

It was the fourth day of walking. Under a frame-pack and the winter sun creeping into March, I walked. Roadsides, highways, the forests of the Black Mountains, I searched for something new, some kind of mirror to understand my place in the world. I had chosen county highways in the deciduous springtime of North Carolina to the semesters in Ecuador, and Italy, and Spain, that my college friends had taken. Instead of abroad, I wanted to go deep, on foot, into the United States. I wanted something “real”, days unstructured by money, skies unaltered by the city lights I was leaving.

I would walk across four states. This was my plan. By day four I had given in to spontaneity, slept in ditches, shoplifted chocolate bars and bread. Trees, then cars and interstate, strangers and small talk: this was traveling solo, inchoate in my own country. Lost, empty, lonely, adrenaline too strong to be scared, my mind easily ambled into longing. But what I longed for surprised me. I didn’t want warm food or a bed, not t.v. or a friend. I wanted something more like control: in strange, subtle and recurring longings, this became an ache for my skirt.

This skirt was special: white cotton, floor length and full, like a medieval undergarment, heavy, two ruffles at bottom. It fanned my legs with each kinetic step and in a chill, its folds trapped my body-heat to me. Laid flat it made a circle big enough to lie on, a bed, a beach towel, a blanket, big enough to fold on top of me. Hung around my neck like a smock, it was big enough to hide in.

I found it months before I left, piled with bricks and bowls and faucets in an abandoned SoHo dance studio some friends were squatting. I had modeled it around New York, to work, on walks in the rain. Its ruffles absorbed a gray reminder of every sidewalk it swept, every foot that preceded mine, and the dreary, romantic monochrome of a wet, wet city.

The skirt projected femininity, innocence, antiquation, changed the profile, the gait and posture. Like a mohawk and makeup had been for a past me, it was a cover, a costume, cartoonish and damsel. What we wear implies a story, a past, a future. A dirty petticoat, it was odd even in New York. Indeed, a photographer for Vogue stopped me once to take its picture.

From the dirt roads of the south, I trekked back to my boxed up belongings in New York, and left again with the skirt draped from my waist. It hung here for seven years; I continued to roam, sketching an outline of America. The weather changed, the traffic changed, the landscape changed. The faces changed, too. But inside I was safe, shielded by my uniform, as the skirt stockpiled, bit by bit, reminders:

A snot stain, stiff and green, dabbed shotgun in a big-rig on I-80. Pink dashes of thread mending tears from barbed wire, a snagged screw, a tree branch. Seven tiny holes, spaced at the interval of gears—a borrowed bicycle, the crowd moving on without me. A phone number to find friends in California. A mysterious note, “dear chemin, peck, lindsey, love.” Paint stains. Grease stains. Broad yellow coffee stains. Stains from ink rubbed off fresh, homemade tattoos. Tape. Tar. Blood.

The homeless have homes we can’t recognize: a collection in a shopping cart, the sound of cars on a bridge, the smell of leaves turning to mold. If one is fated to wander, or even in a wandering mood, home is a space that is carried. Like inches marked on a doorframe, smears on the stove, scuffs on the floor—home is an assemblage of relics, a place to control. Mine flowed between my legs, covered me when I slept, and carried me through a strange and ever-changing landscape.

It hangs now on hooks in my bedroom: just rags, just for savoring, too fragile to take too far, too thin to be of much use; I wear it to dance alone in my kitchen. Still, it stands in the gap between my self as a private secret, and my self as part of the world I'm still be deciphering. Some mornings, as I brush past on my way to work, or for walks in the rain, I push my face in and inhale. Trapped between the fibers, my collection jostles, dislodges into my nose, to my brain, a trigger. It smells like detergent, like my skin, my breath, my sweat. It is the smell of my bed, a smell too familiar to recognize, a smell strong enough to call an animal back from its prowl, strong enough to calm a swift heart. Sometimes it smells like nothing.