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LIKE A SHOVEL AND A ROPE

Notes on family and a family band

BY DAVID RAMSEY

PHOTOGRAPH BY SULLY SULLIVAN

1. Shortly after she turned one, my daughter developed a sign for requesting music: She would make a fist and thrust it up and down, like the sign for truckers to honk their horn.

My wife Grace or I would cue up a song on the phone and Marigold would wag her head and bobble her shoulders, like an aging hippie whose groove has curdled. She made frequent requests. If she disapproved of the pick, she'd keep thrusting her arm until we landed on a song she liked. "Mary Ann & One Eyed Dan" by Shovels & Rope was a favorite, and she'd reach up to me to pick her up and spin her around the kitchen as I sang along. One of her first sentences was an instruction: "Dance, Dada."

Everything was so fresh and oversaturated, this bright new life, no wonder she wanted a soundtrack. She gave us the trucker sign insistently even in the brief pauses of silence between songs on an album. At six in the morning, she would wake up and immediately begin signaling, with increasing urgency. So there was more music in our mornings, more music in our home.

2. If Charleston, South Carolina, has a house band, let's say that it's the husband-and-wife duo Shovels & Rope. Michael Trent is from Denver and Cary Ann Hearst is from Nashville by way of Mississippi, but that's how it ought to be: A house band of outsiders, tramps like us.

They have been on the road a hundred fifty to two hundred days a year since they began playing together as a band around a decade ago. It's travelers' music that they play, folk and country and rock, just the two of them, swapping instruments and singing nearly every word together in something closer to a tangle than a harmony.

It was a side project at first, and that's how they referred to it for years. Even now they check in every so often: *Are we doing this? Is this good for you?* They weren't musical partners when they got married—they were both invested in their own musical projects and never planned to be in a band together. But then they dabbled here and there, and people liked it, so they outfitted their van with a bedroom—queen air mattress and curtains Velcroed on the windows—and went on the road, and a record label came calling, and at a certain point it seemed easier to reckon a life together if they played together, too. Sometimes when people talk about destiny, what they really mean is logistics.

"We had nothing to lose," Cary Ann said. "Fuck it. Band. Family. Let's give it a shot. . . . Handshake, spit on it. If it gets too nasty we'll cut and run."

3. "Mary Ann & One Eyed Dan" is a ramshackle fable, the love story of a waitress at the circus and a *Delaware Locale Observer* reporter fresh out of the army, "missing half an eyelid so he had to wear a patch." A country romp with a carnival spirit, the song imagines love as a kind of surrender of the self: "So long to my former life / to a worried life, so long . . . So long to a wandering life / To a wounded life, so long."

It is one of those pieces of pop music that fully pops for children, not because it's childish but because it somehow transmits at all frequencies (see also Paul Simon's *Graceland*, "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," Woody Guthrie, the early catalog of Bone Thugs-N-Harmony). Later, we would teach our daughter the efficiencies of grown-up life, like how to speedily put on her own socks. But first there was her delight in a song, that unhurried fixation, that untaught wonder.

Back then she couldn't sing along, but that's okay, her mama and daddy could. "So long to our former selves," we sang, and we sang it loud, like a siren to remind each other that we were there, still singing together. As loud a wail as Michael and Cary Ann on the record, again and again: "To our selfish selves, so long."

4. Once upon a time there was a country singer in Charleston named Cary Ann Hearst, working service jobs to pay the rent. She was in a band called the Borrowed Angels, a name which kind of captures

the sound of her voice, a haggard thing in celestial terrain. Then one day Michael Trent came to town, using Charleston as a home base while on tour in the Southeast with his garage-rock band, the Films, a name which kind of captures the punch and sweep of the songs he writes.

"New boys with rock & roll clothes showed up in the bar," Cary Ann said. "In this town there's not very many cute boys and there's a lot of thirsty women."

Reader, she married him. It poured down rain on their wedding day and that was just fine—mud splattered on her dress, they kept dancing, and their friends had to make four separate beer runs to the Piggly Wiggly.

5. Describing their live performance on stage together, Cary Ann told *Rolling Stone* a few years back, "People think we're gazing romantically in each other's eyes, but I'm really just waiting for the change."

I told Grace this line and she said, "But—isn't that really the same thing?"

6. They had a baby and they made it work. Their daughter, Louisiana, was born in autumn 2015. At first they figured it would be perfect—they record at home, so they would just get some recording done while they took some time at home with their newborn. "It turns out they don't really jibe with each other, like brand-new, wailing infant and silent-room-that-you-need-to-record," Michael said in an interview that first year. Eventually they built a studio in their backyard. Louie wasn't sleeping well, which meant that Cary Ann and Michael weren't either. They wondered how they would ever write a song.

They became obsessive schedulers. "If we could give each other a few hours in the day just to be off the hook—this is your time, go do whatever you want with it, you can go and work in the garden or sit there and try to write a song," Michael told me. "I subscribe to the method of writing songs where you clock in—I work well with deadlines, windows. Maybe in the past, Cary was more of a free spirit, waiting for the muse to come and strike. That's just really difficult with kids."

Cary Ann said she was a work in progress. "I've certainly developed habits that allow me to show up undistracted, because I have a hard time turning off mom mode and going into creative mode," she said. "You know, if it's write a song or make sure there's groceries in the house, I'm going to make sure there's groceries in the house. Because I'm hungry."

Their son, Oskar, was born in January. They bring the kids on tour with them. Nowadays they tour in a bus, complete with separate bed spaces and a bassinet in the back for Oskar. The kids like the rumbles and vibrations of the bus, and they sleep well with the white noise of the highway.

7. Marigold was born the day before the summer solstice, two years ago. She was born in our bedroom in DeLand, a central Florida town full of lizards, Spanish moss, and biker bars. It's a major hub for skydiving and snake venom extraction, and home to a liberal arts college, where my wife was a painting professor. It's not a retirement community or a tourist destination, exactly, but seems to be a way station for people in aspirational transition: not yet living out a Jimmy Buffett song, but at least dressing the part.

In the first few months after Marigold was born, I would sit down to respond to an email and then get up halfway through to relieve Grace and change a diaper and then sit back down to finish the note and realize that two weeks had passed. On one of our early excursions with Marigold, to a pond near our house, we saw a family of ducks walk by and Grace started weeping. We were not sleeping much.

I remember lying in bed, passing our squirming red baby back and forth, chest to chest, thumbing the unused soles of her feet. Narrating the life to come, explaining to each other how we would conjure time for Grace to paint and time for me to write. Then Marigold broke in with wild hiccups, her very first, and I reached for my phone to capture the moment.

8. My first interview with Shovels & Rope was by telephone. My daughter was sick. And in the midst of a "sleep regression." This is the clinical and precise term that parent-advice blogs use to diagnose an utter mystery.

"Oh man," Michael said. "I'm sorry. If you could see my eyes—"

A languid talker, he paused. "I know what your eyes look like right now."

"The international society of dads," Cary Ann said.

"We're all gonna be all right," she told us later, as we were getting off the phone, and then she said it again. "We're all gonna be all right."

9. When I was a teenager in Nashville, I used to go to the basement of a pizza joint to see this girl I knew a little bit play guitar and sing songs. She wore a punk rock getup—dog collar, dyed hair spiky and short—and she sang cover songs and a few originals. It's one of those memories that zags through time because back then, sitting on the concrete floor, I was narrating a future: This girl was going to be a star someday, and I would say,

SHE'D REACH UP TO ME TO PICK HER UP AND SPIN HER AROUND THE KITCHEN AS I SANG ALONG. ONE OF HER FIRST SENTENCES WAS AN INSTRUCTION: "DANCE, DADA."

hey, I saw her play way back when. The acoustics were terrible, but it made no difference. It registered to my teenage self that I had been using the word *awesome*, but this is what the word was actually for: She sang like the mouth of a river breaking into the ocean.

Later, we became better friends. My senior year of high school, she was my date to homecoming at my school; I was her date to prom at hers. Then we both went off to college, kept in periodic touch, then lost touch, until this year, I wrote her, "Cary Ann, been a minute, how about I write a story?"

10. There is a neighborliness to the music of Shovels & Rope. They still have the blister and bluster of their teenage punk roots, so they might not like me saying this, but it's true. Most rock songs, you imagine either that you're the singer or that you're the one being sung to; with Shovels & Rope, you imagine the gate is open and the backyard is full and you're singing along.

Many of their best songs have a deliberateness on the topic of how to build a life, both wistful and hard-edged. "Making something out of nothing with a scratch and a hope," they sing on "Birmingham," their origin-myth anthem, "two old guitars like a shovel and a rope."

11. This spring, Grace and I watched *The Ballad of Shovels and Rope*, a 2014 documentary that follows Michael and Cary Ann at the band's beginning, before they broke as Americana darlings. We carefully arranged our schedules to watch it during Marigold's nap—maybe the first movie we had watched together start to finish in a year and a half.

Michael and Cary Ann gave the filmmakers a great deal of access over the course of two years, and did some filming themselves when they were on the road. The result is an artifact of a different time in their lives: roughing it, on their own, no money, nothing but time. Grace kept pointing to her arms to show me the goose bumps she was getting, not because they're sweet together in the film, although they are, but because it captures the rhythms of their perseverance: Things are hard, but they are made to be a little easier because they are at ease with each other.

The film lingers cozily on the domestic and the everyday. We see Cary Ann waiting tables and lugging clothes to the laundromat, volunteering to mop up after a busted washer floods. We see Michael building the platform for the van that will stow their gear below and their air mattress above. Cary Ann works out the beginnings of a song after playing fetch in the woods with their dog Townes. Michael tries out a new chorus he wrote while he was lonely, out of town working on another record—he's sure it needs work, but Cary Ann insists it has arrived where it needs to be. They have their handwritten plan sketched out in a mess of scribbles and calculations, posted on their fridge. "A lot is riding on it and nothing is riding on it," Cary Ann says. Their wild dream is to make a living playing songs. "And have some rug rats," Michael adds.

On tour, they live out of their van with Townes the dog. On a frigid day at some unnamed stop, they spend the night in a Walmart parking lot. "We got the heat kicking, we got Chips Ahoy!, we got Newcastle," Cary Ann says.

"That," Grace said, putting her feet up on my lap, "was before they had kids."

12. Becoming a parent has given me what I would describe as Romantic feelings about chores. Keeping house can feel like riding a wild animal. This is the most bougie thing I will ever say, but might as well lean in: At the very end of *The Ballad of Shovels and Rope*, there's a scene of Michael and Cary Ann celebrating finally getting a washer and dryer, and I started tearing up.

13. The International Society of Dads reveal ourselves to each other at the grocery store, wordlessly or with the password, *been there*. Our new comrades with carriers akilter move in cautious stutters, traversing a haze of mild logistics. We hold the door or help to navigate loading a trunk. One dad raced to help me at the coffee shop when Marigold was an infant, as I was trying to balance an overly ambitious to-go order while pushing the stroller. When I thanked him, he informed me simply that it was happening. "It's happening, man," he said, and it was true, and I try to keep this in mind.

"There is no space," Michael sings on "By Blood," the foggy title track on their new record, written for their daughter Louie. "There is no time. We are here."

14. "When Michael brought that song to the table, our daughter was just attached to her mother, wouldn't take a pacifier, wouldn't take a bottle," Cary Ann said. "So at the same time he was being rendered into paternal love taffy by this incredibly stunning and remarkable child, there's also this rejection from this thing that he loves the most, or is learning to love the most."

I told them that the night before, I had attempted to comfort Marigold back to sleep for nearly an hour before I finally called for Grace. Marigold wanted milk and nothing else would do. When Mama came in, she was still sobbing and through her tears she wailed, her

"YOU CAN SING PRETTY," SHE TOLD ME ANOTHER TIME. "BUT THERE'S A DIFFERENT WAY TO SING IF YOU WANT TO CALL OUT THE GODS OR CRY OUT TO THE SPIRIT OR DISRUPT THE WEATHER."

last words before the boob, "Get out of here, Dada!"

This made Cary Ann laugh so hard, Michael informed me over the phone, that she spit out her beer.

15. There is a way of singing that is a distant cousin of the temper tantrum. A sound that simmers at the bend and snap of the spirit, fragile and fierce. We are peculiar animals that sing songs to each other, but we are still animals.

On the Rolling Stones song "Gimme Shelter," there is a moment, about three minutes in, when the backup singer Merry Clayton's voice breaks during her soaring cries. You can hear Mick Jagger on the recording, hooting his approval, overcome by the performance. This moment is rich in mythos: The story of how one night in 1969, Clayton got a call from her producer, waking her up around midnight. Clayton was very pregnant at the time. A band she wasn't familiar with from England needed a backup singer for a song they were recording and they needed one right away, immediately. Her husband told her she'd better go. Clayton showed up to the studio still in curlers and silk pajamas, the preacher's daughter from New Orleans, and they gave her the lyrics—"Rape! Murder!"—and she got it on the second take, when she decided to go a little higher, a little harder, and her voiced cracked.

I think what got me hooked on the way that Cary Ann sings shares something of this current, the way something so powerful could have such brittle edges. Shovels & Rope is like this, too—they seem to conjure in each other a kind of frenzy, grease and fury, tender cries at the edge of a scream. They are an anthemic band, but their medium is the fragility of the anthem: Something about to break.

16. "I had this very strong belief as a child, and I'm not unconvinced of it still, that certain frequencies can control the weather," Cary Ann said. "As a child, I was convinced that I had some superpower that I couldn't quite control."

"You can sing pretty," she told me another time. "But there's a different way to sing if you want to call out the gods or cry out to the spirit or disrupt the weather."

17. The infant's state of existential bafflement—*Who am I? Why am I here?*—seems basically correct, if inefficient, and I always feel a little guilty as a parent training it away.

What is the correct answer if your toddler hears the rain outside and asks, is it music?

When Marigold first started talking, I remember taking her to the playground and she approached a lizard and said "hi." Then she got on her knees and said "hi" to each and every ant that crawled by, one by one, and I had a feeling in my belly: Pride.

18. Onstage, Shovels & Rope is like a pair of one-man bands. "At any given moment, we're usually both playing at least two instruments, whether you can tell or not," Michael said. Both singing at full throttle, they switch back and forth on guitar, keys, harmonica, percussion. Their ethos as a band has always been to operate within constraints. Neither one knew how to play drums when they started playing together, but they knew they needed a beat when they took their act to the bar and they knew how to stomp on something in time. So they taught themselves, more or less. "Everything is happening in real time, analog," Cary Ann said. "Somebody is hitting something to make a noise. Nothing is just playing on its own."

It hurt, at first, for Michael and Cary Ann to decide to become a band—to remove their individual names from the marquee, dissolve their former institutions, shed their egos.

Around ten years ago, Grace and I saw them play at the Circle Bar in New Orleans. At the time, it was Cary Ann touring under her own name with Michael accompanying her, and back then one of them would sing their own song and the other would harmonize. They're both gifted harmony singers, from two different traditions—Cary Ann came up dreaming of being Emmylou Harris while Michael sang along to the Beach Boys. Along the way, though, they started singing more and more together, so it's not always easy to make out just who is on the melody and who is on the harmony, that too is swapping and swaying. Sometimes, Michael said, they don't even know. "That was our goal, to make it where you're not really picking out one or the other," he said. "We're pretty loose on stage with the vocal melodies . . . we're just kind of locked in, it's just a natural thing." So it becomes one voice, Shovels & Rope, the distinctive sound of the two of them singing together.

19. The thing that they do, I hesitate to say that you have to be there, but—there is an intimacy and devilment to their live performance, a lift and crash, that has been hard to capture on record. So that their art, like the lives they have carved out for themselves, is a thing on the move, uncatchable as a storm. Home and the road and home on the road.

20. "We have a really great tour nanny, and we have a small crew of people that love the kids and understand the lifestyle," Cary Ann said. "It's not very wild on our bus, it's pretty mild." They try and fail and try again to keep their routines in place. They

eat healthy food and take Louie to visit the nation's aquariums.

When interviewers like me ask them how they do it, a touring rock band with two kids, they say they're still figuring it out. That sounds like something you just say, but actually this is precisely what parenting is like, at least for me. You have a problem, you solve the problem, you feel right proud, your solution is rendered laughably irrelevant one day later because your child changes altogether. You are as plucky and as hopeless as a medical researcher hunting a cure for a bug that evolves faster than every breakthrough.

21. "Be regular and orderly in your life like a bourgeois, so that you may be violent and original in your work," Gustave Flaubert wrote late in his life, in a letter to a friend.

As self-help for artists, this is a useful maxim. Flaubert himself never married and traveled the world sleeping with prostitutes. He had no children, explaining that he would "transmit to no one the aggravations and the disgrace of existence."

22. Grace and I wore out "Mississippi Nuthin'," the second track on *By Blood*, this summer, couldn't get enough. It opens with a panic of drums and a jangling acoustic guitar and then a slayer of a first line, cooed together by Michael and Cary Ann: "Your joy is killing me."

"It's a mean thing to admit," Michael told me, "so it's easier to cast it on a character."

Here's a fun game: Imagine the urgency of a Bruce Springsteen song recast as a late-night drunken phone call. *I wanna die with you, Wendy, on the street tonight in an everlasting kiss.* Yikes. Run, Wendy.

The narrator in "Mississippi Nuthin'" is a former high-school quarterback down on his luck. He drunkenly calls an old friend from school who has gone on to fame as an entertainer, while his own life has gone off track. He swears he's got a plan to turn things around: "I've got ideas." Of course he does. What follows might be called the passion of the drunk dial: Furiously righteous, indisputably wrong. There is no pathos like bad choices.

The song is a pulpy, fist-pumping singalong, but its seductive drama is immersed in spoiled pride. The past has a special buzz and glory if you feel like the present has let you down. "Remember when we used to wear each other's clothes?" the fallen hero asks, and as the song reaches its climax, Michael and Cary Ann's snarls begin to turn into screams: "You always think I'm bluffing / Like I'm some kind of Mississippi nuthin' / But I was first-string quarterback, drove you everywhere." Nostalgia is sweet right up until it rots.

23. In April I drove up to Charleston for the third annual High Water music festival, the lovely weekend event in Riverfront Park organized and curated by Shovels & Rope. It would be their first performance since the birth of their second child, who was then less than three months old.

Sobriety can trip me up at music festivals and art museums. Too conscious of the noisy self. On Sunday, I found a booth that gave out samples of whiskey during an allotted hour at the festival, and discovered they would keep on giving if you went back and waited in line again. I noted in my notebook that I missed my family.

I staked out a spot up front for the Shovels & Rope set on Sunday evening. I met a woman who had driven down from upstate New York for the festival, a trek she treated herself to every year. She was about to go to grad school to study disease-carrying ticks. Because of climate change, she explained to me, the ticks are steadily moving south.

Cary Ann and Michael took the stage in matching electric-blue suits and went to work. Eight limbs in wild motion. I wrote down, then crossed out, that they looked like an octopus trying to break out of captivity. The crowd up front began to swell, and after a while I walked back to the open grass. Whiskey-full and sentimental, I listened to the rest of the set lying down in the grass by myself and looking up at the clouds, which at the time seemed to me the proper position for the particular gratitude I was feeling at the moment—the big sky a miracle, every song a gift. "Carry me home," Cary Ann and Michael sang, and I let the feeling blossom that they were singing to each other, and to the crowd, and to me, "I'm no good when I'm alone."

After the set, I took a taxi to a cheap motel in North Charleston. The reviews on the internet had warned of blood stains on the motel walls. I shined a light and inspected. There was no blood that I could find.

24. When she first started talking, Marigold would break into a chant, reserved for particular moments: "Happy Dada! Happy Dada! Happy Dada!"

I confess I was intimidated by an irony so canny and so grown.

25. Before our first interview, Grace asked me to ask Cary Ann whether she felt that the particular attachment required of motherhood made it difficult to do creative work. Whether she ever felt sapped by the nurturing, like she had nothing left to give.

"I definitely identify with that," Cary Ann said. "If I could do anything different, I would have developed habits before the babies came that were structured. . . . The [backyard studio] space that we built has been a revolution because it's dedicated space where the tools are always set up. I can walk out of here with coat and curlers and get right to work, there's no toys, no stash of applesauce."

When the baby is born, Cary Ann said, "you're home from the hospital and the shine is off and it brings out your pure animal self. You're wrestling with your divine self and your animal self and the shattering of your personal interests and this hatching of a new existence where

the baby's needs absolutely take precedence over yours.

"You know," she said, "that whole thing."

26. "When we became parents, we were thinking, how are we gonna write songs with kids, this is crazy," Michael said. "One day, Louie and I were sitting at our window that faces across the street from our neighbor's house. We had a little toy piano. And every Christmas, our neighbor blows up these giant inflatables—Mickey Mouse, Santa. And we would sit there and play on her piano and make up songs. We made up this song about Mickey Mouse. It went, 'This is a song about a mouse / this is a song about a mouse / Everybody likes to sing a song about a mouse / Sit right down in our house / To sing a song about a mouse.' That song just stuck around, and we would always sing it together and it would make her laugh, and then make us laugh, too, in our deliriousness."

"She was around fifteen months," Cary Ann said, "so that was—she was talking, but not sleeping, still."

Months later, writing songs for *By Blood*, a tune kept creeping into Michael's head. It took him awhile to realize: The melody for "Good Old Days," a smoky, self-lacerating folk-dirge, the album's bleakest turn, came from "This Is a Song about a Mouse."

27. In June I turned forty years old. These things happen. Grace surprised me on the morning of my birthday: She arranged for me to go skydiving. Typically I get nervous around even well-fenced ledges with a drop of more than a few feet, so this was a stretch for me.

The videographer who documented the jump was a very excited Venezuelan man named Luis, who was more or less an anthropomorphized hang-ten sign. He asked me what I was most looking forward to—the jump? freefall? In the video, I tell him that "being in the vastness of the sky sounds nice," which I don't particularly remember saying, but I did. I look happy and calm, and I guess that I was. To my surprise, I wasn't terrified. This was just something that was happening to me. Trevor, the jumper I would be strapped to in the tandem, told me about how he wanted to make sure he kept doing this until his daughter grew up and wanted to try jumping herself, so he could be the one to do the tandem with her.

As we took off in the utility plane, an experienced jumper patted me on the shoulder and shouted above the engine, "Welcome to your new addiction!" I kept waiting for the terror to arrive, but the part of my brain that narrated what it would be like to jump out of an airplane was not in operation when I was, yes, nodding the okay to Trevor with my feet dangling out into the open sky, and then out of the plane I went. This was just something that was happening. The air shot up my nose and it felt a little bit like being underwater, not like I was drowning but like I was playing, at ease, under no illusion of control. This is not what gets committed jumpers addicted, but it was the part that was exhilarating to me: that surrender.

I don't think this is the metaphor you're supposed to take from skydiving but it's the one I got: You're in a rickety little plane and you tip over into the sky, and the sky is vast and frightening, there are things beyond your control, things that are scary, but there is a circular rainbow in that cloud—there, look.

28. Shovels & Rope were guests on a recent episode of the comedian Pete Holmes's podcast *You Made It Weird*. Well into the third hour of the interview, Holmes told them that he hoped to accept death when it comes, like a wave returning to the ocean. "But you know what?" he said. "How you brush your teeth is how you die."

Cary Ann: "Oh my god. Aggressively and suddenly?"

Michael: "Once a day?"

29. "You have this almost archetypical artist putting his art before his children, before his family, before everything," the writer Karl Ove Knausgaard said in a recent interview. "You have also Doris Lessing who did the same—abandoned her children to move to London to write. I've been kind of confronted with that as a writer, and I think everyone does because writing is so time consuming and so demanding. When I got children, I had this idea that writing was a solitary thing. I could go out to small islands in the sea. I could go to lighthouses, live there, try to write in complete . . . be completely solitary and alone. When I got children, that was an obstruction for my writing, I thought.

"But it wasn't. It was the other way around. I've *never* written as much as I have after I got the children, after I started to write at home, after I kind of established writing in the middle of life. It was crawling with life everywhere. And what happened was that writing became less important. It became less precious. It became more ordinary. It became less religious or less sacred.

"It became something ordinary, and that was *incredibly* important for me."

30. Shovels & Rope, as the name implies, began in the business of murder ballads and cowboy romps and tall tales. "We've always been interested in character songs and made-up stories," Michael said. "We weren't interested in being the tormented writer.

THEY WRITE THE SORT OF SONGS THAT COLLAPSE TIME–BOTTLE ROCKET EPICS THAT COME AND GO IN FOUR MINUTES BUT HAVE THE PULSE OF YEARS.

We didn't want to have to be drunk and heartbroken to write a song."

"And it wasn't going to happen, because we fell in love and we were happy," Cary Ann said.

When they were working on their album *Little Seeds*, released in 2016, their songs took a more personal turn. It was a heavy time. A close friend was murdered and Michael's father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Their daughter was born. "We got scared," Cary Ann said. "Like, oh shit, this is happening to us."

In an interview with the *Observer* around that time, Cary Ann said, "I used to write flippantly about death. I used to think that I wasn't afraid to die. Now I know that I'm terribly afraid.

"When you have a child that you have to raise, then you really give a shit if you're going to die or not—as well as if they're going to die. In fact, you become overwhelmed by all the ways you could die at any moment."

31. On the day I turned forty, an old friend wrote me and told me that she couldn't help but think of me as my eighteen-year-old self. I told her this seemed fine and true even if the particulars of that self have dissipated. Of course you think about this as a parent, this constant vanishing. When I'm with Marigold out and about, strangers are always telling me to enjoy it, the particular age she is, because it will be gone before I know it. It will go by so fast, they say. Maybe I'm too literal, but when I think about it, it seems like it's been about two years, actually. It's true that my daughter's six-month-old self and her one-year-old self and her eighteen-month-old self were inexhaustibly interesting characters that are now irretrievable. But I've experienced this as an accumulation—not a replacement, but a kind of stacking up. Her baby self is still here, now, the grains of sand you can no longer see as the castle grows. It would be like mourning the seeds when the flowers bloom.

This is the thing about the long haul, about old friends, about family. I am not the same person that I was when Grace met me thirteen years ago, but my life and her life are stacked upon the particulars of that time, and we meet again and again, new selves, new lives, sprouting from those old seeds.

32. In April, we found out that Grace got a tenure-track job as an art professor at a university in New Jersey, and we drank cheap champagne to celebrate. It had been a hard year. The particulars were ordinary—my parents' health declined and we moved them into an assisted living facility; Grace was hurt in a pair of car accidents. And other stuff. Just life. As parents, we were keeping it together, but our margins were thin.

As their records have become more cinematic and lush, Shovels & Rope have developed increasingly complicated arrangements in their live performances. They are more rock & roll than folk at this point, but it's still just the two of them up there. They told me this summer that they were still struggling to work out the kinks as they played songs from *By Blood*. Cary Ann said she felt like they used to be like two acrobats who could catch each other and now it felt like they were two tightrope walkers juggling, with no one to catch them if they fell.

"I can't resist the familial metaphor here," I told them.

"Yeah, this is hard, why don't we make *this* hard, too," Michael said, and they burst out laughing together, in the way that couples do when a punch line holds a thousand private stories.

Cary Ann and Michael are squeamish about the way their audience inevitably writes a love story onto watching them perform together. "Corny!" Cary Ann said. "I'm always a little bit grossed out. I love him so much. We are a family, we are like one thing. But I don't like that everybody's projecting—it's a romance, but it's not the kind they think it is. I always wanna go, 'ew, barf.'"

A love story is mostly what happens outside of the confines of a song. The particulars are ordinary.

"Partnership for survival in the world—that *is* romantic to me," Cary Ann said. "We're going to get down here in this ditch and we're going to shovel together until we get to the other side. I'm digging on this side and you dig on that side. Hopefully we get to the other side intact."

he been surfing on the very top layer of life and feeling okay. He wrote, "I'm still walking around and looking."

35. I drove with Grace and Marigold to St. Petersburg, Florida, in late June, where Shovels & Rope were opening for Tedeschi Trucks Band. Michael and Cary Ann met up with us the afternoon before the show at the Salvador Dalí Museum. Louie was on a field trip with the tour nanny, but they brought along Oskar, then five months old. Babies put Marigold in a state of excitement that renders her a sputtering fact-checker—"That's a baby? That's a stroller?" She touched his hand, even smaller than her own, as if it were a flower.

Michael and Cary Ann are expansive storytellers, which means they write the sort of songs that collapse time—bottle rocket epics that come and go in four minutes but have the pulse of years. This, too, collapses time: Years pass and you see someone you knew when you were just kids, and now you have kids of your own. Drinking beers with Cary in the parking lot of the Sylvan Park Public Library in Nashville, poof, we're forty.

For no reason at all, the song "Boxcar" from Michael and Cary Ann's first collaborative record came into my head, a stripped-down country song about crime partners, partners in crime—maybe it was because we had been listening to Shovels & Rope on the drive down, or maybe it was because I first heard that song in New Orleans, when Grace and I were living in a curiously

33. Counterpoint: It's not corny, Grace said. Two people making it together, making something beautiful. Love stories are corny if they're false. They are sacred if they're true. Also, Grace said, "They wear matching outfits! They're *adorable!*"

34. While I was working on this story, I got a text from one of my dearest friends, around the same age as me and Cary Ann and Michael, telling me that there's a forty percent chance he has prostate cancer. He would find out more in October, he told me. He was not texting me to tell me this news, we were writing to each other the morning after the singer David Berman died. Reminiscing, in the way that old songs make you reminisce. I was halfway through a strong coffee and allowed myself to be tricked by the immediacy of typing back and forth, though my friend was thousands of miles away. I hadn't seen him in about a year, and he had recently been startled by pictures of Marigold, how grown up she looked. We had been trying to coordinate video chats, but kept missing each other. I told him how Marigold had been singing the chorus to a Berman song she'd fallen for, "All My Happiness Is Gone," over and over that morning. He told me he had been feeling adrift, not in the sense of being lost or anxious, but something more like when you start to feel drunk when you're tubing down a river, and then he apologized for the abruptness, but told me about the health scare that had been lingering in limbo for him for some time. He said again. *Davey,* he told me, *you need to party more.* So I did. I took a pill that he gave me, which I was expecting to have one effect but had another effect entirely. The outlines of the colors of inanimate objects seemed to be pulsing with life. Pepper told me how he missed his daughter, and I told him how I missed mine, although I gathered that the stakes on this subject for us were not aligned. We became chatty and recalled, with crisp fidelity, the time that Carl Sagan said, "We're all made of star stuff." I had a shot of cheap liquor just to see if I could stomach it. I could, and had another. Then Pepper fell asleep at the bar, so I walked to the Port of St. Petersburg and watched the moonlight on the water. I thought to myself that I was a body made of stardust and I danced, to no music at all.

37. No, that's not actually true. That's not what happened at all. What actually happened is that Grace and Marigold came with me to the show, Goldie's first ever rock show. She was very proud of the noise-canceling earmuffs we bought her. When Shovels & Rope came out, she shook her hips with a cussed abandon that I recognized immediately, as true as seeing the way a child's thumbnail looks just like your own. In between songs she looked up expectantly: "Again?" She ran around in the sea of grown-ups' legs and we ran after her. She said hi to everyone, pulled her shirt up to show her belly. To greet every stranger, it was a kind of mission. Then she had to poop, her first go at a port-a-john. It was a challenge. Then we started worrying that the field was too hot, too sunny, and after Shovels & Rope's set we headed out. On the car ride home to DeLand, Goldie fell asleep as it began to rain in Plant City, so she missed the rainbow that we drove under like an arc over Interstate 4. By 10 P.M., we were all in bed.

cheap mansion on Tchoupitoulas Street with another couple, Charm and Jeff, and Charm would play Cary Ann's music on repeat after I introduced her to it, and it is always hard to square my memories of that time, so vivid, with the actual photographs of that year because we look *impossibly* young. We look like babies.

At the Dalí Museum café, Cary Ann obliged Marigold with her favorite song—"Mary Had a Little Lamb" customized with lyrics about her friends, family, and recent happenings. "Marigold had a little dad, little dad, little dad / Marigold had a little dad, they're moving to New Jersey."

"Again," said Marigold, basking in the private little rock show, "again." Just like me, she never wants the song to end.

36. I dropped Grace and Marigold off at a hotel that night and went to see Shovels & Rope by myself. I made friends at the show with a man named Pepper who had a tan line where a moustache used to be. "Shovels," he kept saying, "and *Rope,*" as if the latter implied a slate of possibilities that might prompt a solid second act in a long life. Pepper convinced me, in spite of myself, to come have a drink with him after the show at a dive bar down the street, just one drink. We had three drinks. The word "vanity" in the Book of Ecclesiastes, I told him, is something more like "mere breath" in the Hebrew. It's like the way the air of your breath is visible and then dissipates on a cold day. I told him how there was a way in which watching my daughter grow up was like watching her disappearing, again and again, and other worlds seem to lurk in perpetual possibility. Part of this transition was simply falling in love and realizing that I had something more than art to live for. But part of it was also seeing *Heartworn Highways.* Specifically the scenes at Guy and Susannah Clark's house at Christmastime, everyone drinking and playing songs and communing together. A light went off for me: that's what I want. I realized that I didn't actually want the short, brilliant, tortured artist's life. I actually wanted the long career, the long marriage, the long friendships, the open house. To be a great artist, but to also be good company.

39. In August we drove to Jersey City. In the car seat, Goldie sang to herself, sometimes "Baby Shark," sometimes wandering melodies with no attachment to a tune. "We are moving to New Jersey," she told us. Behind her, in the back, the cats, subdued by CBD oil, meowed only occasionally.

Grace sent her mother an update every time we crossed a state line. Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia. So long, South. Our lives were not too troubled, but we had our troubles, and we talked them through, or tried to, and we told each other our very favorite story: Here is what our life will be like next. We were not too young and not too old, heavily in debt, we had plans, we had ideas, we had each other. Scared to death, story of my life. Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, then on to the New Jersey Turnpike. The horns honked. "Hi honk," Marigold said. "Hi horn."

In the passenger seat, I wrote down notes for this story. Behind me, Marigold said, "The mermaid eats pee-pee cheese.

"That," she said, "is a funny joke."

38. When Guy Clark died in 2016, the poet and television writer Tony Tost wrote a note of memorial and gratitude on social media:

> As a white guy from a blue collar small town, I think about two possible artistic paths: the Townes Van Zandt path & the Guy Clark path. The Townes Van Zandt path is the more Romantic one, I think. To be a visionary tortured artist, adored by those who don't misunderstand or ignore you. To wrestle with the ephemeral and prophetic. To die young and leave behind a brilliant body of work. Doing this, it seems, also means relying on nothing but your own talent. And if you're a genius like Townes Van Zandt, it also means to burn up in that genius. Not just burn up, but burn up solitarily. Alone. When I was a drunken poet in Arkansas in my 20s, that was the path I wanted: to take my shot at being a Townes Van Zandt or Frank Stanford.
>
> But for the last 10+ years, I've been trying to take the Guy Clark path. To be less tortured visionary than inspired craftsman. To write about this world, but to do so with such precision and openness that

40. Years ago, we went with some friends and saw Shovels & Rope play at the Allways Lounge in New Orleans. It was January 2012. Six months later, Grace and I would have a party at the same bar as part of our wedding celebration. Two years later, Cary Ann and Michael paraded through the streets not too far from the Allways on a rainy Mardi Gras morning. Down to the Mississippi River, where costumed revelers released ashes of their loved ones into the water, inspiring the Shovels & Rope song "St. Anne's Parade": "Sang out our hearts while they sent away their dead."

One of the strangest parts of being a parent is the realization that the vivid present will soon be your child's hazy past. And then there is their unknowable pre-history, like that night at the Allways Lounge, just one particular evening before Marigold or Louisiana or Oskar was born, an ephemeral footnote. One of the friends I had convinced to come was in the midst of a hard year. Nothing tragic but hard nevertheless. In the ordinary ways. "I needed that," she told me after the show. "I really needed that." And after a while, we all went out into the evening, the songs still ringing in our ears. It was dark outside, and we knew the night would end, but it wasn't over yet.