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LOVE

*looking for something,
what can it be*

When I travelled, alone, to Los Angeles in early 2020, a taxi driver asked me why I'd come. I told him I was there to write about the singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell. It felt good to have a story.

'Joni Mitchell, Joni Mitchell,' he said. 'I'm just thinking if I know someone who knows Joni.'

I didn't say anything.

'Hmm, wait, I think I do. I've known the musician Gillian Welch for like twenty years,' he said, 'I'll give her a call. Maybe Gillian can hook you up, get you five minutes on the phone with her or something. Here, take my number.'

I took his number even though I knew I would not call him. I was attracted to the idea of being someone who would call him. And while I did hope to write about Joni, she wasn't why I was there. I'd had the trip planned long before that idea came along. I was there to write and think. But I didn't expect much of myself. My friend and poetry mentor Roddy had died the month before. I arrived with a grief that I hoped

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might melt into California's huge horizons. I hoped newness might knock grief clean out of me.

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Joni Mitchell's album *Blue* has been part of my interior world for thirty years. My copy of it, on vinyl, has grown warped from being kept in direct sunlight, scratched from my careless ways with record sleeves and liners. When I play the record, it sounds as though it's being received from space – the music delivered through a fuzzy channel of feedback. It's been so well used as to take on the quality of being commonplace, where dings and scratches and fading are accepted because of its sense of belonging to me. But I don't need to play the album to listen to it. I can sing it from start to finish, with all the emotional and tonal shifts, and often do. I can summon every element of the music in my head. My paternal grandma, Eva, used to say to me, 'Amy, I hear music.' I loved this mysterious declaration. I now know what she meant. Using thought as my instrument, I regularly play *Blue* from start to finish without a pause.

The album came out in 1971, seven years before I was born. It was Joni's fourth, recorded in LA, after she'd taken a year's break from touring. *Blue*'s songs hold within them the potency of that time taken for reflection. Joni was already enjoying success – her album *Clouds* won a Grammy for 'Best Folk Performance' in 1970, and *Ladies of the Canyon*, the record that came out before *Blue*, had sold over half a million copies. But *Blue* eclipsed what had gone before. The album's charting of love, loss and longing became a landmark for millions worldwide, across all decades of life. It's the kind of album people play one another in the early stages of a relationship to help express big feelings. That people

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will frame the front cover of and put on their wall. That someone might pull a lyric from for a tattoo. An album that people inherit from others emotionally. Even before I first heard her music, I accepted as fact that Joni was an important musician, part of popular music's canon in the same way as Prince, the Beatles, Diana Ross, Kate Bush. I don't know how this sense came about, but I instinctively knew that I would one day spend time with her music. Decide if Joni was going to be canon to me.

I think back to 1992 and the first time I heard *Blue*. My best friend had recently begun to have periods, and one had just started. She was sleeping over on the pull-out bed that lived under my own. We called it 'the surfboard'. My red and purple lava lamp was on, the rest of the lights were off. We listened to the album on cassette, borrowed from my older sister Rebecca. An emotional inheritance.

The first song is 'All I Want'. Into the dark cocoon of our sleepover, Joni sang 'I am on a lonely road and I am travelling, travelling, travelling, travelling, looking for something, what can it be?' I remember having a strange feeling, an anxiety-adjacent excitement, a bodily sense that I too would experience something transformative, and soon. I joined Joni on the road she was travelling. I knew I would not sleep until the cassette had clicked onto the B-side and I had heard the last note of the last song.

In my memory of that night, the lava lamp was like the pain my friend was experiencing, the hot red pulse of it. Pain as a red energy, as hypnotic. Pain that moves as an octopus might in the deep seas of womanhood and romantic grief – thresholds I had yet to cross. I was fourteen and yearning to swim in both.

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That night *Blue* ignited my desire and ambition for romantic love, my idea of how I would press my heart against the world. What appealed, I think, was the way it described the complexities of love. It was the first representation of love that seemed truthful: love as best and worst, joy and sorrow. I'd hurt someone. They would hurt me. Love meant staying and going, the bothness of it suddenly clear. And love did not need to mean convention, perhaps not marriage, perhaps not children. The music's harmonic cascades in all their sprawling highs and lows mapped the course I, and romantic love, would take. *Blue* seemed to give me a complete palette to paint myself into all life's possibilities. I took in the album's emotional range, and it became innate. I accepted *Blue* as part of the language I had to express myself.

In early crushes and relationships, I'd test my feelings against *Blue*'s sentiments, as though the album provided an ultimate scale of intensity that would reveal whether the love had substance. Was this a love so strong I couldn't numb it out of myself with wine? Did it have the endurance of the northern star? Could it keep away my blues? Would it anchor me where I stood, or let me sail away? Looking back now, I think I tricked myself into believing almost all of my romantic attachments measured up against *Blue*'s scale. I accepted love would bring me pain, so much so that joyful love became not an expectation, but an occasional gift. Love meant being prepared to bleed. I was ready to commit to it.

But while I have certainly bled for romantic love, I've largely found myself living without it. The last time I had a boyfriend I was twenty-two. I'm about to turn forty-four. In my early years of knowing *Blue* I thought I was at the beginning of romantic love's presence in my life. All beginnings

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incorporate the potential for an end, I just had no idea how rapidly I'd get there.

Sometimes I read my teenage diaries intent on finding a solution to my lovelessness, or clues, at least, about why things have turned out this way. What ideas and behaviours took hold then, and might they give me keys to understanding myself? I've been troubled to read how I would passively respond to the desire another person had for me, as though their attraction was something I was subject to rather than a mutual occurrence. It seemed I'd been gripped by the idea of love as exquisite pain rather than joy. And I would rather have chosen pain, deception, abuse even, than been alone. In one entry, I wrote 'even being used would be better than this' – 'this' being romance's absence. My diaries from that time reveal a young woman desperate for romantic attachment, page after page accounting for being noticed and not being noticed by objects of desire. There is little else – no intellectualising, it's all pangs of longing.

At the back of one diary from 1995/6, between the ages of sixteen and seventeen, there is a list of boys I kissed or had an involvement with, and how long it lasted. Tim, Gregg, Craig (two months), Dave, Brian (two weeks), Adam, Gary, Peter, Gary, Craig. Sometimes these boys were so close together it was like they were cigarettes I lit from the end of the one I was smoking. I thought that list would go on forever.

In 'All I Want' Joni sings, 'I hate you some, I hate you some, I love you some'. A manifesto of romantic ambivalence, of how the mind 'see-saws' when you love. She plays a stringed instrument I had always assumed to be a guitar but now know is an Appalachian dulcimer, which she used for the

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first time on *Blue*. The dulcimer flits cleanly between chords, but is tonally nervy – a musical agitation – and Joni’s mezzo-soprano voice glides above it, making full use of its range. I don’t think ‘I hate you some, I hate you some, I love you some’ is intended to prize a love that is both hot and cold, cruel and kind; but I do think it was easy for me to manipulate her message for my own ends. To justify what I thought, what I did and what I was subject to as the natural or indeed ideal romantic experience.

In my first experience of unrequited love, at seventeen, I wrote obsessively about how I felt. No detail too small. I’d met him at the Riverside club, in Newcastle. I went every Friday night. It was summertime and we were there for my sister’s birthday. She’d made us piña coladas before we went out – I’d never had a cocktail before, and I was greedy for the glamour of it. I wore a hot pink satin miniskirt, low on my hips. It had a skinny belt. On the dance floor, he came over and said, ‘I like your belt.’ That was all it took.

After we kissed he asked for my number. He told me he would call me the following Tuesday, and I had no doubt that he would. He was *so* into me. I was *such a nice kisser*. I was *so gorgeous*. There was some thrilling warm weather that week. Monday was spent wildly anticipating Tuesday. Tuesday came and went, hungry and insomniac. On the Wednesday I bargained with myself about why he’d not yet called. The pre-internet comfort of *he’s lost my number*. I had a half-day at college, so went home, got an extension cord so I could bring a radio outside, opened all the windows so that I would hear the phone, and sat in the yard. I hoped I might get a tan in the narrow portion of sun that fanned across the yard during the afternoon. On the radio, they were leading with the story of Hugh Grant’s arrest in

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LA for paying a sex worker, Divine Brown, for a blow job. I felt I was getting purchase on this world of adults, where I drank cocktails, sunbathed, understood the subtext of ‘a lewd act’ and waited for boys to call me on the telephone. I spent the afternoon walking in and out of the house, checking the phone was definitely on the hook, calling 1571 to see if I’d missed a call. There were no calls. I was exquisitely agitated. There was the pain of rejection, but alongside that pain, there was the pleasure of desire. My body activated in an entirely new way, a way that called back to how it felt to first hear *Blue*. I’d turned seventeen that month. I felt that I was entering the world Joni had prepared me for. I wanted to feel girlhood exiting my body. The way I expected that to happen was through romantic love entering my body and conquering it.

I saw him at the nightclub again and again. One time in between kissing he asked me if I was seeing anyone else, and I said, ‘No, I just want you.’ Later that night he said to me ‘I’ve been worried, about things you said. You don’t want anyone else but me.’ I tried to poke holes in what I’d said to him. To make it minuscule. Eventually he relaxed and asked me to come home with him. It was the first time I would deny what I wanted in the hope it might make me more desirable. That night I was desperate to lose my virginity. He tried for hours to press into me – dry despite my longing – while ‘Wonderwall’ by Oasis played on repeat, the cassette auto-turning from the A- to the B-side and back again. The next day I got the metro back from Newcastle to South Shields, my eyeliner from the night before still immaculate. Before reaching my house I called my friend Rachel on a payphone, asking her to say I’d stayed at hers if my parents asked. A couple of weeks later, when I’d not heard from him again, I wrote in my diary ‘I love you. I love you. I hate myself and I hate you.’ I hadn’t realised, until now, that I was paraphrasing

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Joni. After him, more short relationships followed this pattern. Then I got a serious boyfriend, which lasted a year; then another, almost a year. Another, and then nothing.

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In a 2007 interview with the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, Joni was asked about how she tuned her guitar, an idiosyncratic tuning. She spoke of creating ‘chords of inquiry’, she wanted a sound like ‘a question’ in every chord. She even starts *Blue* with a question. *Looking for something, what can it be?* I think that’s what arose for me in LA, a curiosity about how Joni saw the world, saw love, and the ways in which she had shaped me. So that is where I’ll begin my own inquiry, into romantic love and its absence. I’ll start with a *Blue* perspective, a filter to think through my own questions.

Blue has been a companion for thirty years now, and in it I keep finding something I need. First it was an impression of womanhood and romantic love that I could pursue. It then became a way to measure the gap between those dreams and my reality. But now it has given me an endeavour, one I’ve only just summoned the courage to begin. The more I have listened to the album, the more all the things I thought went hand in hand with romantic love – a home, parenting, self-love, intimacy, travel, sex and exes, soulfulness and consolation, the transformative power of sharing desires – have shown up in the songs, giving me threads to pick up and follow. At first I thought if I didn’t have romantic love, these things would elude me, but then I began to see how I’d found my own ways towards them.

In each song, a particular lyric seems to direct itself to me as a question. About why romantic love is deemed essential to

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our ideas of the home and shared domestic fulfilment. About the choices made and not made to have children. About why romantic love can feel dependant on the ability to achieve self-love. About whether intimacy is possible in a life lived in the absence of romantic love. About how to travel and take pleasure alone. About my romantic affairs, the crazy feelings of sexual attraction, limerence, unrequited love and the strategies I deployed to numb romantic desire and rejection out of my mind. About whether the love I had for my friend Roddy had more significance than our definitions of love and relationships allowed. About what the soul means for me when I've no soulmate. About how if I've found and created meaning in my life, I might find myself transformed by what takes shape in romantic love's absence.

I've had two periods of therapy. The last time, the therapist asked me to set goals for my future. One was that I wanted a romantic partner. Even as I expressed this desire, I was mobilised by resistance: my flight response took hold in my body. 'What's going on for you, right now?' she asked me. I told her I wanted to flee. During the session, she repeatedly asked me 'what would it look like, feel like, to walk towards this fear, rather than trying to protect yourself from it?' I found myself lacking answers. 'Perhaps,' she eventually said, 'your fear is that life is OK without romantic love? Perhaps it is scary to accept you are not deficient without it.' There was some truth in that; my life wasn't bad, and I had likely become preoccupied with the stigma of being without romantic love, rather than looking at the other feelings I had towards it. Life lived in the absence of romantic love was violently at odds with how I saw myself and what I'd hoped for my future. I didn't want to be satisfied with my life as it was and I wanted romantic possibility, I wanted to understand what was keeping me away from romantic love. The

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last person who loved me romantically, my friend Roddy, died. I had not been able to reciprocate.

I feel moved to interrogate those feelings for myself, and for others too, because I wonder if we all lose by centring romantic love in our lives. And it does still feel like romantic love is centred. Even as the internet has helped us to find our own warm pocket of community within the endless variations of romantic and sexual identity; even though state and church control of who can and cannot be romantically and sexually involved, and who can have their relationship recognised, has loosened. Nothing has displaced romantic love from its holy status. If we were to pay attention, what do we fail to notice, share and celebrate because of this? Is it possible that life without romantic love isn't so bad? Is it possible we can take as much pleasure in other loves, find new ways of incorporating romantic feeling into our lives, assign importance to crossing over thresholds that romantic love has abandoned? All those things could be true. But if they are, is it OK to still want romantic love too? I need to know because I feel like I've got myself stuck. Entrenched in the pain of not having, but silently warring against it to present myself as OK.

I've joked to friends how this endeavour 'will put the nail in my romantic coffin for once and for all'. It scares me to lay out all the ways in which absence of romantic love touches my life. I worry that writing all this down brings the risk of damage, gives people too much information. I fear I'll end up a subject of conversation, supported by ample written evidence I have freely and elaborately provided, about why I've been without romantic love for so long. But I've tried my best not to make the question 'why am I single?' even though it is something I ask myself and have many theories

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about. Rather, I'm motivated by how alone I have felt in being in this situation, how ashamed, and the cruel monologuing I've subjected myself to. I know I'm not the only one feeling this way. Even though it's more unusual to live outside of the bounds of romantic relationships than it is to live within them, I feel it could be valuable to us all to think about the ways in which we can create good lives without expecting romantic love to do the work.

Yoko Ono said, 'Each time we don't say what we want to say, we're dying.' I feel those words in my whole body. So, I must speak. It might be that I will live the whole of my life attended by a sense of lack, romantic love eluding me, but I must be brave enough to say out loud, *I did want it. I do want it.* It's still possible I'll end up a victim of my own passivity, of my reluctance to expose myself to pain's potential, but admitting this is my own kind of trying, of reaching towards love. That is something. I gave up my project of romance and now decades have passed. I want to find my way back to the road.