that silencing a woman in a conversation about feminism means exactly what it sounds like. I am blind drunk and I keep reiterating how grateful I am for the male feminists in my life. *I need them*, I say. I disgust myself. What I really want to say – but can't get my drunk tongue to stumble over – is this:



*It is really exhausting, trying to be taken seriously as a human being all the time, and I'd appreciate it if some of you guys could pick up the slack.*

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Months later I am at the gym and I thinking about the night in Portland. I am walking up the stairs and I am overcome with the desire to write it out of my system. I think about texting my boyfriend *Is it awful if I write a piece for our zine about gender?* and then I realize I will not send it because I know the answer (*not awful, I just don't know if it will fit with the rest of the stuff*) and I don't want to start yet another fight this week about feminism with a guy who is deeply, truly afraid of being seen as perpetuating the patriarchy. I do not send the message but it is not because I don't care if he or anyone else thinks I am "awful" for writing about life as a woman. I do care. And that scares me.

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*I have tried to read On The Road a few times.  
The first was in high school;  
It was a best friend's favorite book.  
I read a chapter or two by the pool  
in the lazy summer heat,  
decided I  
"couldn't get into it,"  
put it down.*

*Later, when my boyfriend fell in love with the Beats  
and I knew I'd be traveling across the country soon,  
I tried again.  
This time I read most of it,  
struggled through,  
couldn't connect.*

*That was it:  
I wanted to travel,  
and see America,  
and love her,  
and live fast,  
and feel young, but  
nothing in the book connected to me;  
nothing in the book related to me;  
nothing in the book was written for me.*

*It took me a while to realize  
that most of that was because  
I am a woman.*



*"In the fifties you could be a male  
and be a rebel."  
Now I am a rebel, too,  
but that doesn't seem like  
the goal.*

*Whatever I write about my trip to the  
West Coast and back home  
living in a van with  
few real destinations  
will not be a  
woman's version  
of that story.*

*It just won't.*

*It will be something else.*