

Midwest Molting

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When I tell people I'm from Richmond, they ring with recognition.

"Oh! Virginia?"

It's an easy assumption to make. Richmond, Indiana isn't a tourist destination. It's squat within the Bible and Rust Belt. Its local identity has been blanched by franchises that stretch for miles along State Route 40. McAlister's and Dick's Sporting Goods have tip-toed Richmond into modernity, but its roots in agriculture are still present. Farmers park in front of Auto Zone or Rent-a-Center to sell produce from the back of their vans.

To its credit, jazz and blues enthusiasts might make the pilgrimage to Richmond for the Starr-Gennett Walk of Fame. Gennett, a subsidiary of the Starr Piano Factory, recorded Louis Armstrong, Hoagy Carmichael, and Blind Lemon Jefferson, to name a few. Their mosaiced faces sit in vinyl-shaped medallions along the sidewalk that spans the old Starr Piano Factory site. All that remains is a smokestack and a corner of the building, still marked by Gennett's faded logo. Starr-Gennett Foundation uses the locale to host the Richmond Shakespeare Festival in the summer. But, the area is still just known locally as "The Gorge."

I tried to swill up some pride for this between dollar drafts of Killian's I drank the winter before I received a response from University of North Carolina Wilmington. I stumbled into bed, feeling bubbly. I fell asleep easily. But, I woke when the streetlamps still smeared the bedroom ceiling. The streets were silent, and my thoughts rocked back and forth with alcohol.

As a teenager, I assumed I'd leave Richmond to pursue a career as a musician or to dig for dinosaur bones in Montana; it also wouldn't be so bad if I never left. My family lives there. There are three art galleries, two bowling allies, and a movie theatre. I was proud of my Bachelors' degrees from Indiana University East and Smiley's, the Irish style dive.

That winter, the truth finally bore over me like cellophane, forcing my eyes open at night and robbing me of the will to live. Music is Richmond's legacy, but Gennett Records also produced records for The Klan. With cash upfront and its name absent from the label, Gennett pressed thousands of "vanity records" for the Logansport Ku Klux Klan Quartette. This fact was casually slipped into now-forgotten context, but my perception of my hometown as a wholesome cultural hub deflated. I saw murals of jazz figures in Richmond's depot district and couldn't tweeze apart pride for their presence, and shame of backdoor dealing.

I kept a mental count of all the local artists I knew. They all left for Indianapolis, Cincinnati, or Dayton, it seemed, or else they kept their dreams glass-cased at the back of their minds to revel in after hard days of work, always thinking: someday.

My partner, Chris, and I had visited Wilmington in November 2016, just over a month before my application was due—his due shortly after. We wanted to know if we could stand living there for a few years, but we didn't expect how much we'd love UNC Wilmington's campus, the beaches, and the thriving local businesses. There was palpable energy in the crowds surrounding street buskers as they performed on cobbled streets and there were more breweries downtown than all of Richmond. I imagined fishing trawlers hauling in fresh caught oysters, grouper, and crab. There appeared to be more passion.

More coffee. More bikes. Definitely more racial diversity than I'd grown up with. By comparison, Richmond was stale. It was titillating to be surrounded by the unfamiliar.

The drive back to Richmond hurt, like there was a half of me in Wilmington and I was being stretched—stretched all the way to where I sat in the passenger seat as we crossed the bridge from West Virginia back into Ohio, then into Indiana. As Chris drove, I reassessed every word I'd ever written as if they were the coins that would buy me a lunch every Friday at Pilot House on the Cape Fear Boardwalk.

When we got home to our little apartment in Richmond, I hunched over my writing. I wrote in a bath robe over a sweatshirt, the hood of which became blinders, and revised my samples until I couldn't remember the original order of the words, but got lost in the webs of spaces between them. At the first of the new year, I submitted it to a committee of people I'd never seen. Then, I stared at the ceiling in the middle of the night and thought of the Spanish Moss that dripped from Angel Oaks limbs and the crystalized tinkling of sand as the wind tossed it into reeds.

When Chris and I were accepted into our respective programs, our families tried to be supported but did wonder aloud why we didn't pick a school closer. I can't remember if I told them it was because my aspirations were pressing against my brain like it was a husk. I know I didn't tell them I often thought about death before I received my acceptance letter, nor the way I didn't attempt suicide, but imagined swerving head-on into traffic.

One of the last times I visited my Grandma before moving to Wilmington, a bag of peaches from the Rent-a-Center farmer sat on the floor between us.

"You want some of these to take with you, hun?" she asked, rocking in her chair.

“To be honest, I probably wouldn’t eat them.”

She chewed on her peach in silence for a moment.

“We should do that corn maze before you leave me,” she said.

“Yeah, we should.” I was surprised how much I meant it. Grandma had been suggesting it for years, but we’d never made the decision to just do it. The corn maze was quintessential to Richmond; participating in it days before I moved across country felt like a ceremonial parting—a bittersweet divorce. Yet, the moment passed, and I left my Grandma’s without mentioning it again.

The first few weeks in Wilmington was memorable for the number of times I nearly killed us driving in heavy traffic. The late summer’s heat and humidity stunned my energy until I dripped onto the cool carpet. There were near misses by hurricanes, and when it rained, our lane flooded with ankle deep water. On clear nights, our neighbors held block parties in the apartment complex’s parking lot. Their laughter pounded on our windows but rather than filling me with its brightness, it only emphasized how uncomfortable our apartment still felt. Our cat, Winston, paced the length of it when we tried to sleep; back and forth, he meowed to the ceiling. He scratched at doors, and his efforts to hide in cupboards resulted in *bump, bump, bumping* until he opened them wide enough to squeeze inside. When the semester began, there were awkward introductions to the talented MFA students and faculty. Consequent inferiority complex and smatterings of existential crises. When our Fall Break came, I was ready to go home to Richmond—to be familiar with something again.

We were driving west on US-35, where West Virginia turns into Ohio. The hills straightened out into plains that rolled out like a rug, miles in every direction. Cornfields covered the horizon in swaths.

“Have you ever been in a corn maze?” Chris asked.

“I haven’t,” I said.

I thought about the farmer’s market just outside Richmond’s city limits. It hosts the corn maze every year. The words didn’t quite make it to my mouth, but I almost told him about how famous it is. They get local sponsors, and the top contributors have their logos or portraits mowed down in the cornfield. Every year the locals wait in anticipation to see what the tractors have created next and when pictures are finally taken from above, it’s front page news.

I was not proud of this before now.