

*creature  
of habit*



*By Carmel Mikel ...*



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I.

My father wouldn't tell me much about that season he spent in California. The bohemian poets unwittingly inspiring an entire generation to march into Haight-Ashbury like it was some kind of Promised Land. Hungry-eyed hippies slinging the Berkley Barb for a few cents profit on the prospering American street corners. Sweet little Daddy's girls made free, free, free, braless and flowered in dresses cut from stranger's clotheslines. Beautiful people getting lost and ugly on newly discovered escapism and old-fashioned survivalism.

He was among them I suppose. He told me he met Allen Ginsberg in San Francisco that summer. That was a large enough story for me. Ginsberg, Dylan, Kerouac: they were my Goliath, Wizard of Oz, Prince Charming. I grew up without Walt Disney. And without television.

I met a woman from Philadelphia who shared a silent hour in meditation with Mr. Ginsberg. And a man who stumbled upon him sitting alone in a basement in Toronto contemplating the purity of water. They spoke at length about how to dig an artesian well. Still, I wonder what Ginsberg said to my father.



To worship those aching men of the past  
who spilled their words into dying bottles  
crept like mourning hunters  
to the edges of convention  
to be called originals  
once.

To kneel at the feet of the thinkers  
or weep at their graves  
To lay flowers like widows do for soldiers.

To walk in the early hours of morning  
the streets where they hummed their first revolutions  
into tin can telephones  
and paralyzed 45's.

To caress their monuments  
called books  
To play lovers imaginary  
invent the texture of their skin.

To believe we can know them  
from 8mm reproductions  
still black and white  
and utterly alone.

The gods of the letters  
that strangle and taunt and inhabit  
my adolescent efforts  
holy though they seem  
still so small in comparison.



II.

I collected all my father's journals after he died. I read them slowly, his scrawl unfurling before me like a familiar but foreign language. Searching, searching. The nuns forced his right hand, punished his left. So he wrote poorly, but right-handed. Still, nothing on Ginsberg.

There was the Louisiana story. The women dancing in sweaty clubs all cluttered up along the French Quarter. The kind one who gave him a cigarette and a slice of pie when he was starving and heated up and in debt passed his last few dollars for a dirty room and creaking record player and I always wondered what her name was but he never told me that either. The mad pulse of the country he was born to, where his Polish mother died alone in a sanitarium with blood in her lungs but very clean bed sheets, where his father bought Cadillacs and sold immaculate kitchens to promising young families in the suburbs, where his first blonde-haired love left him for his best friend in an all-American love story and so he ran away to Canada. There was, of course, also the war.

I'm left handed.



## Creature

I'm a creature of habit I'm a creature of spite  
I've got my hands on the rails and my face in the light  
I lean toward irreverence with a flirtatious eye  
I give it, I take it, I lack compromise

I've got my ear to the ground for that first little sign  
The pounding of pavement a tug on the line  
My heart beats unanswered it beats till it dies  
Forsake my wisdom and forfeit my mind

I just want to make you mine

I've read all the holy, the spirit's advice  
Whispered in secret on the last breath of life  
If that road's leading somewhere it's a fool hearted guide  
It walks on a razor and sleeps on its side

I just want to make you mine

I'll pass on patience I'll pass on pride  
And the virtuous pains that pleasure denies  
I'll take that lashing like a criminal might  
With a nod to my left and a wink to my right

I just want to make you mine





### III.

I was fourteen the year we sold our farm, packed our Jeep and drove to America. We toured through my father's old neighbourhood where trees had been removed for parking lots and cornfields razed for shopping centers. It wasn't the same, he kept saying, his left arm out the gaping car window in the oppressive Midwest summertime.

We traveled the interstate through the Land of Lincoln to his old friend's house. In boarding school he'd taught my father to hold a lit cigarette between his teeth and smoke it behind closed lips where the nuns wouldn't catch him. He was an engineer now. He cooked us sweet corn on the barbeque and I thought him so exotic. Maybe I should have asked him about Ginsberg. But he wore pressed khakis. I just knew he'd never met him.

I ate the corn cautiously, imprinting my buttery fingers into the crisp cloth napkins. Was this really where my father came from? That city lay right on the banks of Lake Michigan and stretched out carelessly, row after row, in redundant square blocks.

We can talk the politics of war  
but it's all been said before  
this earth is just a bloody floor  
soaked and stained in metaphor  
built on the bones of patriotic lore

You can sit in television screens  
inventing nationalized dreams  
but it's all a corporate scheme  
to go in dirty and come out clean  
colonize them and call them free

All the money you've been spending  
on building lies and building weapons  
I'd take your scraps I'd take you seconds  
to pay the bills they've been sending  
hard working women aren't worth defending

Corruption hides behind the steeple  
religion cannot save the people  
we may have been created equal  
but this world has become evil  
it kills the brave, enslaves the feeble

There're people going hungry on the streets  
people dying from the love disease  
people killing their own babies  
people drinking, sunk in revelries  
people being born infant fatalities

Now there's this academic scam  
that says the world is what I am  
I can change the shape with my two hands  
just claim the people then claim the land  
democracy is on demand

*Twenty Something Girl*

I don't see it, I'm not seeing  
what you're selling as believing  
the weather's changing without season  
and you're still trying to spin the reason  
you beat the truth down till it's not breathing

All the ills that ail this nation  
healthcare and immigration  
the welfare state and education  
interest rates and inflation  
pedophiles on probation  
a sexualized liberation  
evolution or creation  
and congressmen in conversation  
blame this bloody situation  
on miscommunication

Cancer's killing my own father  
invisible cellular slaughter  
and he still smiles at his granddaughter  
says, "it must be something in the water."  
she just laughs, says "let's play doctor."

I'm just a twenty something girl  
a citizen of this hot world  
I'm just a twenty something.



Canadian border. I guess he chose

#### IV.

He left Chicago in August, 1968. The next day that  
hot city erupted. Kids bled in the streets while my  
father cut a steady line north to the Canadian border.  
I guess he chose a different kind of march.

Ginsberg howled. My father walked quietly across the  
border, tipped his hat, promised to be an electrician  
or some similarly useful tradesman and uttered a  
shaky farewell to America for the next 25 years. I  
still believe it broke his heart somehow.



## Leaver

I know what I am  
I'm a grave-digging baby  
I'm a badly broken heart  
I'm half of what I could be  
And half the other part

I'm a leaver

I know who I am  
I'm a train-hopping sweetheart  
I'm a feather in your cap  
I'm so far from the truth  
I ain't ever coming back

I'm a leaver

You better don your Sunday best  
Better get your sins confessed  
Better bathe in that water till every inch of you is blessed  
Cause I'm a leaver

You know who I am  
I'm twice the fool that you are  
But I'm three times as brave  
I'm a clock that's ticking baby  
I'm a walking hopeless case

I'm a leaver.



V.

Then, those first few months, the glamour of his liberty curling at the corners beneath the humid fingerprint of Toronto. Two weeks in Rochdale washing dishes for the kids, hippy dissidents scarfing down meals and spitting political rhetoric out onto their emptied plates. Billy, who worked the dryers, hitched a ride east to Quebec with my father at the wheel, still looking for his freedom.

Thirty years later he drove my little brother and I down a crumbling highway in southern Quebec. He stopped in front of a crippled house hunched at the back of a field and said: "That's where I met your mother."

I tried to imagine it. There's a line in one of my father's poems - something about writing love letters in the snow. I stole it once and put it into my own song. My mother still says it's her favourite one.

The Eastern Townships of Quebec welcomed him and a thousand other homesteaders, draft dodgers, and city kids high on the organic dream. But even the quaint, stone houses, the supple farm fields, the generously shared dandelion wine, and the intoxicating dance of French curse words circling late night bonfires, was not the Canada my father sought.

It was farther east.

Tell me  
where will it be?  
in the cover of dark  
the broad shoulders of midnight  
the cool shrug of dusk?

No, little one,  
it will be in the bare sunlight  
the cold heat of noon  
the broad space of midday  
that you are found  
and finally freed.



VI.

I wear my father's flannel shirts sometimes. They're too big but they're warm. I'm convinced I'll unbutton a chest pocket one morning and find a scrap of paper, a scribbled on napkin, the back of an old postcard. It will tell me something, I know it.

"I met him in Union Square," it will say. Or "A.G. had a cough but was a decent guy." Or maybe: "Shared a smoke with Ginsberg and never said a word."

There must be other secrets. Omissions. There is, perhaps, a whole man I never got to know. My father was so quiet sometimes. Even in his rants over roast beef dinners pushed aside for the six o'clock news, in his huffing and sighing at the sound of combat-zoned reporters crackling through the AM airwaves like a surreal seismograph panting out the beat of the earth's collective discomfort, in his sermon-like monologues on the strangling of justice and the corruption of kindness, even in his loudest voice he was half somewhere else. Somewhere inside. And as a little girl, I'd lift his great, calloused hand into mine and pick away at the skin, hardened and dried from work out of doors, just to get closer to that secret place.





## Some where Else

I keep your secret, I won't breathe a word  
I know sometimes the truth hurts  
But I've been wondering what it's all worth  
To stay alive when the pain survives  
Longer cause it's stronger than I am

I find myself somewhere else when you're around  
Cause loving you is the hardest thing I do  
Day in and day out  
Loving you

I never listened when they told me to  
I never believed I'd ever go through  
Something like this, if only I knew  
When I was young, looking for someone  
I was younger, I was stronger than I am now

Sometimes I want to hide  
Instead of stare down your pride  
And tear your heart from my hands  
I know you've never been easy, you've never been kind  
You had me dizzy, you had me blind

I find myself somewhere else when you're around  
Cause loving you is the hardest thing I do  
Day in and day out  
Loving you



## VII.

They worked hard, my mother and father. Wrestled that one hundred and twenty acre plot of stony fields and thick coniferous woods. Made children and bread. Fixed the wire fences ten thousand times where stubborn calves shoved their eager heads through for greener grass.

Cape Breton Island. Where, after a few months of searching down lost dirt roads along the Atlantic seacoast, my father found his Canada and bought it with three thousand dollars, a tired old Willies Jeep, and my mother at his side.

I was born there. And still the scent of Timothy hay is enough to bring me back.





## Made

There's a sweet little mama on the radio  
singing to america  
she's the blondest little bombshell you'll ever know  
she's bound to make you stare at a  
picture of her standing next to mister so and so

There's a skinny little chic on a paperback  
she got a story worth a million bucks  
she'll take all of her clothes off if you turn your back  
while she shows it to the rest of us  
and we'll pay her for the pleasure of giving us a laugh

There's a thousand little people on the street  
they're all waiting for the next big show  
somebody wants to put them all on tv  
and now they're dying just to let us know  
that most of us are busy wasting our humanity

Better take your money, better put it somewhere safe  
I hear the boys are undercover  
and the banks are on the take  
And the whole wide world's about to be made

There's a fortune five hundred watching me  
writing my habits down  
they got a pretty little packaged guarantee  
they can buy me and then sell me out  
cause everybody wants to be what everybody wants to be

There's a satellite sailing overhead  
disguised as a shooting star  
it's breathing like a bully right down our necks  
and it knows just where we are  
so if you want to stay alive well you better play dead  
cause there's a pack of wild dogs just waiting to be fed

There's a world full of trouble and hypocrisy  
I don't even want to hear about  
the profiteering patriarchs are fast asleep  
they leave the rest of us to figure out  
who to trust like a brother or treat like an enemy

## VIII.

There was one more place to look. He kept a line of books on the ledge above his desk. The same ones had been there for years, growing pale and rigid in the window light.

First, an old Webster's dictionary, the color of rust and held together with tape. Inside, underlined words he'd intended to use more often: flibbertigibbet, dithyramb, flippant. Next, Longfellow's "Evangeline".

*When on the falling tide the freighted vessels departed,  
Bearing a nation, with all its household goods, into exile,  
Exile without an end, and without an example in story.*

Then, The Book of Job, torn from that larger book and duct-taped inside the hard shell of what was, according to the embossed cover, a diary booklet from 1973. Job IV:19 marked with a pencil: "High and low are there alike, the slave is free from his master."

Of course, there was also that little red leather mess of recycled paper I'd sewn together by hand when I was ten and proudly deemed a "poetry book." That little girl's gift was wedged in right between Longfellow and Job, like I'd been prescribed some good, classic suffering so that one day I might grow up into a real poet.

Ah, but not a word from the beat poets. Not even a whisper from good old A.G.



## Lion or Lamb

I was born in the middle of the night  
the sound of my voice screaming for life  
My mama just a body pale and white  
giving her spirit to the golden light  
My daddy shot dead by a jealous gun  
me just a wailing oh an orphaned son

Old Fort Betty was a coward's town  
cut through by a river and nearly drowned  
No good man dare stick around  
for fear he'd be sold off pound for pound  
My mama was a sweetheart, a caged little bird  
the only sweet sound that town ever heard

My Daddy was born in that heartless place  
with the wounds and the scars and the lines on his face  
Set like a hound in a hunting race  
steal your last penny and kill for your ace  
He'd never sweet talk you and he'd never dance slow  
took my mama like a freight train whistle blows

I was raised on a maple switch  
taught good from evil with forty licks  
Till that widow took me home from the orphanage  
saying "No God's son oughta live like this"  
The swallows just hummed in their nesting eaves  
and I slept like a baby 'neath her warm pine trees

Now folks they whispered and carried on  
saying I must be the lucky one  
Then they held their breath for the years to come  
Fearing I'd be my father's son

A child grows up into a man  
whether he wishes or whether he can  
He don't choose the blood coursing through his hands  
beast or beauty, lion or lamb  
They say my mama prayed hard on her dying breath,  
"let him lead a short life and have a peaceful death."

## I Miss the Moon

I miss the cherry trees  
I miss the moon  
Barefooted city streets  
High noon  
Almost everything  
Almost me

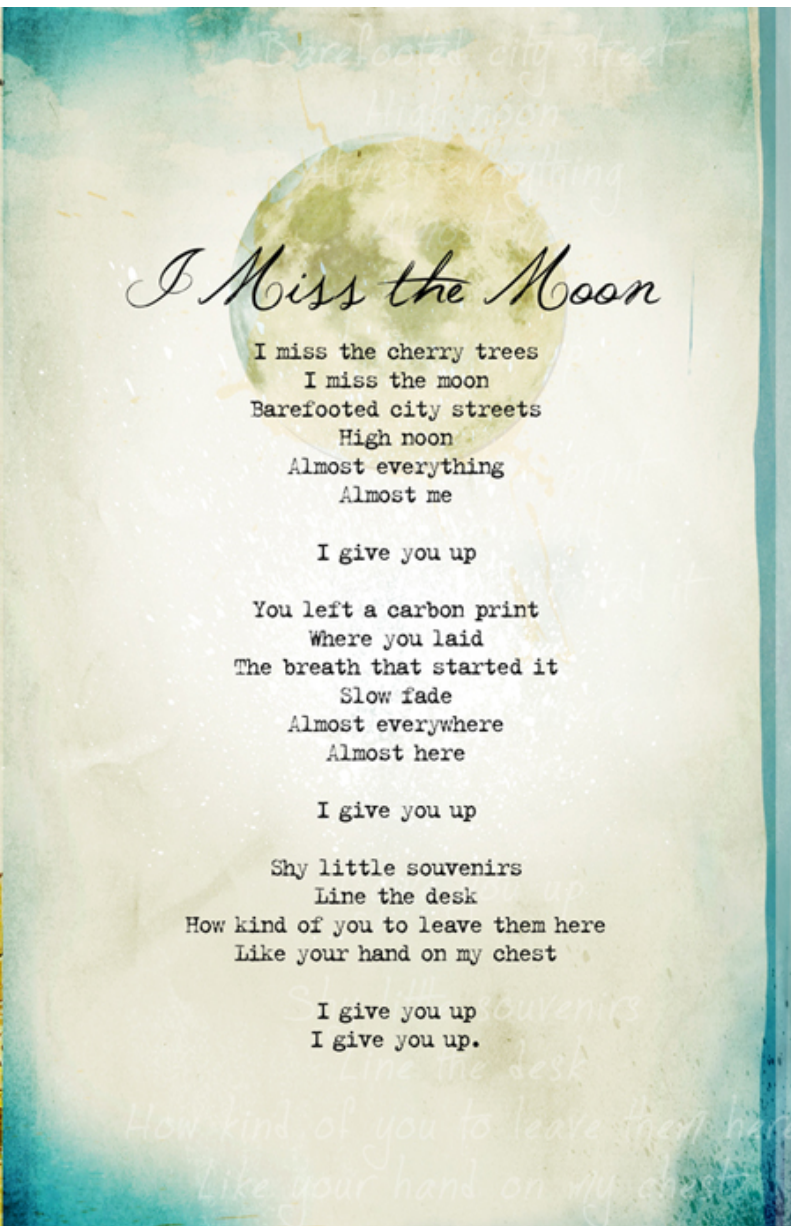
I give you up

You left a carbon print  
Where you laid  
The breath that started it  
Slow fade  
Almost everywhere  
Almost here

I give you up

Shy little souvenirs  
Line the desk  
How kind of you to leave them here  
Like your hand on my chest

I give you up  
I give you up.



IX.

So it's my story now. My folklore. I'll tell you what they said.

My father: "Yo Ginsberg. Stop your crying and plant some potatoes. You got a family to feed."

Ginsberg: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving..."

My father: "And those kids keep coming to you for answers, don't you see it?"

Ginsberg: "Minds! New loves! Mad generation! down on the rocks of Time!"

After all, it doesn't matter what they said, does it?

from the cold war to counterculture  
where are we now?  
hunched to the typewriter  
like sedentary bandits.  
laying  
smoking in our beds  
while ashes drop lazy  
serene into the tops of mason jars  
teetering on our breathing bellies.  
vulgar  
absurd  
curse word animation  
torn from midnight meditations  
beat to beat  
on the horn and the snare  
and the tongue.  
we tasted it once  
then were lost.



“Catch yourself thinking.”

- Allen Ginsberg from  
Cosmopolitan Greetings, 1986



Find the songs from “Creature” the album:  
[carmelmikol.com](http://carmelmikol.com)

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If there's any romance left in the old State highways. If there's still a story in the Trans Canada. If there's a legend to be found in a cluttered old bookstore, a crowded coffeehouse, or a stranger's conversation. If there's any power left in a folk song, Carmel Mikol is out to find it. And write about it.

A triple nominee at the 2011 East Coast Music Awards, Carmel has always been a songwriter. From her early childhood on a family farm in rural Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, to her current 'home' on the road, Carmel has built her life around crafting songs, collecting stories, and carving poetry out of the human experience. After two years touring extensively across Canada and the US with her celebrated debut album 'In My Bones', Carmel returned home to Cape Breton in 2011 to create her newest recording 'Creature'.



Hear the songs from 'Creature' the album:  
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