The Metrics of Backpacks

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How does one survive and thrive as an artist in the San Francisco Bay Area? Living & Working is a multi-platform column focusing on the experiences and strategies from those who continue to live and work in the Bay Area.

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On nights after work, I let myself fall to the very bottom of the pool. It is an old pool, built as part of a club for veterans in 1913, with a deep end of ten feet. I push through the water on my back and roll over, turn my face to the deep and then to the ceiling, spinning and surfacing. I go in the pool after I work at the tech company downtown. The company sells opaque hotel rooms. This means that people purchase a room without knowing which hotel they are booking; its name is revealed once their payment goes through. For enduring this uncertainty, they receive a discounted price. But few people do. Most arrive by accident, get disoriented, and then go somewhere else.

I write the words that ask people to stay. “Unlock deals”; “Save big”; “Buy before prices go up.” I try to sound human, to imagine how another human feels when they are navigating the site and to comfort them. “Oops,” I say when their credit card doesn’t work. “Something went wrong.” I want people to feel the way I do when I write the buttons: maybe they messed up; maybe they got here by mistake, but everything is going to be okay.

Each floor in our office is decorated for a theme: the Pony Express, vintage video games, *Star Trek*. Ours is Alfred Hitchcock. Silhouettes of birds flap against the glass partitions by my desk, while the conference rooms, named for movies—*Vertigo*, *Psycho*, *A Perfect Murder*—lace our vocabularies with fear.

When I am interviewed for the job, I am interviewed in a room named for Tippi Hedren, Alfred's muse, by a man named Dustin and two men named Matt and another man named Sean. Another man is named Chris; he wears a knit blazer that drapes softly, like a pair of woman's yoga pants, on his lithe body. I am nervous in Tippi's room. The night before, while I was driving home from my mother's house in the mountains, a chunk of concrete had hit my windshield, leaving a scar across the glass. I had pulled off the highway, unhurt, though it had stuck with me: that feeling of being a target, like all the cars and molecules were heading for me, the center of it all.

I say something about being the only woman in the room. Dustin laughs, and one of the Matts says, "We have lots of women. Look, there's one, right there," and points through a glass wall. I am mid-sentence when Chris asks me a question about web searches. "What kind of answer are you looking for?" I ask back. "I'm not interested in the right answers. I'm more interested in asking the right questions," he says. Am I asking the right questions? I have a bad haircut that my mother's neighbor gave me in her garage the day before, and I do not have answers for anyone.

But I try. I pretend that the twenty years I have been using the internet have prepared me for this, that the nights I spent in the Mills College computer lab in 1996, when each page took minutes to load and I stayed up all night downloading pictures of Claire Danes and watching the sky turn pink, were enough. The light would change through the windows, and then I would refresh the live camera on the *San Francisco Chronicle* website to watch the sun rise there, too. What a miracle it had been.

Tippi was Alfred's star but also his prey. When they were filming *The Birds* he told her that the birds that flew at her would be minimal, one or two at the most, the rest superimposed after filming was done. But instead he shocked her in a darkened room filled with birds that pecked and darted. Take after take, they attacked, so that Tippi Hedren's fear and blood were wet and real. That is the horror of being in a room that you cannot control. It is rare that it would turn on you so, the walls that you trusted, the lights that you knew, but it is possible still.

When the interview's over, Chris gives me a fist bump, and hours later, the recruiter calls to tell me I got the job.

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My favorite character in *The Birds* isn't Melanie, Tippi's character, but the schoolteacher, Annie Hayworth, played by Suzanne Pleshette, a woman after whom no conference room is named. She follows a man to this beachside town and is marooned. A shipwreck of a woman, but her cabin is airy, accommodating of hobbies. She gardens, paints. It is an unexpected accommodation, how an amorous pursuit can capsize into a habitable burrow. I want to be this windy-haired woman, alone in my home. I have come here by mistake, but I have stayed of my own accord.

We do not do much work here. We start projects and tend to them, like low-yielding crops, and then, mercifully, let them die. A film of pseudoscience sticks to everything we touch. We don't just write messages to users; we calculate the correct word for a situation and deploy it. We are UX writers. We like having X in our job titles because it sounds technical. One of the least-used letters in the English language, X is one of the most frequent in mathematical equations, and its presence suggests that our work is not emotive but scientific. We are engineers, too, sort of. We have a culture of testing, I am told. New features are unveiled in waves, and users' responses determine whether something is deemed a failure or success. It's okay if a test is positive or negative—clarity is revered. The worst thing is an inconclusive test—one that tells you nothing at all. It's an uncontested truth: if a person's actions can't be measured, they can't be understood.

My boss is a woman named Monica. She is skinny and in her early fifties. One day in my journal when I am not feeling kind, I write that she is the type of woman straight men would describe as fuckable, no matter her age. Monica tells me to measure my velocity and capacity at the end of each week. I am a vessel that is never full, I want to say.

Matt and Sean are the two men on the four-person content team. They are white and in their forties, both born and raised in Northern California, like me. Sometimes they feel like my brothers, not because we are close, but because the possibility exists, slim but not disproven, that our histories are intertwined. Surrounded by transplants, we together inhabit a prehistoric California of 1970s sedans, rickety on the highway, hot air blowing through open windows into the backseat. Matt grew up in Berkeley and was friends with the boys I watched from the windows of my high school skateboarding on the UC campus in the early '90s. I'd follow their wide stances as they did rail slides along the smooth cement banks, not yet studded with metal barriers, their bodies disappearing into the sky. Our coworkers had moved here to be a part of the future, but we were left over from something that had already passed.

Sean is the only man at my job that I like. He lives with his family in Half Moon Bay, south of the city. Many days on his commute he sees breaching whales. Sea monsters that lurch and then sink, seaweed and plankton rinsing from their sides. He wakes in fog misting the brown hills, the smell of salt and brine in the air. For much of his drive north, he parallels the ocean, and it is then that he sees the tails surfacing, the bodies submerging. I often use Sean like a life raft, hoping he will steer me around obstacles, both submerged and apparent. In meetings, the man talking to me will often assume that I don't understand, and he will look to Sean instead, seeking interpretation. In such territory, a man by your side is no different than having a compass or a map.

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The creative director keeps writing style guide as one word—in headlines, in emails, in the style guide—and I keep telling him that "styleguide," when written this way, is not a real word. It is two real words that, when put together, become something unreal. "I guess I'm okay with words that aren't real words," he says. I get it. He wants to break rules, and I'm holding him back. I tell him I'm sorry.

The men I work with are not the geniuses of Menlo Park, the ones who retreated to garages and emerged with hardware that changed the world. They're ensemble actors in an industry that favors singular greatness. They have not made fortunes or founded startups but have benefited from their proximity and physical resemblance to those who have. They bought houses and had kids in between booms; today they are balding and graying, and upon entering a room, they sniff every corner like another animal has already peed there.

Only one of our coworkers went to Stanford, and his Stanford-ness renders him visible, serving chiefly to highlight the fact that the rest of us did not go there. Cameron kicks a soccer ball from meeting to meeting and sits on the ground most of the time, stretching his calves and hamstrings when he does. His shoes are some sort of optimized wool sneaker that aims to make all other sneakers obsolete. I once heard him use the word "grok."

We are not changing the world here. Except in the sense that everyone is always changing the world, just by moving through it. We rise each morning, drive north along the sea, notice interruptions in the water before it goes flat again. Doing so is enough to

create a disturbance in the universe; why do more? I don't want to disrupt; I only want to swim so deep that the water above me barely moves.

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"If I give someone data and they don't incorporate it into their process, I'm automatically going to think they are stupid," the young man sitting one table over says to another young man at a beer garden in Hayes Valley. Another group discusses the anatomy of backpacks: the circumference of cup sleeves, the width of straps.

What dismays me about technology is this: not the machine itself but the way its architecture echoes outward, imposing a grid of quantification on everything it touches. The sadness of numbers interferes with our thoughts, begs us to apply logic to warm, messy things. What becomes of the ambiguity of feeling? That which can't be immediately identified is derided, denied, and eventually erased.

The backpacks of my youth were not optimized. They had padded straps and meaningless loops that dangled like ponytails. My friends and I wore our backpacks at night and on weekends, on hillsides behind suburban baseball diamonds, in eucalyptus groves where the mud slipped out from beneath our feet. We wore them when we shoplifted from Payless ShoeSource, stuffing plastic sandals into their depths. Our backpacks hung on our frames as we told our moms we were sleeping at a friend's house but stayed out all night, dodging the moons of streetlights and cars. They were our accomplices and our life vests, and we needed their compartments to be endless.

Today's backpacks disdain excess. They are streamlined and single source, with buckles that gracefully fasten and hidden magnets that invisibly cling. Their side pockets are designed to accommodate only certain brands of aluminum: the thermos that never changes temperature, the phone that picks your eyeball out of a crowd. Today's backpacks never get off the shuttle; they don't even go out for lunch.

My first year in college I wore an oversize backpack with a patch that said Utah sewn on it, and I ran through redwood trees in the forests behind UC Santa Cruz each day. The heavier drug users swore they talked to fairies and nymphs back there. Rachel, from Marin, even had sex in a redwood tree. Seeing a used condom at the foot of the trunk the next day, she kicked sorrel over its yellow skin and said, "Gross." I wore wool sweaters layered atop one another and grew a single dreadlock in my otherwise straight

hair. I wasted all my time. At night I rode the campus shuttle in continuous loops, from the entrance deep into the trees, savoring the dark hills and the driver's voice singing along to Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car." It rained every day in January that year, 1995—the year I took mushrooms at a Grateful Dead concert and cried in the rafters of the Oakland Coliseum, the last year that Jerry was alive. My youth was full of unnecessary trajectories and fallen branches and the time I climbed too high and could not get down, but it was textured and unrepeatable, and I fear that today it would be written off as just a bunch of mistakes.

But alongside these feelings is another, however guilty or impure. It is the rush of gaining entrance to a fortress long closed, a window now opened. What was once a wall dividing the Bay Area, cutting off my view, now has a ladder thrown over its top. Shortcuts appear where once only long roads existed. I do not look down on others from my raised seat on the company shuttle, but it no longer seems laughable that I could. I do not wear a backpack with the logo of my company embroidered on its pouch, but it's possible that someday I might.

After the beer garden, as we walk down the street, a slightly older man, bearded and dirty, like Charles Manson but handsome, wobbles by in tattered shorts and a half-buttoned shirt. "I'm just trying to get back to New Mexico so I can die," he bellows, and we are confronted with the starkness of those who are inside and those who are not.

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Technology works in metaphors because it lacks in objecthood. I decide this when I realize that the contents of a screen can be seen at only the right angle and light. But for all this industry's ethereality, I feel only bodily in this job. My hips swivel, bovine, beneath my pants. When I walk across a room, I am neither invisible nor directly seen. A woman describes the feeling in a documentary about coyotes that I watch one night: "I can't see him but sometimes I don't feel that I'm alone," she says of the animal that stalks her backyard.

Over Christmas, a coyote begins roaming my mom's neighborhood. She takes minor pains to avoid him, not going outside at night, keeping the dog close to her side. I do the opposite. I look for him. I stare out the kitchen window and absorb every hint of scrub brush, every broken tree. I memorize the jackrabbit prints in the muddy snow—two large feet, two small. I imagine the coyote's methods of surveillance and attempt to duplicate

them; I want to flash a blinding mirror that reveals his own tactics. It is unnerving to be watched but to never see your watcher, to be tracked on land where you are not meant to be by a creature thoroughly native.

We begin to track that which tracks us, even though we are unskilled. I learn to identify coyote scat, black and grassy, like rubber that burns off a tire. There is very little snow this year and what there is is melting, revealing dog piles and pine needles. The air has a raw smell, fecal and sweet. When it rains one day, I worry about the coyote. I picture him coming to me, stranded on the road like a hitchhiker, fur matted and dripping, pleading with me to stop.

In *The Birds*, the male love interest is a lawyer who visits his family in Bodega Bay on the weekends. He plays in pet stores in San Francisco during the week, causing trouble because he can. He is the guy standing next to the beer tap in the third-floor kitchenette, Nerf ball in his hands. “Wanna go upstairs and shoot some pool?” he asks.

On Fridays we have happy hours that begin at three. A service delivers local microbrews to the office. The beers are yeasty and thick, with flavors like peanut butter and oatmeal stout. When the happy hour is announced on Slack, a man will respond by writing “beer” and posting an emoji of a beer mug. Then another man does, and another, writing “beers,” “lots of beers,” “beers, beers, beers,” and then they post gifs of men drinking beer.

I am in a foreign country; these are my hosts. I study their dialects and graph their inflections, seeking fluency. I listen as they discuss fishing trips and ways to get their wives to watch science-fiction movies and how annoyed they get when she eats their leftover burrito from the fridge. I offer up pieces of my own life that I think they will like: stories of my boyfriend’s obsessive CD collection, memories of the science-fiction movies my brother made me watch as a child. I too cringed at the green of the Emperor’s blood in *Flash Gordon*; I also sat in awe when the owl in *Clash of the Titans* moved its brass wings. But this is belonging by proxy, a male escort at my side; it is never inherent.

These guys like to play practical jokes. One designer rubs his hands with light green hand sanitizer each time he returns to his desk. Some guys go to the drugstore and find dish soap in that exact shade and replace it, and the designer falls for it. It was hilarious, they say. I try playing practical jokes at home, in my regular life. My partner Aaron goes to Whole Foods and ties up the dog outside. I decide to meet him outside but to move

the dog to another spot. I try to anticipate the split second after he sees the dog is gone and before he realizes my sleight of hand. The moment does not come. Instead he is unmoored. He finally finds me and the dog around the corner and comes to us crying, scared he has lost something we will never get back.

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Sometime in January, I feel my butt getting bigger. It has always been round, but its proportions become askew: width and depth outpacing length. I look at my butt in the bathroom mirror. It is planetary, a single Styrofoam ball in a science fair display. I think about my butt when I stand in the office kitchen brewing tea, when I sit in the small chairs during meetings. If I stand still long enough, my butt starts to rival the magnetism of the machines that pull all the dust to their surfaces each night and in the morning let it go.

One day after a meeting, Monica says to me in a whisper, “We’re going to hire you permanently.” I am three months into a four-month contract that was initially described to me as a six-month one, and the only healthcare plan that my staffing agency offers is called, simply, Benefits in a Card. It is a flimsy card, library- not credit-card thick, as though one of many punched out of a sheet. Its website brags to employers that it offers the least amount of coverage legally allowed. It tells me there are four doctors in Oakland I can visit with the possibility of reimbursement. When I do make an appointment, I arrive to find the doctor and her assistant laughing over the meagerness of my plan. Longing for a human, I look up Benefits in a Card on Google Street View, and it shows me their office as a curb in a parking lot, ringed with dense greenery, somewhere in South Carolina.

Several weeks later, Monica takes Sean and me into a room named for a movie about a woman who is pursued against her will. Her life turns strange; the animals undermine her. She summons strength she was not bred to have. Monica tells us that Sean is being promoted and that my position is being eliminated. They are restructuring; it is not personal. The next day Dustin comes in on his day off to meet with me. He wears black gym shorts and a black tee shirt, as though interrupted mid-workout. He takes me to a floor decorated for the Pony Express. There is a stool with a saddle for a seat and a pair of cowboy boots in the corner. Dustin wants me to know that it was his decision to not hire me. “I have to feel really good about a person before I bring them on, and I don’t feel that way about you,” he says. "Tough day, huh?" he asks. I first cry in the bathroom on the floor of the Pony Express and later when I return to my desk. I try not to make a

sound, but I am porous. My eyes and nose run, and my cheeks turn hot and red. My mouth takes small gulps of air like I am thirsty.

When I return the next morning, Dustin has sent me an email telling me that my crying the previous afternoon was disruptive, threatening the well-being of the group. He expects emotional stability in his employees, and my contract is dependent on my display of this quality. I have fallen into dangerous territory, asserting a pheromone profile that is not in the code. I fail to recognize myself though I visit the bathroom mirror hourly for inspection. A basket of tampons sits on the counter, but they're not the right kind. They get longer, not wider, as they fill with blood, harder to pull out the longer they're inside. I write back to Dustin and make him a promise: I will be emotionally stable, productive, and positive at work. When I see him at happy hour that week, he reaches out his pint glass to clink against mine, but I have long finished my drink—my mouth is already dry.

I feel heavy as I stand beside him and sense my metabolism begin to ebb. The food that enters my body is not digested but waits at the gate to my stomach. In the kitchenette bags of protein powder rest on the counter and a scale is on the ground. The last product director, fired before I arrived, was into weightlifting, I am told, and he wanted his staff to achieve similar bulk. What if I won the weight-gain contest? Would I get disqualified for my hips? Would they let me stay?

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If you want to swim fast, you must learn to move your body in ways that reduce friction. You must cup your hands taut and twirl them down your sides. Force your body to move as the water moves: reach forward in hungry gasps and ebb in careful sighs. It is not a natural thing, but it is one that can be taught. An early lesson emerges from these tricks: to progress in a foreign substance, you must assimilate entirely.

In tech, friction is also considered an undesirable thing. It occurs when a person experiences delays on the user path. When a site takes minutes, not seconds, to load, when a set of instructions does not clarify but only misleads, a distance emerges between person and machine. An itchy sensation, like a limb that has fallen asleep. They may move to dislodge it, close their computer, even walk away. Such actions are death for the internet man, deterrents to growth and conversion, his only two goals.

Growth as in mass, not a tumor but an abundance—the more users, the better. Conversion as in purchase, not foothold but transaction.

But what if the user does not want to be swallowed whole? Where is the woman who wishes to stay rigid, an intact body surrounded by foam? In *Vertigo* Kim Novak's character throws herself into the water beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. Her clothing billows like moth wings; she is not absorbed. If Jimmy Stewart had not rescued her, how soon before the ocean spit her back out, realizing she did not belong?

I am not a fast swimmer. My stroke is uneven, and my left leg kicks out rather than down. I am constantly reminded of myself, my body reluctant to fully disappear. At the end of the day, I let myself fall to the bottom of the pool, resisting progression. At the end of the day, my resistance determines my speed.