

Saying 'yes' to Michigan, after saying 'no' for all these years



Melissa Favara

Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 7, hosts a bi-monthly reading series and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

Back in the '80s, when I was growing up in Saginaw, Mich., then home to something like eight factory sites for General Motors, the state motto — emblazoned on billboards, T-shirts and bumper stickers — was “Say Yes to Michigan.” I can still hear the jingle, its melody saccharine and infectious on the car radio. And as the GM plants closed one by one in Saginaw, mirrored by the Ford factories in Flint a scant 30 miles away, leaving third-generation auto workers like my stepfather kind of stunned and blinking in the aftermath, it felt like the world was saying no to Michigan — and I pretty quickly followed suit. I drifted away from my blue collar family, especially from the social conservatism that grew among my relatives as incomes dropped for the working class in the Rust Belt. I drifted toward an obsession with Emily Dickinson and writing zines, and so I moved to Portland in 1996, where the air was clean, the politics were liberal, the ethos DIY. The air itself smelled like creativity and hope. And patchouli, a little — but that was a small price to pay to get out of what felt like a stifling, dying planet.

Seventeen years later, Marshall (husband transplanted from the East Coast), Ramona (seven, born here), and I are rooted deep in Portland. Most years I don't get back to Michigan; Marshall and I both embraced Oregon like religious converts, more devout than the native Oregonians. Maybe it's Lot's Wife Syndrome — I think I've been afraid to look back at my hometown because with the tanking Michigan economy, so much of its vitality has leaked out as the family owned businesses have turned to dollar stores the old Victorian houses have been chopped into apartments, and Saginaw has started appearing on national Most Violent City lists. We usually use our vacation time to visit Marshall's family in Ashland, another bastion of west coast progressiveness and relative safety. This summer, at long last, I decided to bring my family back to the mighty Midwest and take a good, long look.

The light hangs from a different angle

across the flat land outside Lansing, the state capital where we flew in. As if light could be older than it is in Oregon — and the trees that line the road are deciduous and kind of scrubby, not the tall, haunting Douglas firs of the west. About an hour into the drive toward family, my allergies have completely vanished, which freaks me out a little — it feels somehow disloyal.

From Lansing to my brother's house. Whenever I think of my brother, he is as I left him in 1996: 15 and skinny, a sweet kid trying to pass for a surly punk rocker and not quite making it, his soft eyes giving him away. These days, he's staked out an old farmhouse north of our hometown where he's tiled his own kitchen and raised a golden retriever and a 2-year-old girl named Madelyn. After two tours of duty in the Mideast, he's bald under his weathered Detroit Tigers cap, missing a finger, and yet still sports the same gentle gaze that belies his attempt to sound stern when Madelyn jumps on the couch. The hand resting on a coffee cup on what I recognize as our grandmother's kitchen table has battered knuckles and a hefty wedding ring. It begins to dawn on me that the image of this full-on individual human that I've been holding onto is an outdated snapshot of a moment that's been followed by many other moments — this person, and perhaps this place, have stubbornly refused to stay put in my absence.

The next afternoon, it's on to a backyard party at my cousin Matt's — my last interaction with Matt (memory — cheeky cherub circa 1982) was a nasty exchange on Facebook about gay marriage, so I have the grotesque image of a sweet-faced child spouting Republican rhetoric. As we dress at my brother's, I ask Marshall, “Will they think I'm being pretentious if I bring mineral water? If I wear a scarf?” Marshall's silent gaze answers — I'm being silly and nervous, and he's right, because when we knock on the door, mineral water and all, Matt, who now has the strong jaw of Kirk Douglas and a total of three ridiculously

beautiful children who are themselves cheeky cherubs, bear hugs me. In person, not a word arises about politics — we talk about safe practices for remodeling when you have both kids and lead paint on premises, and I compliment his mid-century house and the grass-green color he's painted his dining room. We eat macaroni salad. We watch Ramona blow bubbles for his toddler, Peyton, and I copy down his wife's Stromboli recipe. Is it possible that we've grown up a bit in the interim and we can talk about the common ground rather than the places where we don't overlap?

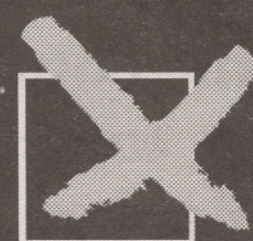
Next, we're heading to my mom's place in rural northern Michigan — the tip of the pinkie in the mitten that is Michigan, to be exact. But first, we drive through the heart of Saginaw. To be sure, on some streets where I remember well-groomed houses, the porches sag, and weeds with pale blue flowers tower in neglected lawns. But there's also a new hospital. A hip coffee shop risen in the ruins of Old Town. A total of seven second cousins for Ramona, and the best Goodwill I've ever visited (Ramona sings Macklemore's “Thrift Shop”, sans curse words) while I vogue in a Cookie Monster blue shag jacket, my brother perusing ironic trucker hats and Madelyn trying out a hobby horse.

Leaving Goodwill, we pass a fast food parking lot where a memory flashes: I'm Ramona's age, and my favorite song, “My Sharona” is playing on the car radio. We have to turn the car off to go in and get hamburgers; when I assume out loud that the song will still be playing after we finish lunch, my mom breaks the news that the radio station will move on to other things while we are away. While I'm momentarily disappointed, it's really OK. I have heard that song so many times already that I have it memorized. When we get back, there will be something new playing. And if we really listen, we might find something new to listen to. And hear.

Out of the Darkness,
Into the Light

By Aimee Davis

As a child your outlook on life
Was shady. When your innocence
Was taken, that left a hole your heart
And scarred your soul.
You thought the world
Was cold and dark.
And from that day,
It played out your life sadness.
Now its too present, now you can
Rise from the ashes in your mind.
And let out all the demons
From the past. Escape from your body
To set you free. So you can live
In the present, and not in the past.
The deep dark past,
Where things like to hide
In the shadows.
No more darkness,
All you see now is bright light
Over you.
No more dark clouds.
No more demons
To pay you back.
Because you finally stepped
Into the light,
Where the past cannot
Hurt you.
As long as you stay in the
Here and now.
Life won't be an upward
Battle, as long as you move forward
And don't look back.



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