



In the mono-cropped suburbs of Phoenix I suffer from the sameness, wondering at what it is that makes an American feel safe inside the asphalt. Whole Foods, Home Depot, Costco, Kinko's, Ross. Whole Foods, Home Depot, Costco, Kinko's, Ross. Whole Foods, Home Depot, Costco, Kinko's, Ross. I know there is soil somewhere beneath the concrete casing, but what else is beneath it, quietly waiting? What art is frozen there, what revolutionary ideas? No, creativity can't germinate here.

And now we're in Sedona, at a campsite by a creek. The wilting songs in me have sprung back to life. The sun is playing on the current as it swells around some pebbles. Tonight we play at a chocolaterie where the seats are hammocks hung from pinion trees! Oh, the variety of each day's work! The variety of every friend that rises up from the crowd to throw their arms around you -- your souls have already met in the ether between the stage and the seating. They shook hands hours ago when the lights dimmed, and everyone tuned in, and the notes let go from the throats and the hands, and the words tore from the band like a page from *The Real Book*.

Yes, you've got new friends before you step off stage, and they open their home, and their innermost hopes, and seeing that you are a collector of dreams, ignite, sharing unique perspective and insight. Every deal is cut with trust, and every move with wanderlust, and here, come with me I know the ropes, I work the boats, you don't get sea-sick, do you? And now it's a new place, and we're meeting hopeful eyes on another new face, songs by a fire in the Midwestern plains, peacocks barking operatic and shrill, smoke swirling up to the crisp stars.

It's so nice to meet you. You need a ride? Come with us. Bring your instrument. Share the front seat with me. Here. Put your foot here and we'll all fit. Stuff the ukelele up on the dash, or hold it in your lap. In your lap on my lap. Sorry, it smells like dirty clothes in here. Can you grab the steering wheel while I take a bite of this burrito? Mexican is the only local shop on this stop. Hey, on this one, too. Where's the main strip? It's all corporate bullshit except the main strip. Whole Foods, Home Depot, Costco, Ross. Look, there's a Mexican joint, a bean burrito is always a safe bet. No, don't get gas yet, we can make it to the next gig. This one's a theater, we'll sell some schwag. Get a good tank tomorrow. Promoter said it took 'em two days to set up the lighting rig. Jesus! We just need one condenser mic, that's all.

Gentleman in line wanted to know what kind of guitar I play. I told him it was a fancy case for a rifle. Think you can beat that bully with your banjo? Just if we need to, of course. Alright, let's hit it, sister. We're late for sound check, we'll run those harmonies in the car. Think you can swing it this time without a chart? Here, let's cut that one from the set list til we've got it just right. There go the stage lights, the dust is streaming up from the dance floor, burning up on the blue bulbs. I can't see anyone but the girl in the front row with the cell phone glow on her forehead. Her eyes are illuminated vacancies traced with red. Look, lady, we could be friends. Turn off, tune in. There we are, now we're starting to win 'em. They're holding their breath, you can hear a pin drop, that's what my mom always said. Kiss the mic, honey, let me hear your words, now. Enunciate. Smile more. Don't stop smiling unless you're singing about dying. Show them your soul. With you mouth closed they can't see it, and they sure as hell can't hear it. That sounds stiff. Slur it. Take a bigger breath, resonate, make it all the way through the end of the phrase. You'll feel it a few bars in, even if you start out fakin' it. There it is. Three hours sleep can't compete with this adrenalin. Bearded boy by the ticket booth says he lives in a tree house. Wanta see it? Sure, let me pack up the merch case, there's nobody buying CDs --

already they've forgotten we made 'em feel that way.

They're all at the bar now, spending their money on something they can taste. Your order's up, Frank! Frank! Your order's up. These days people don't spend much on their ears. The waiter drops the plate on the table like a turd in a toilet. Shit man, I wouldn't eat that. Can you pay us fifty extra instead of this drink tab? Dude in the corner just gave us an eighth of pot and high-tailed it out the door. Didn't even tell me his name. Said he liked the song about "Turn Myself in Monday." Car's all packed now. No, we aren't sisters. Sure does feel like it, though. Thanks for having us, see you in six months. Yes, it's a D-35. Bye now.

Gig tomorrow's in a barn, the Dobro player said Pete Seeger lives down the street. He's pickin' us up at the station in Easton. No, not Pete Seeger. The Dobro player. His name's Dave. Ah, I can't believe it! I lost the ticket. Sir, I just bought the ticket two minutes ago. It must have fallen out of my pocket, see how loose my pockets are? Ok, pass the instruments up, there's room on this luggage rack back here. No, no Mam', we can't check them. Look, this guitar was my old man's, OK? It's the only thing I care about in the whole world. Yes, it'll fit, I promise. I've put it up there a million times. Gentleman in the seat behind wants to know what kind of music we play. I don't know, man, go to the website. here's a sticker. Yeah, a stupid sticker. I don't know where to put it either, I put 'em on my old man's guitar case, show him I've been all over the place just like him. But if I didn't play guitar, I don't know what I'd do with it. Toss it out, probably. Or put it in a bathroom stall, or give it to a kid. The city scape is flying by the window. Whole Foods, Home Depot, Costco, Kincos, Ross. Construction. Trash stuck in the rail road ties. Branches. Brush. Branches. Shadows. Light. Shadows. Light. Shadows.

Negatives on a reel.

Gig tomorrow's in a barn, where a thousand hats are hanging on the walls. I bet Dave will sit in with us for a tune, he and I used to play four days a week in Harvard Square, at this Irish Pub. Til the owner found out I wasn't 21. That was the end of that gig! I lived in Mission Hill then, by all the hospitals. The sirens came right in, kept me company. No, go ahead, get some rest. I know you've been carrying that 40 pound banjo baby all around the city. I used to lug my guitar up a big old hill and four flights of stairs. Always outta wind when I got to the top. But I felt like my dad, never went anywhere without my guitar, just like him. No, I know. Get some rest. We'll be up late tonight. Dan's a crazy cat, man. He plays everything but the tuba, even plays the tractor. I swear. This jam'll last til sunrise.

We live in the in-betweens, you and me. When they're working, we're sleeping. When they're playing, we're working. When they're sleeping, we're playing. Under a set of stars so sharp you could cut your forehead on them. Oh, I'd love to sing that one! Let me try. Jeeze, I don't think I can remember it. My finger's can't find the frets. Songs die, you know, if you don't play them. You gotta play them or they die. I gotta whole new crop now, try this one. You'll like this one. You said you want an autograph?!? Nah, man, you don't want an autograph. We're just buds. Who the hell invented the autograph?

And then it all slams to a stop.

You're smacked in the face with the stillness while doing something like watching a spider squirm inside a mason jar on the south window sill.

You're doing something like dusting off books, or watching a square pool of light crawl across the tile floor and shift into a diamond as the day dies

You're standing at the kitchen window drinking tea while a bobcat stalks through the garden at dusk

You're seeing the spotlight moon rise through a stage curtain of clouds, listening to the

typewriter-striking-the-paper sound. It's just like the slow clap of a solitary audience member in Fresno, that gig you played last week and a thousand million years ago

Friends ask how the tour was.

You say, "good."

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*For more short stories written by Gabrielle Louise, please visit her [Cowbird Diary](#).*