

Portfolio

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I've Prayed to God to Ask If He's Real

As an adult, I'm told that these things are true: The candlelight of communion is softer than the fluorescent overheads in the office. *Religion was devised to comfort people*, which you can either say with a sneer, or say with reverence. Holy commitment is a band-aid for the meaninglessness of capitalist existence. It feels good to be a part of something.

The boys in my junior high class discovered atheism the same year they discovered "dark humor." After jokes about babies in ovens and mothers being so-fat-that-dot dot dot, the coolest thing to say was that God doesn't exist. Or that the Bible is a fictional book. Or that a cult plus time equals a religion. Jesus is gay, Catholics are pedophiles. Spencer's sold heresy right next to the scary sex stuff in the back.

I was born in a place called the Bible Belt, which also happens to be inside Tornado Alley. The kind of place where the ornaments of a church mean sinful decadence. Basements are stocked with survival supplies: canned goods, medicine, guns, Bibles. The End Times loom in the scriptures and in the dirt storms.

My mother taught me how to braid using the three satin ribbon bookmarks glued to every hymnal book in my childhood pew. I didn't think much about the stories the preacher told while I gazed at the stained glass, alternating the red, blue, and yellow strings like she taught me. Church was men in unripped Levi's and beige cowboy hats that they respectfully held to the chest. Church was dixie cups of grape juice for communion and boxes of donut holes during Sunday School.

My classmate's birthday party at the roller rink was that same year. Between ice cream cake and skating to the Shrek soundtrack, whispers spread that Hanna was an *atheist*. Looking

back, I think she just might have been Jewish. But we assumed that if this friend of ours didn't follow our God, she must follow Satan. We were scared to talk to her for the rest of the party. After the event, our teacher warned us of the perils of bullying. She noted that even if the rumor were true, doubt was a crucial element of faith. It didn't matter if this girl wasn't a believer, we were. And we could skate with atheists and ask them questions. She assured us that we could all find our way back to Christ, no matter what. I bought none of it.

I hadn't thought about Hanna or my childhood piety in ten years, until I sat over a bucket on the edge of my bed the morning after I got drunk for the first time. I was poisoned, I was poisonous. I thought of my Baptism dress, the size of a yearbook, all sweet white lace and satin ribbons, collecting mites in a box in the attic. I'd outgrown it sixteen years ago, and I was convinced if I even touched it now, I'd turn it black.

But there are people for whom I will always be the girl who fit into that white lace gown, for whom my cheeks never hardened, my curious eyes never dulled. For some, that is because their love for me triumphed over my sins. Some simply didn't survive long enough to watch me damn myself. Did I pray to God during that final hospital stay with my grandfather or did I plead with the doctor? The only hymn I heard then was the beeping monitors, and I've felt the quiet shameful gratitude in years since that there are some things he never had to see, hard conversations we never had to have.

A man born before the Great Depression, who knew how to make things grow in the dry soil of the Great Plains shouldn't have had to know the right thing to say when I brought home a girlfriend instead of a boyfriend. It's its own kind of mercy that he didn't.

We shouldn't have waited to pray for him until it was dire. And just because someone dies doesn't mean we stop praying now. I was in high school at the time, and I'd been told to pray for: the drought to end, our boys' safe return, my friend's negative pregnancy test, Nick Jonas's recovery from diabetes, and plenty of straight A's. But the death of the man who drove me to Dairy Queen after Sunday service was an easy place to identify where I started to build the temples for my new idols.

After high school, I cashed out all the equity I had in Texas. A modest amount of pocket money and four extra-large suitcases later, I'd become a young woman who lived in New York City who, sometimes, had single-digit balance in her checking account. Looking back at my ineptitude, I remember the occasions I stumbled down the wrong street, late at night, only to return home safely. Or how the first time I tried to ride the subway, the machine ate my money, and I panicked so badly that a sweet bystander had to help me sort it out as she wrangled her children— but I still made it to my destination ten minutes early. I think about signing a lease with my first girlfriend after three months, to find myself still waking up next to her another day five years later. My true stories aren't compatible with logic and science, but no one's ever really are.

When I was a kid, a preacher stood under a cross and read requests written with those little halved pencils on folded up strips of paper. We bowed our heads and hoped. Now, the person who made our dinner reservation opens their phone and reads a text from someone who couldn't join us, or someone whose boyfriend is cheating, or someone whose roommate is a total shrew. We send our thoughts and offer a well-placed latte or a cocktail. An extra kiss on the cheek the next time we see each other. Friends in trouble don't request prayers, they request the right *energy*.

The collective effervescence at the evangelical megachurch, not unlike sweating in a crowded club, dancing. Experiences of bliss, of horror, of awe. The night I romped through Central Park wearing flowers in my hair felt closer to ritual than reading my horoscope, more frivolous than lighting the candles on Christmas Eve. We all bend language, massage logic, and rearrange it. Only once this is done can the deeper truths be found, the ones unburdened by fact.

The Catholic church condemns suicide, but I met a woman whose whole Irish Catholic family flew to meet each other when one distant, depressed cousin took too many pills. Some of them took off work for two weeks just so they could all hold hands and pray. Twenty or thirty family members plead and plead with God, begging Him to make an exception. To accept this tortured man into heaven, if only because of how much they all loved him. They did this in community, the woman explained to me, to show God the evidence to support his goodness, despite this final, tragic mistake. He couldn't have been so undeserving of God's forgiveness if so many on Earth loved him enough to give him grace.

And though I'm sure when I die, I'll go to the soil and not the stars, I still wonder if I can change the weather with the right attitude. Sometimes, I shoot hoops at the park, making up rules in my head about the fate of the world depending on the success of my shots.

If this goes in, I'll get that text I'm waiting for. If I miss this one, I won't get that job interview. A TikTok video told me that's a symptom of OCD.

Instead, I'd like to believe that it's just *an itch for the transcendental*. We extend our hands to the light and trust that our skin won't be scorched. Let the choral harmony give you goosebumps, I tell myself. Let your eyes roll all the same. Read Leonard Cohen poems to your

lover and scoff at promise rings. The bells ring for us all eventually—we might as well dance to them.

Sheila Liming on the Limits of *Hanging Out* Online

I've lived in New York City for seven years, which, in the scheme of things, isn't a very long time. I certainly don't have a claim to wax poetic about the way things used to be in the glory days. But, even in these years, I've felt the increasing discomfort of occupying public spaces. The bars and cafes I moved to the city to hang out in ask me to pay up or get out. And the people in those bars and cafes seem increasingly less likely to talk to anyone they don't already know. And then I find myself waiting for a friend to arrive, looking at my phone because so is everyone else, feeling less interesting and less a part of the world than I ever have, despite the fact that the world is supposed to be at my fingertips.

Even though there's data to suggest I'm not the only one who feels [more depressed the more time I spend online](#), I'm insecure about how I might look if I admit I feel like this. It's reminiscent of a certain conservative, kids-these-days-ism of which I'm wary.

But then Sheila Liming's new book fell in my lap. [Hanging Out: The Radical Power of Killing Time](#) delivers a mix of personal stories and cultural analysis, compellingly and charmingly urging readers about the dangers of disconnection. I rapidly devoured its highly readable seven chapters and felt like I was reading my own rants about how much social life, city dwelling, and human connection have changed, made eloquent in Liming's thoughtful hands.

So, although both Liming and I are tired of hanging out online, that's exactly what we did. Over a wonderful hour I *almost* forgot was over Zoom, we discussed *Hanging Out* on the Internet, the loss of IRL spaces, and what this means for young people.

My first question was: what constitutes true hanging out and how can I do more of it?

Liming recommends “simply not doing much and daring to do it in the company of others. Both of those things involve a little bit of risk– that's why I put the word *dare* in there. Daring to not do much is itself radical when you're told that not doing much makes you lazy, makes you worthless, makes you wasteful. Then the other side of the daring is daring to not do much in the company of somebody else, which is code for also daring to be bored with somebody.”

I agree with her wholeheartedly when she tells me that the intimacy required to “be bored with someone is some of the truest intimacy we have.” This time spent together– resisting commodification, resisting agenda, and embracing one another– sits at the center of Liming’s self-proclaimed manifesto. Her concern that we don’t spend enough time together anymore stems a little from living in a pandemic, sure, but is also just a product of modern life.

Both Liming and I express a little caution about voicing our internet misgivings, hoping we don’t sound like skeptical Luddites inciting baseless panic. But neither she nor I can deny our mounting exhaustion with online expectations.

I’m a returning adult college student and I’ve observed differences in the behavior of my classmates since the last time I was in school, seven years ago. I’ve noticed that the younger a group of people is, the more silent the room they occupy. The rowdy chatter and laughter shared by my classmates the last time I was in school has been replaced by fifteen or twenty sets of eyes fixed on their laptops or phones, waiting for the professor to get things started. Liming, who teaches Media and Communications at Champlain College, has noticed the same. We both find it baffling that a group of people who, at the very least, have one thing in common and see each other each week, would have *nothing* at all to talk about.

Granted, it can be hard to unplug, unaware of what kind of social situation you'll be immersed in. As my conversation with Liming continues, we find ourselves circling around the same word: risk. Mostly, I think about the risk aversion that people grow because we're so used to controlling the content to which we're exposed. On that, Liming argues that we're "afraid of situations that we can't control or curate for ourselves because our interactions online teach us that those things are possible." After all, we can't close browser tabs in real life. However, the worst-case scenario in situations like those is that you spend some hours with someone you don't like. Even then, it'll probably give you a funny story for next time.

However, there are real risks of which we should be afraid: the risk of losing little bits of ourselves as we cower further into our comfortable corners online, and the risk of exclusion if we dare to opt out entirely.

Speaking of opting out, I ask Liming about a passage in the book in which she remembers her own college days during the beginnings of Facebook when the website was still exclusive to university students. Dorm party invites started popping up as online notifications rather than slips of paper or whispers to a friend. Years later, Liming found a homemade, cut-and-pasted invitation in her old things for something called a "non-Facebook party." On this, Liming notes, "today, of course, every party is a Facebook party, even if it has nothing to do whatsoever with Facebook."

This rule, she tells me, includes her high school reunion, to which she's never been invited. Because, to this day, she does not have Facebook. This is especially funny because Liming— a professor with a website, an active Twitter account, and an easily-accessible faculty email— is especially easy to find online. To me, Liming's exclusion from reconnecting with her

peers spotlights the shackles that social media has a lot of us in, me included. No matter how badly my mental health begs me to opt out, I'm too afraid to lose the connection.

As someone who was born in the mid-1990s, this fear remains all too present. Much of my social life growing up was dictated by who had and hadn't gotten their parents' permission to make an account on Myspace, then on Facebook, then on Instagram. Not having the right account at the right time felt like social suicide.

Liming, too, has "caught onto the way that [social accounts] are now viewed as rites of passage." Back in the day, your parents might have let you start wearing makeup at thirteen, start dating at fifteen, et cetera. Now, these markers also include when a kid gets a cell phone or an Instagram account. Paradoxically, Liming says "we have incorporated these things into our lives and viewed them as milestones of maturity, even though, of course, what they do is create a playground for immaturity." I chuckle, remembering all the inane conversations I've had with grown adults over who-liked-who's-post and who-unfollowed-whom.

Indeed, many of my own "milestones of maturity" were marked by the creation of my online persona. Not only do I not remember any parties that weren't Facebook parties, but I also can't separate my development as an individual from my development as a social media user. Since junior high, social interactions have always operated on two planes: the internet and IRL.

Perhaps what struck me most from Liming's book was the way she describes the magic of a finite thing. She catalogues moments in her life, and phenomena at large, that only feel so special because they will not last. From those aforementioned pre-Facebook parties, to a spontaneous night out in Scotland with strangers, to the concept of the jam session; the worthiest experiences can't be captured or reproduced. If I live for the documentation, I can go back and

admire my photo gallery. I can recreate the same lighting or outfit or photogenic meal that I had. But if I live for the moment, I can't do that. I can't hold a great memory in my hand. So, I find myself less incentivized to seek out experiences that cannot be cataloged online and will not exist again. This feels like the most insidious symptom of being "online" that I've experienced.

I wonder aloud how that struggle to savor life's less photogenic moments might change how we connect romantically. Liming identifies a growing shift in the way we view relationships—namely, that they've become more transactional from living in a "networked universe" like ours. Liming sympathizes:

"If I go and meet a person in person at a bar, sure they could be like a murderer or whatever, and that's one dimension of the risk. But a larger dimension of the risk is 'What if this person is somebody I have no interest in spending time with? When I could have gone on Tinder and found someone who wants to have sex right now.'"

As I tell Liming, I met my current partner on Tinder in 2017. What I don't mention is that I thought the two of us would have no chemistry and probably just be friends. On my phone screen, I couldn't see in her what struck me in person. I wasn't particularly excited about our date and nearly canceled it— an embarrassing fact that my girlfriend still teases me about six years later. Before our eyes ever met in person, we both had ideas of each other based on our profiles which are, of course, only tangentially representative of our genuine selves.

And sometimes, it's challenging to separate that two-dimensional, still-life version of the self and the actual person I am. For a while, if you had asked me to envision myself, rather than the person I am, I would have pictured the online brand I created. The swipe-through of curated

photos that show what I look like up close, a group shot to prove I have friends, a silly face to show I'm down for a good time.

Liming, too, picks up on this way that young people “advertise, market, and explain their sexuality online.” Of course, this is true on dating apps, but also on social media profiles. For young queer people in particular, the way that one's sexual identity is formed has been revolutionized. The formulation of the individual happens alongside the formulation of an online persona, and explorations of sexuality are no exception.

“Sexuality, for many [young people] now begins on the internet. That is the first space where they try out saying what they are, or how they identify, or what they desire— before they try it out in person. So, it's like this hypothetical identity.”

I can vouch for the truth of this. At the tail end of my teen years, I discovered my own queerness largely due to long nights staying awake on Tumblr and Instagram and YouTube, consuming content created by other gay women when I should have been sleeping. I publicly identified as gay before I had ever dated another woman. While this had its benefits (namely, allowing me a safe space in which to explore), I also found myself unprepared to transfer my newfound queerness to real life when the time came. I had spent all that time experimenting in abstract rather than in actuality, more concerned with how gayness looked on me than how I felt about it.

I initially connected with Liming to discuss the [rapidly-dwindling number of lesbian bars](#) in the United States and how that might relate to her warnings of disappearing connective spaces. Liming tells me that when she got my email, she immediately ran to Google whether or not Wildrose, a beloved lesbian bar from her hometown Seattle had befallen a similar fate. (It

hasn't!) She asks me how many are left, and I say about twenty-one. In New York City? No, in the entire country.

Liming, who recounts in her book the time she spent as a bartender in rural Washington state, knows firsthand the connective value of the local bar, and what we stand to lose when we move all of our community-forming online.

“With the decline of space that we can share with strangers in a society, it gets harder to *care* about those people. Suddenly, we start to view other people as an infringement upon us, as a problem we have to deal with, and as something that interrupts what would otherwise be our comfort zone.”

Liming, who has a long-term partner and has never dated online, asks me about existing as a queer woman post-dating apps— and in the wake of so many lesbian bars disappearing. Since entering a monogamous relationship, it's become harder to make friends with other gay women (outside the parameters of work or school) as the connections we used to forge in the lesbian bar have moved online. We forget sometimes that gay bars aren't just for romantic or sexual agendas, they're for the community. They're for *hanging out*.

Despite all our disparagement of the ways that the internet isolates us from each other, Liming doesn't want to reject all online connections as superficial. After all, if online connections didn't exist, I wouldn't be in my relationship, and Liming and I wouldn't have had our wonderful conversation. “Most relationships begin online, whether it's friends or colleagues or romantic partners, they all start there now.”

Most relationships *do* begin online, which doesn't reassure me. It is true that, without social media and dating apps, I might still be single— especially considering the empty space where so many lesbian bars used to be. But if I had let my worst tendencies prevail, I also wouldn't have gone through with our first date at all. My first judgment of a Tinder profile nearly cost me a relationship now in its sixth year.

Ultimately, I think we lose more than we gain when we retreat further into our phones, but they're obviously not going anywhere anytime soon. So, it's on us to figure out how to connect with each other in ways unmediated by online parameters. Liming agrees, and she might remain a little more optimistic than I am.

“One thing we've learned from the pandemic, but also just from recent human history...is that we really can't live without each other. And if we are forced to live without each other, we will find ways to seek each other out and make those connections happen.”

Liming concludes *Hanging Out* with the following fivefold advice: take time, take risks, take opportunities, take care, and take heart. To that, I will add: patronize your local bar, queer or otherwise. Sit alone on an uncomfortable stool and meet someone new.

Down with Signature Cocktails

The signature cocktail has undeniable appeal. A big fuss has rightfully been made about the magic of a Manhattan martini, one key ingredient in the [New Yorker Happy Meal](#). And where would cranberry juice sales be without Carrie Bradshaw getting everyone hooked on Cosmos? We all dream of waltzing into our neighborhood spot, nodding to the bartender, and requesting “the usual.” There is indisputable style inherent in the signature drink, especially in a city like New York where people are hyper-aware of how chic or interesting or cultured we look. It becomes another fun way to identify ourselves. *I’m a Libra, I drink margaritas, and I’m an ENFP.*

But nine times out of ten, you don’t need your order to tell people who you are. Those of us taking your order can usually do that for you.

If you’re a group of 30-year-old women all wearing Aritzia, you don’t need to tell me it’s time for a round of espresso martinis. If you’re an older man on a date with a younger woman, I know I should tell you which red wine has the fullest body. If you have tattoos on your hands, I’ll assume you work in the food industry yourself and will either want a Budweiser or some obscure aperitif I’ve never heard of.

Deciding on a signature drink helps us build our personas. It tells the world what we think about ourselves and what we want the world to think about us. Who cares if you don’t like olives? Dirty martinis are such a vibe on TikTok right now.

Consider when [that](#) video became so painfully inescapable last autumn that our bar bottle bins overflowed with empty vessels of Campari, sweet vermouth, and, yes, prosecco. The sbagliato went from a niche in-the-know request to a potential new signature cocktail for dozens of people who melted at Emma D’Arcy’s raspy voice. As so often happens with these viral drink

trends, many people who ordered it didn't know what to expect and didn't end up liking it. Hordes of the drink flew back to the bar with one or two sips taken, to be replaced with margaritas or glasses of rose. Campari is bitter, prosecco has bubbles. Things to know before you order.

You'd think a server at a busy restaurant would prefer to avoid this whole mess of sent-back drinks altogether. That I would rather approach a table of people who don't cluelessly stare at a spirits list but look me in the eye and order the same thing they always get. An old fashioned. A Gibson. A Manhattan. Keep it moving, time is money.

The only problem with this? Guys who snap preprepared, macho orders usually think they're Don Draper or James Bond— which is more annoying than a million sent-back sbagliatos.

The other problem with ordering “the usual” is that it's always just the usual. This signature drink business gets monotonous. Until every once in a while, someone goes off-script and tries something new. If you sit down at my table and ask what I recommend, I'll tell you what I like, but I'll also ask what you typically drink to try to guide you better. After that exchange, even if it's just thirty seconds long, we've had a conversation. You've made the brave choice to talk to another human being rather than recite your rehearsed little order, reducing my job to a computer that plugs it in for you.

During the great negroni sbagliato debacle, one of the girls who ordered it had to sheepishly send it back, which led to a conversation about what she'd like instead. We worked together and realized she wanted something sweeter, so I asked her if she'd ever tried a Kir Royale. She loved it and insisted it would be her new signature cocktail. Instead, I hope that it becomes *one of* her favorites. And I hope drinking it reminds her of that week when that video was viral and that night out when the waitress told her about Kir Royales.

I know I'll remember it as that night when my coworkers and I helped ourselves to a bunch of sent-back sbagliatos behind the bar.

As easy as it is to pass judgment from my side of the restaurant, I can sympathize with wanting to find just the right drink to make me feel cool.

I myself was supposed to be a whiskey-on-the-rocks girl. When I turned twenty-one, I decided on it. I thought bartenders would have no choice but to feel grateful to me that I didn't make them mix anything. Plus, I've always loved the mysterious look of a rocks glass in the hand with dark liquor in it. And Carrie Underwood taught me that liking "fruity little drinks" was lame. I didn't want to be one of those girls.

But then, thankfully, I failed to keep my word. I ventured out and tried new things. I talked to bartenders and listened to their recommendations rather than just ordering what I had rehearsed in my head. I moved through phases of favorites, which had a few wonderful side effects.

For one, I didn't miss out on a whole world of flavors just because I was committing to my personal brand. Living in the city and pledging allegiance to one kind of *anything* forever seems silly— whether that's a cocktail, a pizza place, or a neighborhood. For another, I got to learn a lot about other people by hearing what they like and why they like it. I've found the question "What do you recommend?" lights up the eyes of many weary restaurant workers, delighted to chat and share expertise. Since becoming one myself, I feel the same.

But the best thing I've gotten out of my noncommittal drinking habits is the memories. Sure, they might be blurrier memories than my sober ones. But when you flit about different drinks, as I do, you get the pleasure of returning to something months or years later and *remembering* the last time you had it. The sour-sweet bite of a lemon drop martini tastes like the

karaoke bar I went to on the Upper West Side. Tequila pineapples smell like the sticky dive bar my coworkers and I visit after a long shift. Montenegro reminds me of a superstitious man I met who always had to finish his nights with a shot of it. And when I smell mulled wine, I think of the first time I ever tried it, at a cabin upstate a few autumns ago, with friends who've since moved away.

The sense of identity that some of us get from a curated signature drink can't compete with that. No one drink is ever going to be as delicious as something that doesn't just taste like a drink but like a great night you once had, a place you once loved, or a person you miss. Whereas "the usual" is only ever going to taste like your artificial idea of yourself. None of us can ever hope to sample all the drinks New York City is serving up, but we might as well try to make a dent.

Plus, you don't look as cool ordering it as you think you do, anyway.