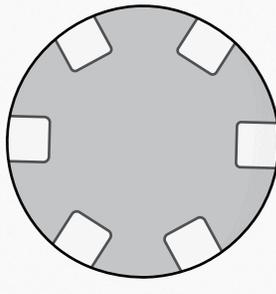
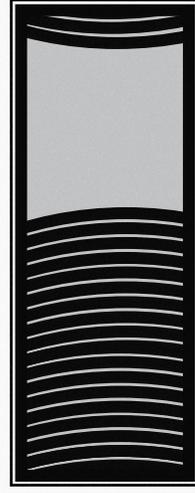
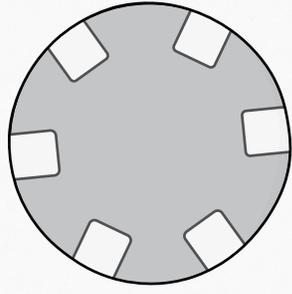


A

MEMOIR MIXTAPES
VOLUME: 1
Origin Stories



SL-L

LOW NOISE HIGH OUTPUT

C-90

Your Long Arms

by Marcus Civin

I convinced my parents to spring for the bus to San Francisco. I said, "It's hard." I said, "But it's good." I said, "At least I know I'm not ready for college."

A roommate fresh from Peace Corps falls in love with an Italian lawyer. Leaving for his family olive farm, she says: "I'm bad at goodbye," shoves at me two shoe boxes stuffed with cassettes. One is orange. One is unadorned brown cardboard.

"Thanks. Grazie di cuore! Listen, Peter will be in touch for these at the end of summer. He's an old college friend. He's on his way back from Wyoming. Mi dispiace. Devo andare. È la stagione del raccolto!"

My parents underwrite my sixth of the rent for my windowless portion of an old washing machine warehouse. I blame them for my schooling. Though I studied, lessons never took. I'd worn a uniform, attended football games. For a pep rally, my drama teacher had asked me to recite the rallying cry from Shakespeare's *Henry V*. I botched it, in shame, jumbling the order, forgetting everything after the lines "But when the blast of war blows in our ears, imitate the action of the tiger, stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage..."

In San Francisco, I feel purpose as the temporary keeper of Peter's two boxes of cassette tapes. I feel responsible. He will be in touch at the end of the summer, quick, unemotional, frank like he is picking up a book he's ordered at the library. He will be less than I want. To me, his tape collection suggests more. While I have his boxes, I take it as my duty to listen to every tape. I feel I can't hold them or pass them on unless I listen. I am conduit.

It is Laurie Anderson who sticks with me from one of the boxes, her 1982 album, *Big Science*. On it, her 1981 single "O Superman." There, über man. There, a set of well-meaning, if clueless, parents. There, Anderson's menacing electronically processed voice singing about soothing maternal body parts gone robotic: long arms, automatic arms, petrochemical arms. Something is wrong. Arms, I think, as in: human arms, Mom and Dad, a hug in winter, and also: arms stored in an armory, an arsenal of ammunition, M-16s, and Uzis.

There is sweetness in her voice, harmoniousness. I can see her singing by a bedside, and I can see her singing over roadkill. More, I feel her forcefully beckoning towards an aggressive hate, packaged-in passengers about to be sent off into a universe bereft, unjust. In the song, the distance between answering machine and apocalypse is a surprisingly easy slide. There, a singing voice message: "This is the hand, the hand that takes."

There, the same voice issuing assurance that a staff of dedicated couriers is hard at work; they seem to have something to do with airplanes. The more I listen, the more I think of the planes as flying hearses, death jets.

The warehouse where I live is large. It sucks up sound. Before I leave every morning, to get me up, I listen to Laurie Anderson: “Oh Superman. Oh Juuuudge. Oh Mom and Daad. Mom and Daaaad.”

From San Diego to San Francisco I carried a bulbous lamp, a towel from the bathroom closet at home, my father’s tape measure, his T-square, screwdriver set, and plug-in drill. I work for a man named Ward. I help him flip apartments. We cut, set, and drill studs, unload, load, and hang drywall. We restore the occasional restaurant or bar, a new bistro where there had been a Salvadorian place.

Ward has something to say about everyone. I think his particular sourness might overtake him. It makes me nervous, but we manage. He doesn’t stop to eat lunch. Instead, he runs. He has a talent for ending up his runs nearby a young woman, getting her talking as he starts sit-ups and push-ups on the sidewalk. His pick-up gimmick is pretending it is his Birthday.

I learn by surprise he is allergic to bees. His face blows up one afternoon while yelling at me and one of the other guys about how stupid salad dressing is. Somehow, he seems unaware of the swelling or the original sting. Or, he doesn’t care. “Dante,” he screams puffy-faced at my co-worker, “Who would want to make salad dressing?! Eat a fucking vegetable! Just eat it, don’t dress it up! Fuck you and your fucking salad dressing!”

I make enough working for Ward to purchase a video camera. This feels good. On the tapes, I make only snippets, putting multiple events on a tape, playing them back at night listening to Laurie Anderson, her talk-singing, her techno rise and fall. There are blue spaces on the tape where the image falls off and the timer keeps going.

Laurie Anderson: “Hello? This is your Mother. Are you there? Are you coming home?”

0:08:16 - 0:16:15

On a car ride, my neighbor Bev driving, I record the passing buildings. Bev says, “Here we are, Sir.” She parks by the copy shop, chews at the side of one of her fingernails.

0:16:45 - 0:28:09

I stack books to stomach-height, set the camera on top and record my hand just in front of a rough wall: my finger pointing up, a fist, then my hand waving, my finger pointing down, fist, thumb folded-in to make the number four, a fist then a peace sign, two hands holding a precise distance between them, lifting that up and down.

“Well, you don’t know me, but I know you... So you better get ready. Ready to go. You can come as you are, but pay as you go. Pay as you go.”

0:32:05 - 00:33:31

Sitting naked, sucking in, hands holding in my stomach, pushing up under my ribs. Me holding my breath.

0:34:59 - 0:45:58

With Bev, I go to the woods lugging a heavy sack of clay, collecting sticks and trash, a lot of broken plastic lying around. With this, we make what we call torches. We hold up our new stick-clay-branch-

trash torches. We shout: “Y equals aloft water bottle!” And: “Y equals medicine bottle broken and stuffed with clay!” Then, “Thanks, mouthwash bottle! Thanks to spray cleaners! Thanks, flower coffee cup!”

“This is the hand. The hand that takes.”

0:46:17 - 1:02:04

We go back to the woods, find a rusty bathtub, bring it deeper into the woods, fill it with dirt. Bev says: “Isn’t it?”

“Here come the planes. The American planes”

I say, “It is.”

“So hold me now, in your long arms. Your automatic arms.”

I say: “Wash!”

Bev takes a photograph, prints a life-size image of me in the bathtub covered in dirt. I reprint the photograph onto fabric and sew it into a dress. Bev and I take turns wearing the dress around her room.

I receive in the mail a blue-and-white blanket from my Montana Aunt. I cut garlic, sauté spinach. I notice the way two hammers rest against each other on the shelf. I scrub the warehouse kitchen, the dented toaster and the burnt microwave. Bev’s elbow, her light blonde arm hairs, her huge sigh.

I shellack the torches from the woods walk with Bev thinking they’ll last longer. I store them on the top shelf in a closet sticking out of a metal toolbox.