

## Fourteen Women Playing One Guitar

It is the year I own a bed again. The year I return to D.C. to work in an elementary school, tired and overextended, resentful and broke. The year all of my belongings do not fit into a suitcase or the corner of someone's room or one shelf in their closet.

It is the year I do not live near ocean or mountains. The year a boyfriend from a decade earlier develops a brain tumor and I don't know what to say, so I say nothing. It is the year I forget to make resolutions and every photo I own in a box under my bed with a suitcase I do not use.

In early October, I go with a friend to see Icelandic performance and visual artist Ragnar Kjartansson speak at the opening of his exhibition at the Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum. In a basement auditorium he speaks about his creative process. At the end of the evening I have jotted a single note into my phone, attributed to Kjartansson: *The defiant act of suffering without dying*. My friend took something else from the artist. As we are leaving, she tells me that she is done dating, is going to focus on herself and whatever she wants.

I remind her that I stopped dating, for years at a time, before I picked up my life and moved across the continent and up into a new country for a man. "Look how well that ended for me," I tell her, laughing.

"Wasn't it good to live that life, though?" she asks.

It is the year I insert my pain in odd places, annoying myself most of all with the audacity of it.

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In Ragnar Kjartansson's performance piece *Women In E*, a woman in a floor-length gold sequined dress holds a guitar and stands on a revolving stage with an amplifier. The space around her is a circle of thin gold streamers hanging from the ceiling. The woman strikes an E chord, over and over, for two and a half hours at a time. When you ride the elevator up to the exhibition on the second floor, it is the only thing you can hear; a single, drawn-out chord. Closer, the woman's arm moves in a slow oval, striking every fifteen or twenty seconds and letting the noise fill the room before she aims again.

The women choose how long, exactly, between the chords, but it is never fast. It is slow and echoes. When one woman's time is up, it is a new woman's turn to go on the pedestal. The transition is so seamless that there is only ever one missing E chord between them.

The friend who is done dating is a curatorial assistant at the museum and helps the women transition between shifts. She tells me they share one small dressing room they've built into the walls of the museum. The space will be destroyed when the exhibition closes, so they leave notes and write quotes for each other on the white plastered walls. They become close, these fourteen women. You can't see the door unless you know to look for it.

In November, I let a man I like hold my face hard and say "Look at me when I'm fucking you" and it feels good. It feels good to be told what to do. It feels good to be able to do something so easily. He is honest about who he is and what he wants and I tell myself I am listening. I count bruises on

my ass and my thighs and my breasts as proof that someone wants me.

He says he has waited a long time for this, but he has not.

I tell myself this is a kind of pedestal.

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On Christmas, the new girlfriend of the boyfriend I moved across the country for posts a photo and calls him her soulmate. This is something I never dared to name him during the four years we loved each other. She did it within a few months. He is hers now and seems happy. They like the same things, do the same things, are from the same country. She looks easy. She looks *nice*.

I am not easy. I am not necessarily nice. I like books more than exercise or other people. I am the person on his couch when he comes home and the person who does not get out of bed at all some days.

When we broke up I moved back in with my parents for three months, just before moving on to D.C. I wrote obituaries for a Canadian newsgroup out of a Buffalo, New York office. My boss instructs me that, should anyone ask where in Canada we are located, I must respond, "Near Toronto." Sometimes people from Vancouver Island call and I tell them I used to live up-island in Nanaimo. Eventually people from Vancouver Island start to ask for me specifically. The crematorium workers and funeral home directors like me. I add "hey?" to the end of my sentences and know how to pronounce all of the small island towns.

During bathroom breaks I sit on the toilet and quietly recite the names of places he and I had been together, afraid I will forget them, then wash my hands like they are tiny, fragile things.

It is the year I stop speaking to him.

It is the year I find out I have developed an irregular heartbeat—shocking my childhood pediatrician who generously offers to see me without insurance. "You never had this before and it's not in any of the medical records you had forwarded here," he tells me.

It is the year I learn my heart has actually broken.

The doctor gives me a prescription for antidepressants and tells me I am far too pretty to be alone. *It's really a shame*, he says.

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If I had been a boy my name would have been Peter. Peter is derived from the Greek word *petros*, meaning "stone" or "rock." If I had been a boy, my mother would have had three sons and they would have stopped trying to have more children. My mother tells me how much she wanted me to be a girl.

With age, I want to know what it might mean to be male. To live Peter's life. Hard and steady and

rock-like.

My name means “worthy of love.”

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In the last few days of Kjartansson’s exhibition, just before the new year, I go to the Hirshhorn to watch all 64 minutes of *Visitors*. In the installation, the artist and seven other musicians play a gospel dirge inside a decaying mansion. They are each in their own room of the house and each projected onto one of eight screens. A ninth screen shows the outside of the mansion and an old man sitting on the porch cleaning a canon. Halfway through the piece, he lights it and it explodes, the sound carrying through each screen at different volumes depending on where the musicians are in the house.

The lights are dim. The piece makes the room vibrate with sound, makes the museum space feel like an organ. Depending on which screen you are in front of, you hear the voice and instrument of one musician more than all the others.

I sit on the floor of the museum between a screen showing Ragnar playing guitar in a bathtub and a screen with a woman playing the cello. I sit between the legs of the man I am fucking. I want to lean against his chest and I do not. I want to cry and I do not. Throughout the piece, in between crescendos of chorus, they repeat the same line:

*Once again I fall into my feminine ways.*

It is the year I can control my emotions almost completely.

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A few weeks pass and this man tells me we cannot sleep together anymore. He has a tattoo of a lock behind his right ear and there is no key anywhere on his body. He has a tattoo behind his left ear that says FIX ME and I understand the joke finally.

It is the year I do not have to be told and told again when someone does not want me.

*Visitors* ends with all of the artists abandoning their instruments and exiting their rooms, one by one. Ragnar has been sitting, naked, in a bubble bath with a guitar and all of the bubbles are gone now. He rises, grabs a towel. They meet in the entryway of the mansion and open beers and light cigars. They keep singing and walk toward an open field, repeating “*Once again I fall into my feminine ways.*” They sing in chorus until they are out of earshot and, finally, out of view entirely.

Kjartansson’s ex-wife, Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir, wrote the song about their divorce. He performs it without her.

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The exhibit closes just after the new year. My friend who works at the museum can finally divulge one of its secrets: the stage turns on with a remote control they kept hidden inside of the amplifier.

The piece is reliant on the flick of a switch.

It is the year I depend on art more than people to heal me.

It is the year I think I want to be put on a pedestal.

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Months later, I meet one of the *Women in E* performers at a party. When I ask about any discomfort from playing the same note for hours at a time she tells me that what she found most unpleasant was when people viewing her performance spoke about her like she couldn't hear them. That sometimes people stood close and sang to her. That she could hear one of Ragnar's other pieces while she played and it haunted her.

I know the piece she means—it is the one I stayed in the room for less than two minutes to listen to—and we deliver the single line it repeats to each other: *Sorrow conquers happiness.*