

# Variations on a Theme: Misreading

written by Guest Contributor | May 6, 2021



I was 17 when I first heard Liz Phair in the backseat of a boy's car with my much cooler best friend. We were aimlessly driving around when the boy put on *Whipsmart*. I immediately loved how Phair's low voice paired with the quintessential 90s fuzz guitar; the music seemed a kind of sexy provocation, alluring to men, but also something Phair made just for herself and maybe me too, listening in.

When I think of this moment now, it exists in the amber afterglow we associate with youth, the color of a sunset captured in a photograph, accessible only through layers of memory. This vision is clearly colored by nostalgia and its presence suggests I've lived through layers and layers of my life already. Officially middle-aged, though I don't feel like it.

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In 1998, when Phair's follow-up to *Whipsmart*, *Whitechocolatespaceegg* came out, I was in college. As you do with anything from a favorite artist, I bought the album immediately. When I listened to it, though, I found myself straining, unable to connect to Phair's sonic exploration of marriage, motherhood, and regret.

Then, as it goes, I lived through two decades. Time felt both intolerably slow and regrettably fast. So I was 17, then I was 40, running on the treadmill—keeping fit as middle-aged people do—when “Only Son” from *Whitechocolatespaceegg* came on and I knew I was finally old enough to get it.

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“Only Son” starts out with a slow languor. It could seem relaxed, but when you pay attention to the lyrics, the tempo feels more wistful than anything else. As the title of the song suggests, Phair sings from the perspective of “the worst kind of son,” one who brings “shame to [his] family.” We learn he has hurt his mother, hurt his sister, failed in every way to live up to expectations.

As a familial role, “only son” is weighted, freighted with responsibility. An only son should be an exemplar, the one who goes on ahead to blaze a path; but, the only son of Phair's song has gone astray, not just into his own disappointment, but into a life as a disappointment. “I have wore my mother's

heart out," the only son laments.

This is a song that could only have been written by an adult. Phair sings in the tone of someone awash in the kind of regret that comes when you've lived long enough to see the things you should have done, should have left undone. But since the past is, by its very nature, unchangeable, you can only say, "I wish I had known / I was not good enough." Wishing it could have been otherwise—the if only, if only of adult regret.

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When I listen to the shame voiced in "Only Son," I can't help but misread myself into the lyrics. I think, yes, I too am "the worst kind of son," a failure, spiraling into regret. It's like I'm still 17, in the backseat of the car with my best friend, just following along, aimless, but I'm not actually there, it's only amber resin memory, after all. No, I'm 40. I'm supposed to be driving the car, not passively looking out the window, but here I am, staring into my life without nostalgia and all I see along the horizon is what hasn't happened, the expectations for adulthood I haven't filled—no husband, no house, no baby. Where did I go wrong? If only, if only, I sing along, I had known I was not good enough.

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When you start to think about your life's difference, its variation from the standard script, like the only son of Phair's song, it's easy to get fixated on your own inadequacy. You know the expectations themselves deserve critique, but you're too caught up in your failure to offer one. Instead, you cast about thinking of ways to fix yourself, become like everyone else. I could still buy a house. I could still get married. Could I have a child?

As a woman, this question of children feels as if it is the defining question of my adult life. So, it doesn't surprise me that "Only Son," a song seeped in adulthood, brings babies up in the first line. Phair sings, "All these babies are born / to the wrong kind of people." In the context of the song, it's an ambiguous statement. Is the only son saying he was born to the wrong parents or that he's a bad father himself?

I'll confess, when I hear these lyrics, I don't even try to parse the meaning. I sing it as myself, a childless woman, whose chance at having a child is fading fast, who needs to believe if it doesn't happen, it wasn't meant to be, that a lack of children has nothing to do with my failure. After all, babies get born to the wrong kind of people every day.

Still, when Phair sings, "All these babies are born, like a field full of poppies," I imagine myself standing at the edge of the field, the beautiful flowers at my feet. Becoming a mother seems like the most natural thing, the pinnacle of a certain vision of adult womanhood. I remember the many times women speak of their children and the lack in my mouth, the shame in my stomach. How could I have failed to do it already? Am I the worst kind of son?

The song tells me time is running out, as I mouth along, "I believe I'll soon leave the meadow, I see my shadow." The day of my life passes like the sun. It's one thing to choose not to enter the field, but another entirely to simply let it pass you by, to fail to achieve the kind of relationship that would result in a baby. I can't help but feel shame for having never quite figured it out.

It's at that point that the song cries for me, "I'm running out of time. I'm losing my mind. Won't you come take me home?" It's a question a child would ask, but we're all adults here. And, as the cliché goes, you can't go home again.

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When I try to find out what inspired "Only Son," I read somewhere that Phair wrote it after her older brother fell into some kind of financial trouble. This is a piece of information without citation, but it's enough to make the voice of shame and regret in the song make sense. I also know Phair and her brother were adopted, facts that seem to swirl in "Only Son's" query about what happens when the wrong kind of people have kids.

But, when I listen to the song, I don't care about any of this real-life information. I don't think about any of this context. The song is about me, for me. I am the only son. I'm the one asking, "Won't somebody hold me? I think I'm losing my soul."

A purist would say I am completely misunderstanding this song, reading it in a way Phair didn't intend, but I'm too old to be a purist. When you're young, you can't see your way into adulthood, it's all up ahead, so you have a pure idealized view of what you'll be, the roles you simply expect to fill, the family you simply expect to have. That's your horizon and it's perfect because you've never been there.

So, you hear a song about regret and it doesn't move you, but then, as it does, time passes, and you're 17, then you're 40 and no matter what you've done or left undone, you've moved through experience, you're in a different place than you started and you see things differently. Now you know the horizon is an optical illusion, it moves when you move.

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For the final minute of "Only Son," the lyrics drop away and it's just the jangling of a guitar lick repeating, sometimes up a chord, sometimes down, moving on in a way that reminds me of a car driving down a road. How could a song that's so sad end with a sound that feels like breaking free? It's a contradiction until I misread it.

If I can misread "Only Son" until it speaks about me, if these associations are layers I put upon the song, layers through which I build a connection between the song and myself, then I can misread my life, misread childlessness as the freedom of a shapeless day, misread my lack of a mortgage as an increase in mobility, misread loneliness as the open quiet in

which I develop fortitude. Now, I'm moving up a chord, misreading a disappointment of a life as simply different, the path ahead shorter than the path behind, but open, full on ahead, to the next horizon, barreling out of if only.

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*Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it's an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life's soundtrack. Please email submissions to [meganentropy@gmail.com](mailto:meganentropy@gmail.com) and keep an eye out for others' [Variations](#).*

*\*\*("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade recorder class horror stories, etc)\*\**

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In addition to poetry publications including *Flatlands* (Black Lawrence Press, 2018), *Conveyance* (Dancing Girl Press, 2012) and *Nursewifery* (Jacar Press, 2020), Ruth Williams has published creative nonfiction in *Crab Orchard Review*, *DIAGRAM*, and *South Loop Review*. She is currently an Associate Professor of English at William Jewell College and an Editor for *Bear Review*.