

## O GIVE ME A HOME

The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation.

The very idea of body implies separation and observation.

- Andrea Rexilius

In the novels and essays and think pieces about New York City, you never really spend much time in the apartment of a character, unless they are very rich or they lucked into real rent controlled pricing, or the diametric opposite, they are destitute and the walls are actively and literally collapsing all around them. But most young New Yorkers, both ones I read about and ones I know, have an absolutely just-fine living situation, maybe without the windows in the kitchen or the shower that they would like, maybe with their bedroom facing the street instead of the quieter alleyway, but cozily adequate. Unless their situation is extreme, the living space is more or less vanishing, because most New Yorkers seem to spend only a small fraction of time in their actual apartment. There are so many work hours and at a restaurant or bar hours, commute and gym time, museum and theatre time, Prospect Park at season change time.

So when I lived in Brooklyn I didn't consider it at all strange that I had only seen the apartments of my very closest friends and my longer-term lovers. Why meet at an apartment when we could people-watch on a bar patio, or take the train to some weird part of the city we'd never explored, or just move through the streets with a bottle of wine emptied into our Hydroflasks? Personal space, back then, in that Brooklyn, was just a charging station, something required but ultimately ancillary. Something that existed mainly to afford you access and proximity to the spaces where you really did your living.

There were many things about New York that I planned ahead to miss and mourn. City architecture, Xian's Famous, my community in Bushwick, and all the access. Access to just anything, whenever. Instead, three months after I arrived in Missoula, where I would live for almost precisely two years while I earned my MFA, America's 45th president was elected, and the slate of mournable conditions I felt forced to perceive in the aftermath — which we are still experiencing — began growing

daily, each list item accruing a dozen caveats and subheadings like the David Foster Wallace novel I have long vowed never to read. But I couldn't ignore this new American narrative, because it was impossible to ignore my physical body in Montana, and the gaze applied to it.

It came down to something very simple and profoundly crushing: Montana could never be a home to me. There were too many ways that we fundamentally repelled and resisted each other. I felt constantly reminded of my errantness. A lot of it was shallow, like the way my wool pea coat and heeled Docs were almost formal campus oddities compared with the ubiquity of puffer vests and Blundstones. Sometimes it was cringeworthy, like the time a bartender insisted I'd already closed my tab and it turned out she had given my credit card back to a different woman of color in my program who looks nothing like me, not even in the dark. And every so often there were jarring acts of ingrained racism, like during a July visit from my parents, one of them South Asian and the other Mediterranean, all of us extra summer-bronzed. We waited twenty minutes at a popular seat-yourself brewery for the waitress to finish chatting animatedly to the white family at the next table, and the smile dropped off her face when she turned to us and asked if we needed anything else before we left.

I had many visitors in those two years, most of them my New York friends who had never considered venturing to, and who lovingly berated me for choosing, even temporarily, to live in a place so redly remote, more full of cows than people. Turns out there are so many variations of the question, Isn't it somewhere in the middle? Like Nebraska? But I'd become, against my will and expectations, good at living in Western Montana. I showed it to all of my visitors in its most brilliant spring and summer light, cooked them bright fresh meals with my CSA bounties, brought them to the best hip-adjacent restaurants I didn't usually let myself indulge on my stipend.

And I told them about the geography we moved through. I knew which mountain ranges we passed through to get to Glacier National Park or the Bitterroot Valley, didn't need Google maps to take us to the National Bison Range or to the hot springs just over the line in the Idaho panhandle. I'm terrible with directions, and maybe because of this I am obsessed with feeling completely familiarized in

the places that I live. In New York this meant mastering the subway maps or unfalteringly navigating the ungridded West Village. In Montana, it meant knowing land. That word had never meant something like that to me before.

I was too good. I made everyone who came to see me love that land. They fantasized about leaving the city, buying real estate, working less and affording more, having chickens and mountain views from their expansive yards. I had somehow become a kind of person Annie Dillard wrote about: the loving knowledgeable, who can see a place so well they can make others know and love it too.

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These friends who came, they all were white. Maybe I didn't have to say that for you to know it. Maybe the fact that they didn't have to filter these fantasies through the what-ifs of raising mixed kids or feeling unsafe on public trails told you that. Or that they could conjure up Manifest Destiny-adjacent fantasies in 2017 to begin with.

Their dreaming, it hurt me. There's no way to avoid admitting it. My awareness of my body, of the way the people of Montana were determined to receive it, had slipped its bounds, moved from inner to outer. It got all over everything. I was becoming one of those people who are quietly abhorred for not allowing anybody else around me to let their personal condition go unchecked. If I had to think about what I was denied, you had to be uncomfortable about why you could have it.

I love Montana, but I couldn't do it in public. I was jealous of their freedom to do so, and of the knowledge their love could be mutual in a way mine wasn't, and of the probability that they would get to know and experience that land in a way I never fully would. I was jealous and also ashamed, because I was close to 30 years old and only just becoming aware of the way so many people are made to move through the world: with others always trying to convince them it will never be theirs.

How can I tell you, if you haven't felt it in your body, what it means to love a place which, with its whole body, resists you?

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I used to fall asleep on the subway, used to walk home the 40 minutes from Williamsburg to Bushwick in what was either the middle of the night or the very early morning. Logistically, usually, it is very hard to stop off in the middle of a day at one's apartment, and for this reason everyone acquires many satellite homes in the city: preferred bookstores, dive bars, or cafés for passing half an hour, your favorite library branch, your deli in the neighborhood where you work and the one where you live, the part of your park with the sunniest or shadiest benches, depending. What I'm trying to say is that all the parts of my New York felt inherently and uncomplicatedly available to me.

My New York was comfortable, I know. After the first scrambling two years, I settled into longer-term jobs I was confident I'd only have to leave if I wanted to, made enough money to save some each paycheck, lived and worked in gentrifying neighborhoods full of young people of all stripes. And my New York may have been accessible, but that didn't mean it was safe. I got followed home by men who'd yank viciously on my building's outer door just seconds after I managed to pull it shut, had multiple yellow cab drivers pull their dicks out on me, came out of a blackout, once, in an unfamiliar apartment with nobody I knew in sight.

The difference being, largely, that all these idiot things were mine for the choosing. Nobody in New York, and nobody in Southeast Michigan before that, had ever told me that just my half-brownness, just my able and lightly tinted body, was inherently a problem, a bar on experiences. In Missoula at dusk I removed my headphones for peak awareness, or better yet drove, even from my apartment to the café I liked downtown, though there were just four blocks between them. In Missoula I was older, less reckless, that's part of it. But there were also certain bartenders that would ignore me until they saw me chatting with one of the more burly guys in my cohort; a street preacher who widened his eyes and turned his back to me instead of offering me a tiny Bible; all the pale men on Tinder pictured laying their favorite weapon across the body they killed with it.

I'm saying again: I had three decades without ever feeling that way. Some people never get one conscious day.