



Hi there,

Long time reader of Cracked Up, Greg Spear, takes over the newsletter this month!

Recently I encountered someone at a casual acquaintance's birthday party who wanted me to know that he traveled. I don't mean he told me, explicitly, but as our circle of small talk was gradually overtaken by a litany of his overseas escapades, I got the message. The frenetic anecdotes that followed were peppered with self-satisfied observations ("I was surprised how easy it was to pick up Greek!"), absurdly banal, subjective takes ("Oaxaca was low-key really beautiful!"), and a more substantive episode about a hike to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro that ended simply with: "and at the top, our guide made us all do ten push-ups!"

I left the party at 7:00 PM.

Why do we travel? After spending 12 years of my professional life counseling college students on study abroad and designing educational travel programs, I know many ways to answer that question, though none that ever felt deeply satisfactory to me. Whatever the answer is or ought to be, it's probably not to regale strangers at parties.

Around the time I was nodding along to the Kilimanjaro story, the New Yorker dropped this [short, cheeky essay](#) that gave voice to my despondency.

“Travel gets branded as an achievement: see interesting places, have interesting experiences, become interesting people. Is that what it really is?” asks the author. With stone-cold precision, the piece exhumes the uncomfortable truth buried at the center of the modern tourism industry: that souvenirs and photos are what we bring back from our travels when we have nothing else to show for it.

If you don't read the piece, take this with you: “If you are going to see something you neither value nor aspire to value, you are not doing much of anything besides locomoting.”

LET'S CONSUME MEDIA

Back to me (Rachel)

Books

- ***The Poppy Wars*** by R.F Kuang. The violence, hopelessness, and anger didn't seem to have a purpose. I do want to read *Yellowface*, though.
- ***Either/Or*** by Elif Batuman. Sometimes reading a sentence from Batuman feels like gaining a sixth sense, like understanding something mundane with a new clarity. So many of those moments: when she sees her mother's face in her own after a summer in Hungary, wanting to know what makes a poem “good,” sending an email to lose her virginity. I want to give Selin a hug.
- ***House of Mirth*** by Edith Wharton. Can a woman be both understood and independent? Wharton says no.
- ***Crying in H Mart*** by Michelle Zauner. ooof. oof. it's a tearjerker, folks.
- ***The Anthropocene Reviewed*** by John Green. I liked this book. I like John Green, despite how easy it is to bully him online. And I particularly liked the chapter on sunsets, because how can something beautiful that we see EVERY DAY seem photoshopped? Green has a few of those moments throughout, where he grapples with a cliché, struggling to experience something novel in the universal. [The Glass](#)

Essay by Anne Carson explores this too, which I just reread. (“When Law left I felt so bad I thought I would die. / This is not uncommon.”)

- ***Candy House*** by Jennifer Egan. This novel was tough, almost like a workout, but I’m glad I read it. Someone asked me what it was about and I couldn’t answer. The future of technology’s impact on our lives? Commentary on social media and sponsorship? An indulgent trip down memory lane vis a vis *A Visit from the Goon Squad*? This review said it best: “Egan is after more than a cautionary tale; she is interested in describing social technology as a lived environment. [...] It’s not the A-plot, it’s the soundtrack.”

These are called "pieces" for some reason!

- [The downfall of Lara Logan.](#)
- [Bad Waitress.](#) This piece was a delight. A must-read if you’ve ever worked in the service industry. My fav excerpt:

"People ask me all the time what’s the worst thing a customer said to me, or what’s the craziest story I have from work. I always say: I don’t remember. I used to store things like this, anecdotes to share on social media, but by the end, I went into work, I got through my shifts, and when I left, I wiped my brain like a chalkboard. When people ask me this, I get the sense that they’re looking for entertainment. What, I wanted to say, do you think I do this job for anecdotes? People will say that, too. Oh, it must make you a better writer, seeing all these people and the crazy things they say.

It has not made me a better writer. It’s made me lazy. It’s made me love money. It’s made me see that life is more than writing, it’s lessened my chokehold on dedication. I no longer identify as an ambitious person. I identify as a person who wants to make the life that they can scrape together as comfortable as possible."