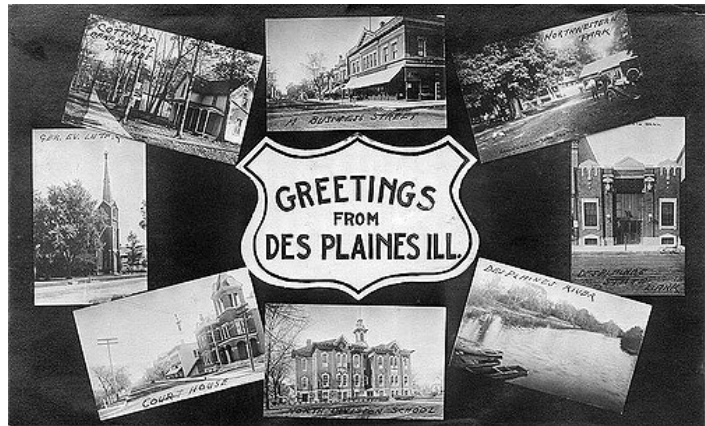


July 20, 2017: Des Plaines is a suburb of Chicago, a low-lying place where the Mississippi Valley watershed almost meets the Great Lakes watershed. It misses by about twelve miles and perhaps a hundred feet in elevation, largely in the form of the Valparaiso moraine, a terminal moraine from a Wisconsin period glacier. Native Americans portaged across what became known as the Chicago portage, and in wet periods could canoe most of the way. The town takes its name from the Des Plaines River. French explorers named the river for the trees that lined it (most likely the sycamores but perhaps red maples) that reminded them of European plane trees. In 1848 the ninety-six-mile Illinois and Michigan Canal crossed the portage, punched through the Valparaiso moraine, and ended at the Illinois River at LaSalle-Peru, starting Chicago off on route to its status as a great world city. The canal later formed part of the Sanitary and Ship Canal. Today it is a linear park, the Chicago Portage National Historic Site.



I was conceived in Portage Park, a northwestern neighborhood in the small northern wing of Chicago's bungalow belt. My paternal grandparents owned not a bungalow but a brick two-flat and my parents lived there for a few years early in their marriage. The neighborhood and the park is named for the Native American portage between the Chicago and Des Plaines Rivers. Portage Park, constructed between 1913 and 1917 with WPA improvements during the Great Depression, is the largest public park on Chicago's northwest side. My father remembers the area to the west as still swampy and undeveloped during his childhood. My grandparents lived on Berteau Avenue, at the north end of the park. I remember the park well from my youth and have been back occasionally since. But that's another story.

This story involves our move to the suburbs, even before I was born. We returned to the city most Sundays to visit my grandparents (both paternal and maternal; my mother's father lived nearby). Driving back to the suburbs at night, we took the Northwest Highway. It went through Park Ridge, Des Plaines, Mt. Prospect, and eventually Arlington Heights, where we lived. In Des Plaines, we went under a railroad trestle at a winding turn. We went slow and it was dark and gloomy with perhaps sometimes caution lights, and maybe some water, at least occasionally. I think of it now as the "slough of despo" (despo as short for despondency) and have another place, at the Miami-Whitewater bike trial, that I think of as the slough of despo too. It's a similar dark, damp underpass.

When we visited Chicagoland in 2009, I made my brother drive me under the Des Plaines trestle (yes, incredibly, it's still there), twice. Most of the cover photos are from that trip – and most from that drive under the trestle. Pictured on the front cover are the dreaded slough, the local movie theater, the original McDonalds restaurant (my dad knew, worked with, Ray Kroc), and a map of the watersheds. The back cover features a movie of sorts including photos of our drive under the trestle, the relatively

wild river, the floods that still beset the area, and the theater (again), all framed by the familiar green and yellow Chicago-Northwestern commuter trains that served the northwest suburbs.

This past winter I lived for a time in the slough of despo. So this isn't a party mix, no matter how energetically it begins. "I was never here at all. Just a shadow on your wall" establishes the mood. The despondency came, aside from the general rustbelt winter blues, from the converge of my own aging and Rachel's new job as associate dean. I've been blessedly free of worry about aging for most of my life, but it got to me for a couple of months. What, I heard a physicist wonder, is there no more experience when we're dead? As for Rachel's job, it not only took much of her time but seemed to introduce a measure of instability in my life that I hadn't seen coming. Where was this leading, would she be leaving for another school to advance her career, what are these banal administrative issues we spend so much of our time together discussing? None of this, of course, is her fault and we are working it out (like everything else) and my mood is considerably lifted these days.

But what was I thinking? Life is relentless, I've heard someone say, it just keeps coming at you. Did I think I was exempt? I always say that life has a good deal of pain, but I guess I didn't exactly expect it. The visit to Des Plaines and the slough despo was hardly welcome but then, when it comes, well, make the best of it. The key to a good novel, someone once told me, is to be sure the potential for tragedy continues to grow. Because if you are lucky, that's what life brings. If not, the tragedy comes earlier. So, for your listening pleasure, some dark music.

Side One: Brooding: 1. *Dear candy – Ryan Adams and the Cardinals*: recrimination is a fine wine. It's troubling how much I love this song. And the way he says the name, "Candy." And the unadulterated bitterness. "You were never mine, I was never yours" indeed. 2. *Steal your love: Lucinda Williams*: I don't want your drugs, I don't want your money, I just want to steal your love." Yep, that's about it. But after all, "let me kiss you and set you free" isn't that bad: 3. *Wildest dreams: Taolo*: I, of course, am the female lead in this rendition. Remember me in a yellow shirt. 4. *When I was young: Nada Surf*: Lots of ways to take the song but Jeff first introduced it to me in terms of my experience as a father. 5. *Crossed out name: Ryan Adams and the Cardinals*: hey, I removed even more morose songs from the mix. And it is beautiful, no? **Side Two: Under the Trestle:** 6. *715 Creeks – Bon Iver*: Polly turned me onto Bon Iver's 22, *a Million* album. It's been a godsend. This one is about loss, devastating loss. 7. *Liar – Built To Spill*: "When things are all you think of, when plans are all you make" – but mother nature, she don't mind, she don't care. I guess it's "there's no meaning, except for what you make yourself." I mean that's what he wouldn't be a liar about if he said it. Existentialism with a pop score. 8. *33 "God" – Bon Iver*: From existentialism to God, frames things so to speak. Reminds me of the guy who was worried death, you mean there are no more experiences? 9. *One Diamond, One Heart – Smashing Pumpkins*: not my favorite, a bit saccharine for my tastes but the "always on your side" seemed apposite, given the mix (my first use ever of the word apposite, but I think I got it right). And hell, it's heartfelt. 10. *Re: Stacks – Bon Iver*: But then gotta end on my own terms and, yes, Bon Iver is patron saint of this mix. "There's a crow sitting across from me. He's crossed his wiry legs. He's got my keys; he even faked a throw. Whatever could it be that brought me to this loss?"