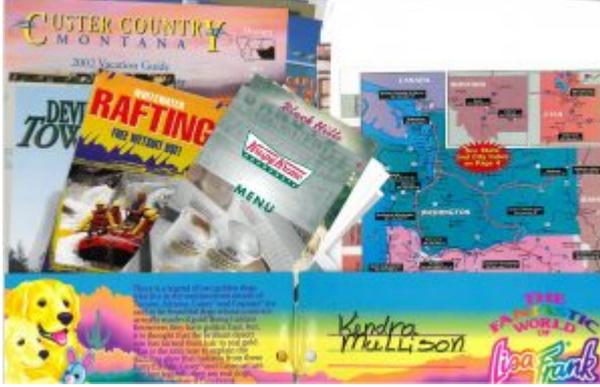


Thou Shalt Covet, a Literacy

written by Guest Contributor | August 17, 2017



The first time I took a travel brochure, I felt ashamed. The second time, too. It wasn't exactly stealing, but all the same they signified the unreachable, things I could not have and places I should not want to visit. Each slick sheet of paper became a theft of happiness.

By the time we reached Indianapolis for the second time, circling the continental United States on giant swathes of blistered asphalt, I had stolen so many leaflets that my one suitcase burst open when I pulled it from the trunk of our borrowed van and they all fell to the ground like all our unspent prayers, hundreds and hundreds of them. My parents looked, and looked, and then they began to laugh. The lump of shame which had been sending its roots deeper and deeper into my body swelled, a great hot misery, unfurled all at once—and the tears came. I sat down, right there, in the hotel parking lot.

I was not quite fourteen, and we were on furlough.

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I ripped the photographs out of my travel journal afterward, but I kept all of the brochures. I titled the journal *American Quest: Bits and Pieces of the American Culture*. I was extremely patriotic, but the timing was right for patriotism in exile. We flew from Sydney to Los Angeles less than two months after terrorism ripped a hole in New York City, and the whole way over I couldn't shake the memory of a girl in my Geography class spinning in her chair. "Your president is the antichrist," she'd hissed. "America had it coming."

Schoolyards are cruel everywhere, but in Sydney they didn't know what to do with me. The brat, the missionary kid. Amidst the blue uniform wash of our school blouses and heavy kilts, I always found ways to wear the American flag. A pin, a kerchief, a keychain on every backpack zipper. All of a sudden I was the genuine article, as if I'd always been.

But my fascinations betrayed me for what I was. When adults call themselves travelers, they're at home everywhere. Their children are at home nowhere.

We have a name. We're called missionary kids, or MKs. We have our own psychological profile, our own internal fractures. During conference season, when all our parents lumped together and prayed for success, sustenance, and financial support—we battled amongst ourselves. MKs from Florida versus MKs from Prague versus the boarding-school MKs. The ones who'd grown up in the field, sick with malaria and scarred from exploding stoves, were of a superior strain. I was not that cool; nobody bought my stories about giant spiders and riding kangaroos to school.

We all had one foot in the divine and the other stuck deep in the desperate world of teenage longings.

Appropriately, I stole my first brochure from a church. I stole *two*. And I kept the ticket to the Christmas concert as well, describing the event afterwards as "perfect for the modern era," well adapted "to the age & mood of the congregation." One of my sisters had given me Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* and I copied its style religiously. But of course, at the time, I did everything religiously. My parents were on a nonstop Jesus bender; expectations were high.

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My second theft came from a movie theater in Lethbridge, Alberta, where we each paid \$4.50 in Canadian dollars to watch *The Fellowship of the Ring*, my first foray into both fantasy and films in which bodies are parted from their heads. My father, in an extraordinary lapse of judgment, forgot that he was not to instill in his daughters a flexible notion of reality. He would regret it later.

It was a messy thing, my family's longstanding relationship with entertainment. My mother, born into Saskatchewan's rich Mennonite tradition, had broken from her childhood abstinences in order to acquire a degree in Medical Technology. She'd afterward run away to Africa in order to satisfy her own needs for escape and adventure. There, in Kenya, she met my father, who took her to see *The Empire Strikes Back* before settling into an arguably more pious life after marriage. By the time my eldest sister was two months old, they had returned to North America, subsisting on food stamps while my father started two IT businesses that immediately went bust. Then they had Danae, and then they had me. Life could only go downhill from there.

The Texas panhandle was then, as it is now, the beating heart of homeschoolin', churchgoin', boycottin' America—and over the years, my mother's friends tamped down her reckless imagination. Before Peter Jackson's Middle Earth was realized on screen, our movie collection consisted of *Iron Will*, *Little Women*, and *The Great Train Adventures of Australia*. During a

brief interlude in California, an overly-liberal family friend once snuck me into a showing of *Lion King* and gave me a hand-me-down *Pocahontas* costume. My mother told me the lions were New Age hippies and that the dress was not to leave the closet. The *real* Pocahontas, she assured me, had converted to Christianity and would have been ashamed of those bare shoulders.

So I blame Peter Jackson for making me a writer, and my father for forgetting that I ought not be allowed to become one. And I'm grateful to Mrs. Kazarian for the dress.

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We had not paid for our tickets with cash, but a clerical error led to us being flagged. At every airport for the duration of our furlough our carefully packed bags were picked over by TSA agents. Several of the 9/11 terrorists had entered the country by way of Canada, as we were doing, with tickets paid for in cash. Gloved hands went through my underwear, and my brochures. I was too young or perhaps too naive to draw parallels of radicalization and secrets.

I floated through Chicago security, two friskings, and a bag search.

On the plane, the flight attendant had asked my parents, the row ahead of me, what they wanted for their in-flight refreshment. "Coffee," they'd both ordered. "Black." This was acceptable; routine, even. After all, they were adults.

Then he had come to my sisters, seated across the aisle. "What would you like, girls?" he'd asked.

"Coffee," Tricia had said. "Black," Danae had added. They came off as sophisticated.

Finally, the flight attendant had come to me, and I panicked. "Black coffee straight, thank you please!" I nearly shrieked at him. The attendant slowly inspected each face: my father's, my mother's, my sisters', and mine. He must have seen something that made sense to him, because with a flourish and a grin he poured me my first ever mug of coffee.

It tasted like fury. But I drank that sucker down, straight, black, and hot as hate. Afterward, Tricia stole my creamer packets and my extra cookie.

The feeling of fierce *belonging* lasted all the way through the checkpoints at O'Hare. It only faded when we reached the car rental place, a business which specializes in giving missionaries discount deals. Listless, I lifted a stack of travel guides to places we would come nowhere near on our travels—a Custer County, Montana vacation guide, and brochures for the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary, Lusk, the Devil's Tower, and Pikes Peak. I sat there and practiced the sin of covetousness under the acrid air of a wall-mounted heating unit.

And I picked up a Lisa Frank folder at an airport concession stand to contain my growing collection. It was December 26th, the day after Christmas.

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In Florida, I drew an astronaut's footprint in moondust in the margins of my journal. "To me," I wrote, "it symbolizes man's genius & capabilities, which were all given to us by God." Every *i* was dotted with a miniscule heart.

But I'd already begun to stray. Only into Middle Earth at first—I spun a copy of Howard Shore's soundtrack to *The Fellowship of the Ring* in my Sony discman all the way from O'Hare to Orlando—but from there, something enigmatically *other* began to work its magic. I picked up maps, coupons, flyers. Silver Springs, Daytona, the Florida Aquarium, Kennedy Space Center. In my dreams, the gantries of Complex 39 loomed large—but from Orlando, nothing was visible.

The Space Coast was quiet, lambent under winter clouds.

"If man was meant to leave the planet, God would have given us rocket boosters for feet," my father joked. In the evenings, after a full round of luncheons, house visits, and paperwork at the mission organization's headquarters, we got in the van and drove a little further.

My parents couldn't afford to take us to Disney World, but they did take us to Downtown Disney, where each of us was allowed to pick out one item from the shops. I got a sweater. I crammed its front pocket with leaflets and brochures. I pinned a tiny gold space shuttle to the bottom hem.

It was January 9, and the catchment ponds were skinned in ice each morning.

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The highways seemed endless, as no doubt they were meant to. From Orlando we blurred through Richmond, St. Louis, Austin, San Antonio, Lubbock. We kept an itinerary taped to the dash. Somehow, I mustered enough fervor to dedicate a poem to Lubbock. I'd been born there, and felt I owed something to the place. The poem began: "Queen of Cotton, oh Stubble Fields"—and you can imagine it only got worse from there.

For once, there was no glitter of faith in my purple prose. We had returned

to a where a casual footfall might land on a cactus or a diamondback coil. Where one could watch tornadoes coming twenty miles off. Where we'd been so poor for so long.

Deep winter held the South in its open mouth, and we woke one morning to snow.

I'd slept in dozens and dozens of guest bedrooms, on cots, on floors, in closets. All that I had to anchor me were my stolen glimpses of unseen wonders: Scotts Bluff Country ("Visit the Valley"), Elvis Presley's Graceland ("Not just a tour; a fascinating journey"), Leadville ("Mining Put Us On The Map. Victorian Charm & Mountain Adventure Keep Us There!"), and the Abraham Lincoln Museum ("Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history"). I put aside leaflets for Mystic Caverns ("Closed on Sunday"), Woodford County ("It's *that* friendly"), Ruby Falls ("Welcome to an experience 200 million years in the making!"), and Yellowstone National Park.

The longer we drove, the more fluid my memories became. Had I never really been to any of these places? It seemed hard to believe.

By the time we reached Wray, Colorado, my collection had outgrown my Lisa Frank folder, and I began to shove them loosely into my suitcase. It was fine; I could only take fifty pounds through customs on my way back, but surely they didn't weigh all *that* much.

"It was incongruous," I wrote. "Me, my books on the kitchen table. Me in short sleeves 3 feet away from snow falling. Very incongruous." There were other incongruities to be had, but I hadn't the heart to see them. Not yet.

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My grandmother no longer lived in the old ranch house under the bluffs, with boxelder bugs making little moving lumps under the hallway carpet. Danae had made a game of squashing them—thirty seven, I beat you!—and we begged to go back. But of course, that wasn't possible. Charlotte's new house was only two blocks down from the Wray Rehabilitation & Activities Center, and four blocks from the one-screen movie theater. A couple of times a week she'd take me with her to deliver Meals on Wheels, or serve cornbread at the Senior Center.

I'd finally come to a land where everybody and nobody seemed to dream of going anywhere else. A land devoid of brochures.

Our arrival sent whispers rippling through the congregation on Sundays. "You couldn't make me go for a million dollars," someone said. My dad shook hands, greeted childhood friends, and left my mother to face the tough questions.

"How do you justify it?" they asked her, looking at us. Such young girls, to

have been raised in such godless country.

"They're bringing the light," Charlotte would interject. But later, at home, she'd levy three years of delayed grievances. "You took them away when they were too young," she'd tell my mother, while the microwave hummed and I worked at my calculus on the kitchen table. "You've *damaged* them."

Wray was going the way of all the old little cattle towns, its young people long gone to find work in Denver, or Lincoln, or Kansas City. Only the mothers were left, and us. We stayed until they pledged to give my parents enough money to let us live somewhere else, somewhere we would not remind them of their own lost children.

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There was no easy end, no concrete moment when our furlough was over and done. Danae was long gone back to Sydney to begin the school year, which began in February. Then, Tricia left us to stay the summer in Georgia with an aunt and her husband, the Methodist minister. At some point, in the grey predawn hours, my parents and I simply picked up our heels and let the world carry Wray away from us.

In Indianapolis, I salvaged what I could from the gutter, and paid the fine for an over-heavy suitcase full of brochures. My parents didn't prevent me, but they were confused. "Why this one? We took you to Sherwood Forest. Enough caves for a lifetime." My secret collection felt somehow stupid, whenever they mentioned it. A little quirky, but fine. At least I wasn't sneaking off to pierce my nose. We flew home by way of Singapore, when those "round the world" tickets were the only way to fly affordably, and reclaimed Danae from the clutches of a new boyfriend.

My geography teacher—our new principal—quizzed me, my first day in class, my back to the blackboard at the front of the room.

"Define 'sublimation,'" he commanded.

Transformation from one state to another, without passing through some expected, intermediary step. How could I not know this? I was fourteen. I drank coffee. I dreamed of spaceships and bridges over the deep. I was dangerous around those racks of flyers for local attractions in hotel lobbies. One thing did not lead to the other, but the other was *here*.

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Furlough. Usually the word is used in reference to soldiers, or to government employees required to take an extended leave of absence until a budget crisis has passed. But in my world, furlough was a term of religious significance, albeit one in which militant and bureaucratic aspects were easily embedded. The language of faith—the language of my childhood—was and is rife with such allusions, collusions, and inferences. Hymns speak of going to war against a rapidly devolving world, of bringing about new kingdoms and new kinds of government. Theocracy by the book.

Theocracy on the road.

Faith in the hand.

Prayers in the parking lot, scattering under the wheels of old leather suitcases.

My parents are missionaries. Still, after all these years. After a lifetime of returns. Returns here, returns there, bad habits returning to bite and kindnesses long forgotten. Something changed me on furlough, somewhere between the airport and the asphalt. Rockets supplanted the red, white, and blue. Other unsanctioned love affairs would follow, ridiculous and risky and downright sacrilegious. There would be no more furloughs.

My world was enlarged. My heart was not in it. My dreams forgot to ask permission.

Brochure by brochure, I collected a better future than I could ever hope to live. But—it was mine.



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landscape riven by rapid ecological and political change. Possessing an MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing from the University of Arizona and now working toward a second Master's in Library Science, Kendra has published short works in *Essay Daily* and on *Terrain.org*, co-edits the Montana Library Association's *FOCUS*, and is finishing up a children's picture book giving narrative form to the story of aquatic invasive species (AIS) in the American West.

If writing defies "common sense," if it seems to go against traditional modes of thought, norms, and histories, the idea of that common sense no longer makes sense, or might make sense if we're allowed to reinvent ourselves. That's what I'm looking at with the literacy narrative. I want to hear yours: when you first "clicked" with a language, whatever it is; why you questioned the modes of your Englishes; how you wrote "poetry," but looked at it again and called it "lyric essay." I want to see your literacy narrative in its scholarly, creative, and hybrid forms. Send your literacy narratives to Sylvia Chan at sylvia@entropymag.org. Stay tuned for more literacy narratives from yours truly and others.