

Vivian Lee
May 17, 2021



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COLUMNS | HERE IS A SONG

To Grow, To Burn Things Down, To Start Again

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I wanted to quit, to move back to what I knew because the unknown was actually too scary.

This is Here is A Song, a column by Vivian Lee on music and culture.

For the first twenty years of my life, all I knew was the suburbs. First, born and raised in Torrance, a sleepy suburb of Los Angeles, and then, to college, in Irvine, to an even sleepier suburb of Orange County. The safety and security, the sameness that a suburb affords a person is probably why my parents were happy in Torrance, and why they easily let me move to Irvine, a town only a forty-minute drive away.

I felt sheltered and protected growing up in Torrance, but everything also felt the same because a suburb is intended to behave in this way. If you grew up in a suburb like I did, you may have had a similar thought: *I was born here, I may die here, there is nothing to do here.* The flatness of it all; the chain restaurants of it all; the smallness of it all.

It wasn't until I heard "Kerosene," a single off of Big Black's 1986 album *Atomizer*, in college, that I felt a song put into words why I felt stifled in some way growing up; this song finally put into words why I felt incomplete.

The sneering yet bored way Steve Albini—who grew up in Pasadena, another LA suburb thirty miles from me, albeit two decades before—sings the opening verse hit me similarly to the way the cacophony of bass, drums, and guitar bang indecipherably in the first minute and a half of the song.

There's "nothing to do [but] sit around at home . . . stare at the walls . . . stare at each other and wait till we die," Albini draws. I didn't know that, as a teenager, everything in my life could feel both so momentous and yet monotonous. I was the first in my immediate family to have been born in the US, and the first in my extended family to figure out what it meant to grow up here. I didn't yet know what my possibilities looked like. I thought it was beyond my imagination to dream bigger—or to even know that bigger things could possibly be ahead past the safety net of suburban living.

My friends and I would drive to the beach, watch the waves break. Drive past the oil refinery, walk around the mall. Drive by manicured lawn after manicured lawn, hang out at someone's house. Drive up to a park, get too bored. What was different was just the day on the calendar and the people who were free that day. But this ended up being our routine.

I was lucky to have found my people early, but confined by our age, by our lack of disposable income, and to the boundaries of this town, it didn't mean too much yet. We just knew that in our endless search for entertainment, there was *something more* out there, and it definitely couldn't be found where we were, where we grew up.

Big Black and their oeuvre offer up two options to break the monotony of living: sex ("she's something to do") and death ("set me on fire, Kerosene"), and Torrance is not a hotbed of drug activity—at least my version of Torrance wasn't, because I was still a kid raised on Catholicism in the end. However, if you wanted something less intense—ADD medicine, weed—all you had to do was drive up Hawthorne Boulevard into the exponentially richer, whiter neighborhood. The kids there were more privileged, more bored. They got their kicks selling skunkweed to Torrance kids because they were already tired of all the luxuries and activities we envied and couldn't afford.



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Vivian Lee



On the Nature of Teacher and Teacher



A high school friend and I decided to get high one listless Saturday night. We were both home in the winter of our freshman year of college. She had some weed tugged into a film canister in the glove compartment. We decided to drive the winding, tree-dotted roads up into the next neighborhood, home to mansions and pools, golf courses and horse stables. Her fuzzy red die hung on her rearview mirror; it swayed violently back and forth with the road.

Residents there had complained about cars being too close to their homes, so the city let them build houses away from the streets or build gates and two-story hedges to protect themselves. Residents there had complained about the streetlights interrupting their sleep, so the city took all the lights down. Residents there had complained about how loud the roaming peacocks were, but for once, the city didn't listen.

The roads were always dark, yet we wound faster and faster up the edges of the hill. My friend decided we shouldn't smoke in her car; she was scared her parents would smell it if they ever decided to drive it. I wondered aloud if my parents would ever know if I was high. They never gave me a "talk," since I was very into following the rules, but I had a theory that, since my dad used to play in a band in college in the '70s and once chastised me for not knowing who CCR was, he definitely would understand. He might know.

Instead, we drove to the park and climbed up to the top of the rocket-shaped slide. The nearby swings swung violently in the wind. There was a person wrapped in a huge blanket—or maybe it was a high school couple trying to get some privacy—on the bench near where our car was parked.

It got too cold to smoke outside, so we gave up. We drove for hours.

*

As boringly oppressive as it felt to grow up in a large suburb, going to college in a smaller suburb was even more so. Irvine was a planned suburb, built literally around the college. The wealth was higher; the cops had even more free time. It was a city that had consistently ranked in the top ten "safest cities" in the US. There was even less to do with ourselves.

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In an attempt to make friends, I joined my public college radio station and, again, found my people. We would spend hours in between class sitting in the lobby of our small trailer and talk about the weird mustiness of the DJ booth, upholstered with soundproof foam that always reminded me of egg cartons. We would listen to the new albums that came in the mail and share our favorite songs. Sometimes, friends would DM or call the radio station during my show (in the weird, twilight 3 to 6 a.m. slot) to make sure I was either awake and/or not in danger.

With a more varied class schedule and more unstructured time, my friends and I drove past the boundaries of our planned neighborhood, into the vibrant and exciting city of Los Angeles. I think about the first shows I went to with radio friends; we'd drive from our Orange County suburb an hour into LA, where all the big shows were held. The excitement in the car was palpable, especially right when we got over the big dip on the 110 freeway, past the MLK Jr. Boulevard exit and the exit toward the 10, and saw the vast expanse of lights that made up the downtown skyline.

Live shows were a way to spend our nights, exploring dives, people, and experiences that weren't offered closer to us. I saw that there was more here, not necessarily in opportunities, but in newness. It felt freeing to go to my first real shows, without adult supervision. For the most part, most of my friends had also grown up in suburbs, so to be able to experience all of this newness together was addicting. I understood even more deeply how monotony could smother a person, how "Kerosene" was so much about that feeling, of wanting to break out of it.

*

I have never seen Big Black perform live. They broke up the year I was born, so I have never had the pleasure of throwing my body around to the sounds of "Kerosene" as they themselves perform it. I did, however, see the song performed live in 2011, when thirteen artists came together at New York City's Bowery Ballroom to do a [ten-year anniversary concert](#) in honor of the book *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground, 1981-1991*, in which each band covered two songs from bands that were written about in this book.

I went to this concert with someone who I was freshly out of a relationship with, a nebulous thing that would become very common in my early to mid twenties. He had bought the tickets for us, and I had refused to let my ticket go. And so we went together. And as I stood there watching the backing band start the first familiar, yet deeper-sounding, riffs, I finally forgot about him, about my discomfort, about the unknown.

The year before, at twenty-two, I had moved across the country and not to another suburb. I was now in New York, and everything I could possibly want I could get at a moment's notice. Gone were the days when I'd eagerly anticipate heading into LA again for another show, gone the meandering drives through our quiet streets, the futures we were planning for ourselves in the city—*any* big city.

But I had no idea who I was outside of wanting to leave the stability of home. What did it mean to finally break out of a neat bubble into the chaotic, unpredictable world of city living? It felt

...many strands of a hair break into the chaotic, unpredictable mess of my living. It was overwhelming, and when one small problem (the subway taking forty minutes to get here on a cold day) compounded another (hauling weeks' worth of laundry down five flights of stairs and then another three blocks) and another (dating!), I realized I craved reliability. Living in a city alone was very different from visiting LA with friends because I always knew the night would end back in my bed in Irvine, to a quietness and a sure thing. I wanted to quit, to move back to what I knew because the unknown was actually too scary.

But then I saw St. Vincent gnash her way through "Kerosene" on the dark, wide stage, her body curled inward, like the utter effort of playing the guitar was too much. What came out was loud and abrasive—and in a live concert setting, even more so. It wasn't the lyrics that transformed me like they did when I was a teenager, but her stage presence, the way she broke the song down and rebuilt it back again. Seeing a woman onstage feeling it all and allowing herself to be hard: It was the guide I needed to let go of the dread that I would die sad and alone, to let go of the anxiety of living in a new place, three thousand miles away from everything I knew. She wasn't dressed fancy, wasn't using some type of gimmick to make herself stand out. She was just herself, onstage, with a band behind her. But I could feel the energy she put out, and I took it into my body, and, as I pushed myself into the crowd of sweaty bodies, I exercised everything I could. I felt energized and renewed to strike out and start anew.

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I keep going back to this line, repeated in St. Vincent's rendition: "Set me on fire, Kerosene." The way she yelps the phrase one last time before making way for the guitars to crash into each other into a cacophony of triumphant and angry and brash noise. This line made me realize that in order for me to truly grow, I had to let my fears go, to burn some things down—even lifelong things I was holding on to. To start again.

I had spent my teenage years yearning, but in that moment, as she sang those last lines with almost a sense of rabid desperation, I realized what I wanted to actually do was figure it out instead because otherwise, I would be smothered again.

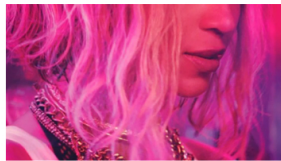


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Vivian Lee is a book editor and writer based in New York. Her work can be found in The Los Angeles Times, Eater, The Rumpus, and more. Follow her on Twitter @vivianwlee or on the internet at vivianwlee.com.

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 Vivian Lee
Apr 20, 2020



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