



Liz Phair

“Flower”

Exile in Guyville

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Matador

On Hearing Liz Phair's “Flower” For the First Time

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Every time I see your face

I think of things unpure unchaste

I want to fuck you like a dog

I'll take you home and make you like it

I am 16, sitting in the middle of the bench seat of a Dodge Aries between two boys on the way to a basketball game. The backseat is full too, three people across, but girl boy girl back there. As I listen to them chatter, the driver, a boy who is cut like marble all over, puts a tape into the deck and whispers in my ear: *listen to this.*

From the crackling car speakers comes the electric echo of a distorted guitar, a girl's high, reedy voice, and then another voice that swings like a pendulum between girl and boy. This voice says all the things we are told never bring to our lips, to cover them over instead, no matter how much it hurts. But when I hear this voice, I'm a geode that's been struck open to the crystal inside, sharp and glimmering.

Who is this? I say. He hands me the box. On the cover is a girl, her eyes in shadow, her mouth open, the small dark arc of her nipple edging its way into the frame. I want to put my tongue inside her mouth. I want to run my tongue along the edge of her nipple. I've been told the first thing I should feel about that is shame, but I don't. All I know is the glorious feeling of breaking open, of bringing all the sharp glimmering things to the surface, and that the pain I'm feeling isn't the pain of shame but the pain of desire, pure and pointed.

In the rearview mirror, I can see one of the girls and the boy making out in the backseat. The boy is one I've already had. The girl is lovely, but she's not the one I dream about. Still, because I remember what the boy tasted like, I can feel their kiss like a phantom on the lips of my own mouth, and it makes me feel like I'm kissing them, too. The boy cut like marble next to me is pressing his leg into mine. This is the boy that I want most, the boy I dream about, but on the other side of me is the other boy, the one with the pretty face who once told me he hugs me because he likes pressing my breasts against his chest, and I kind of hate him for it. In that moment, though, that moment of being sixteen and having my ears full of that miraculous song, in that brief moment of breaking open, I want him too.

Here we are, all of us, young and high on the freedom of getting out of school to watch our team play in the state championship. Here we are, barreling down the road with this song filling our heads with the thing our parents have lectured against. And then my desire softens and wings out of me, flutters its way into every crevice of the car, touching the surface of every inch of skin like a feathery plumose antenna and me, the polyphemus moth: I want them all. Every one of these beautiful people with their young bodies and their glowing skin that I know is really just translucent, that I know is just a sheer cover over the sharp, glimmering things underneath. I want to pull the car over into a field somewhere. I want all of us to put our mouths on each other everywhere, everywhere, again and again and again.

And I can see the desire fluttering up out of them too, but I can also see it's different. It has form, direction. That boy to my right wants the girl in the back. The girl in the back wants the boy next to her. The beautiful marble-cut boy next to me, he wants me, and the other girls too. But these desires flutter back and forth in isolation. They only pollinate each other. Mine is the only one that spreads its reach to everyone. Then all of the sharp glimmering of my want returns and the lovely winged transformation disintegrates, and so I cover that want over again with stone.

I hand the tape back to the boy. *I like this*, I say.

It's these three words that I always come back to. It's these three words that I repeat for years when I don't know how to explain my desires, when I don't know how to tell people why it took me so long to come out. At 16, with "Flower" in my ears and the photo of Liz Phair in my hands, I knew that my desire wasn't for men or for women or for the lovely people in between but for all of them, for people in every incarnation. But for years, I didn't know how to say that so people would understand. For years, it was these three words that I used when I saw a person that I was attracted to because I didn't know the word for what I am.

For years, I also had this recurring dream that I'd been hired to direct all of Liz Phair's music videos. My dreams weren't elaborate productions. In each one, Liz was performing on the same stage that Michael J. Fox played on as Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*. In every single song, she was playing to that same audience of 1950s teens. Before filming each song, I would slowly undress Liz (each time, the bliss of uncovering her body was almost unbearable) and then dress her again in something new. For each song, I would position her body on the stage and hand her a guitar. The clothes were always different. Sometimes she'd wear a 1970s white glitter Elvis jumpsuit, complete with pompadour. Sometimes I'd put her in Madonna's lacy corset and gloves from "Like a Virgin" or the white dress that Jennifer Connelly wore in *The Rocketeer*. Sometimes it was Tim Curry's leather corset and stockings from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Sometimes it was Brad's suit or Janet's dress instead. For so long, when I thought of that dream, I agonized over what Liz was supposed to be wearing on that stage. Who was she was supposed to be? What was she supposed to look like? I never had an answer. It wasn't until a few years ago, right after I finally found the word for what I am—pansexual—that my dream changed. Instead of only looking at what Liz was wearing, for the first time, I turned and looked at the audience. For the first time, I saw that no matter what she had on, the audience still danced to her music and threw glitter on the stage so that it rained down over her hair.

The first woman I ever kissed broke my heart open. I was so, so young when it happened that the rupture was quick, the repair mostly easy. The glittery sharpness closed up on its own, and it didn't leave a scar. But for a time, it did leave an echo of that first crack of pain: I remember she had a mouth just like Liz Phair, sharp along one lip and soft along the other, the kind of mouth that you dream about, the kind of mouth that when you watch it kiss someone else, you can feel the phantom of it against your own mouth for days. I've never told that story to anyone else. It's easier now than when I was 16 to tell those kinds of secrets. But I'll still always have a few. All of us do. And yes, some secrets are terrible. But not all of them are. Some of them—even the sharp ones—are delicate things, and if you try to pry them open, you crush them and leave all the brilliant parts in pieces. I tell myself now that it's okay to treat some of my secrets with silent reverence. Sometimes secrets are the sharp, glimmering things that keep you from sealing completely over to rock inside. Sometimes secrets are the things that teach you how to refract the love you have, or even to compound it.

I still love *Exile in Guyville*. I still dream sometimes of dressing and undressing Liz Phair. I still listen to "Flower" because of its raw articulation of female desire, because it's the song that broke me open, because it's the song that, before I had the name for what I am, made me knowable to myself. Here's another secret: the boy who introduced it to me never knew what an impact that song had on me. I never told him. I hope he'll read this. Maybe it will help him understand, like I do, that sometimes it's the dirtiest things that tell us the cleanest truths, even if those truths are the kinds of things that, for a time, magnify our pain. Maybe he'll realize that there's an immeasurable gift in knowing that you were there at the beginning of somebody's transformation, even more important, in some ways, than being there at the end.