

## All the Directions

New York City

## Introduction

Between 2017–18, I had a particularly annoying subway commute from Astoria to Brooklyn. During this time of transit to and from work, I established an unexpected writing habit. I jotted down one or two scenarios that caught my attention, and over time accumulated quite a few. This book is a selection from those recorded.

Much of what there is to look at while on the train is phone screens. Most people are thumbing through their Instagram feed. “The feed” is an ever-additive collection of other people’s recorded moments that is matched by an endless hunger for brief and instantaneous entertainment. Insta-gram: the Greek *gramma* is a thing written or recorded. The process of recording images during my commute in the form of writing is inevitably in conversation with and a slowing down of the Insta-gram mentality.

I don’t carry a notebook, so I write in the Notes app on my phone. There are distinct qualities of writing on a phone. One is the ready-at-hand nature. I am able to easily write while in motion (walking down the street) or in a tight space (squished in the middle of a crowded train). This allows me to write on the spot while I’m looking at something, rather than from memory. Two, is the keyboard, which is designed for typing with the thumbs. This text was written entirely with that finger that has historically played a supporting role, but is now more directly involved in the act of composing thoughts. Three, the proverbial “blank page” on my iphone 5 screen is quite small, and so the pressure to write is as well.

Morning, on the way to the train. There is a woman redirecting traffic away from the side of the street I usually go down. Yet there are still people walking along like normal on the blocked sidewalk. I quickly realize these are actors, playing pedestrians in a film. I continue to the train on the opposite side of the street, watching the actors imitate us as we walk to work or wherever else we are going.

A child being pushed in a stroller. The child is holding up an object and turning it like a steering wheel, as if she is driving herself independently rather than being pushed by an adult. As I pass I can see that the object is an ipad and the child is playing a driving game. The ipad is fortified with a two-inch-thick rubber casing shaped like a bumblebee with little wings for handles on each side.

A harried woman leading a tour group in Times Square.  
She is holding up two cell phones, one to each ear,  
and speaks into them both simultaneously. “Yes!  
Everybody has arrived!”



A couple walking side by side. The man is wearing a shirt that says "Always Be Nice"; the woman's says "Empire Strikes Back."



Waiting for the train. A man is watching a video of meat being prepared on YouTube. He leans over to his friend and says, "I'm looking at food because I'm hungry." The friend responds, "So you're eating with your eyes."



A man on an iphone scrolls through his list of alarms.  
It is seemingly endless.

Walking through a parking lot on my way home. A man in a fancy black car is holding down his horn at a flock of pigeons that are blocking his way. He continues honking until they have all flown.

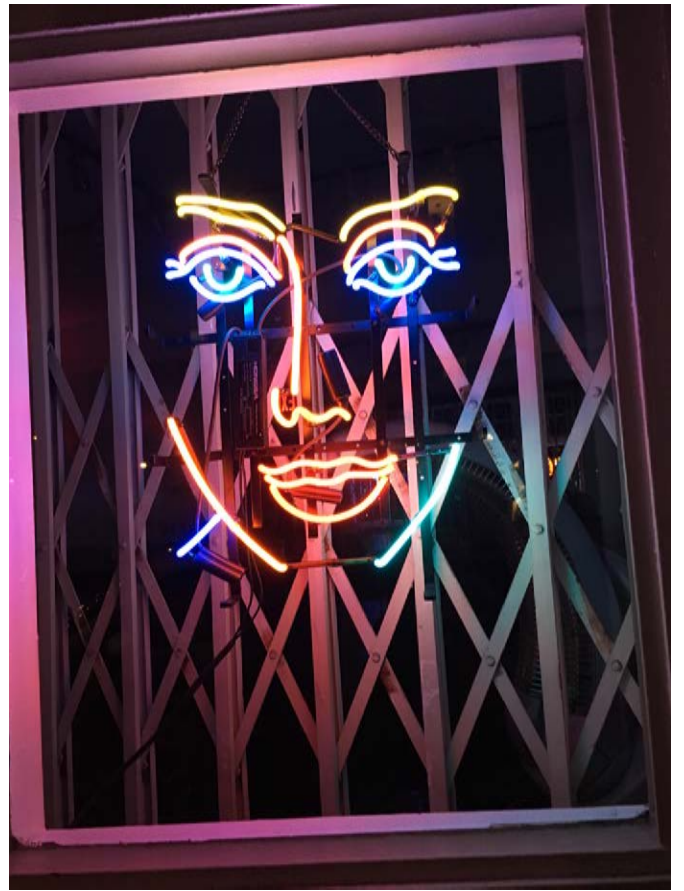


Rushing to the G. I saw a Cheez-It cracker on the stairs and suddenly had a strong craving for Cheez-Its. I looked up and there was a little underground shop. I had a dollar, so bought some and consumed them quickly. While walking down another set of stairs, I reached into the bag for the last two. One of them fell from my grasp and landed at my feet. I considered eating the cracker off the ground, but decided instead to leave it for another hungry commuter.

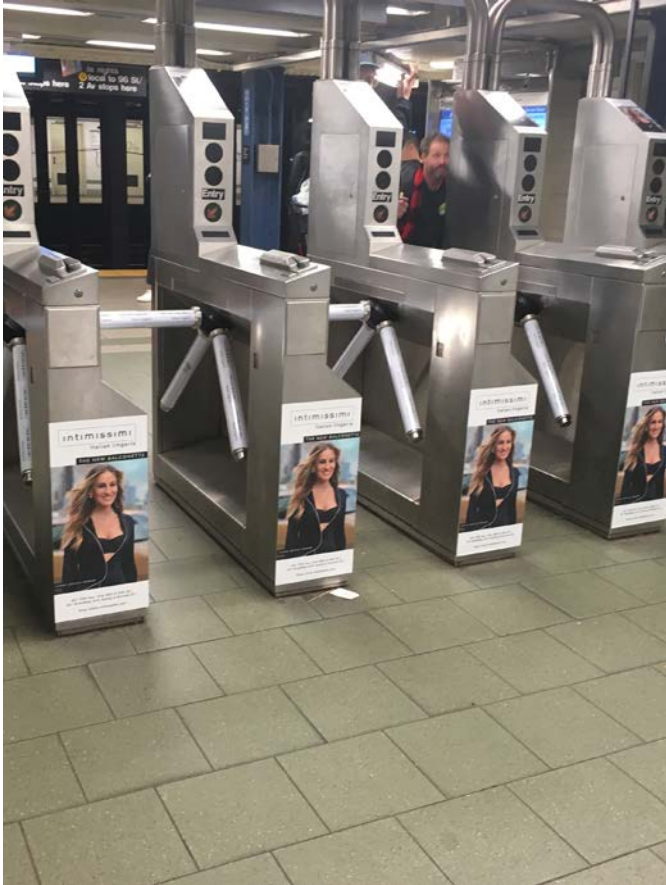
Passing through Washington Square Park. A man and woman stand under a tree holding out a fleece blanket. It turns out they are there to monitor a pair of baby squirrels clinging to the bark of the tree about twenty feet up. “You wouldn’t normally see baby squirrels out and about like this,” the man says. “They don’t leave the nest if they are being fed by their mother.” The two volunteers stand with the blanket every day, at the same time, and wait for the squirrels to fall.

Walking down the street. I make eye contact with several people as they pass, then turn to my right and inadvertently catch my own eye in a shop window. For a moment I don't recognize my reflection and see only a woman's face.





On the train. Little purple and green veins show through the translucent skin on the leg of the woman sitting next to me. Their criss-crossing paths look like the map of the subway above the woman's head.



Two men walking down the stairs. They look at their phones moving at the same slow pace, and create a traffic jam behind them.

Walking near NYU. Two young men sleep on twin mattresses set up on either side of a LinkNYC kiosk, using it as a shared headboard. Further down the street at another kiosk, a student waits for his Juul and phone to charge.

NYC

# NYC Quotes

"It's one of the things I like most about NYC. It reflects any attempts you make to lie to yourself."

Nicola Yoon

*The Sun Is Also a Star*

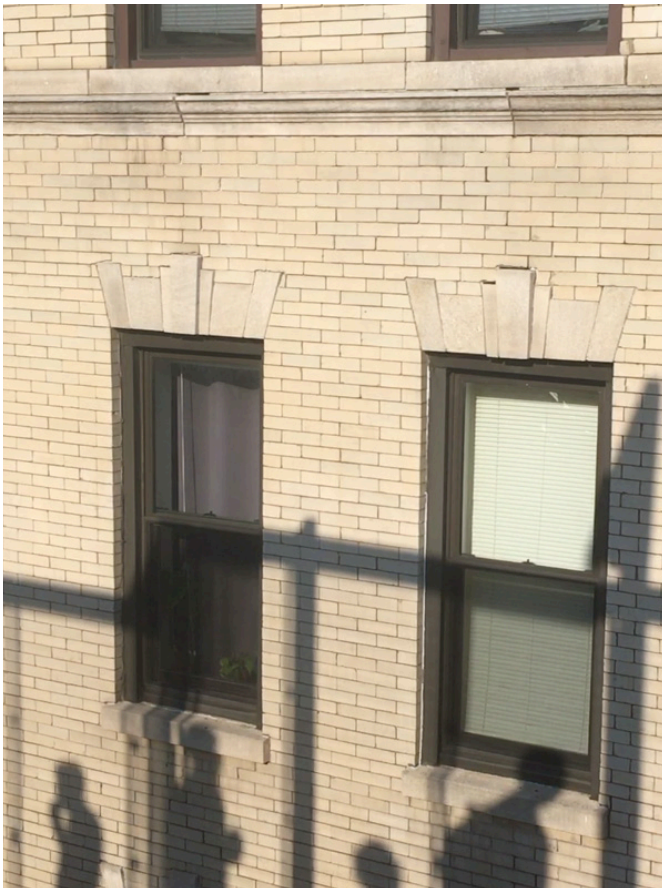
The weather report said there would be a big snow storm this week, but it hasn't come. In preparation, property owners have thrown salt onto their portion of the sidewalk. After days of waiting, there is now a layer of pink and brown salt on the ground instead of fresh white snow.





On the G train. A young man enters, throws a small pile of loose clothes onto the ground, and sits down next to it, blocking the doorway. He is wearing worn-out shoes with no laces and dirtied white clothes. He talks to himself in a hushed and serious tone (or to anyone who gets too close as they walk around him). After a few stops, another man enters wearing a clean white shirt and slicked-back hair. He is holding a Mac laptop under his arm, and in his other a small pile of paper that appears to be a script. He begins reading out loud from the sheets of paper in a hushed and serious tone.

A woman sitting next to me on the aboveground platform on this winter morning is talking on the phone. I can see her breath as she speaks. The breeze carries each vaporized exhale slowly toward my face; it smells of alcohol.



A winter tree with equidistant plastic bags of many colors, decorating it like prosthetic leaves. The wind made the leaves fall, the wind brought them back.



If you see something, say something.

Stepping into a crowded subway car that just emptied out at Queensboro Plaza. I grab the pole and feel the lingering warmth of a person's palm in the metal. I have a strong urge to pull my hand away.





In high-pitched voice a gray-haired woman is shrieking as she slowly walks down the street. “I’m tired, I’m flipping out! Why don’t you tell me the truth about New York? It’s filthy!” Pause. “I’m tired!” She repeats the phrases as she walks. A minor drama that we all appear to ignore.

Two parents and two young boys enter the subway station. The mother prepares to swipe the metrocard for the boys, while the dad stands on the other side waiting. After the first swipe the elder boy doesn't go. "Jesus Ayden, go!" the mother says. The boy doesn't move. "Walk!" the father yells. He pulls the boy through jerkily, violently. The boy seems unruffled or possibly absent from his body.

Across from me on the train there appears to be a mother and daughter. The woman is popping a zit below the girl's nostril. Her whole body is squirming and her eyes are wincing, yet she laughs and seems to enjoy the attention. The woman stops to show the girl her reflection in the mirrored camera of a pink ipad. She turns the girl's head up into a strained position to get a better angle. Then the girl puts her legs up on the train bench and places her head on the woman's lap. It seems this is a routine.

I am waiting for the N at Union Square. There is some commotion. A woman is crying on someone's shoulder. We are instructed by a policeman to leave the platform immediately. Unclear as to what to do and for what reason, we move slowly. "If this were an actual emergency you'd all be dead by now!" he yells. By this time, waves of information whisper through the crowd. A woman, keeping her eyes locked on the commotion, tells a stranger standing next to her that someone has been hit by a train. Firemen come from all angles carry pickaxes, giant black bags, and stretchers. A woman approaches an MTA employee and asks, "Can I stay here? I just want to make sure I won't see anything I don't want to see." A ring of people have gathered around the stairwell to peer down. "Move away, leave!" Cops swing flashlights into the crowd and the people disperse, but like flies, the crowd resettles again. I take the L train instead.



A woman checks an app on her phone called The Bump. It reports on how large your fetus is each month of pregnancy. Hers is currently the size of a pea. She then switches to an article titled “The Ten Worst Things about Being Pregnant.”

I spend a lot of time looking at people's feet.









Total silence, except for the sound of winter jackets scratching against themselves and a chorus of sniffing.

I am typing and walking. I almost bump into another man typing and walking, then veer around another man typing and walking, who just veered around a man typing and walking. Then I pass by two women typing and walking, all while I'm typing and walking. Down the block, I pass a woman wearing a *Clueless* T-shirt depicting Cher and the rest of the gang holding giant flip phones to their faces.

A puffy cloud rises from a man walking ahead of me. It quickly disperses behind him. He appears like a faraway train on the open plain with a billowing steam engine. A moment later, I am overtaken by a saccharin strawberry scent. One can spot e-cigarettes by this signature vapor cloud, far larger than a puff of smoke from a cigarette.\*

\*A brief addendum: flavored capsules for e-cigarettes have since been banned in New York State due to a wave of deaths across the US attributed to vaping-related illnesses.

In a Chinese restaurant, king crabs sit in their holding tanks facing the sidewalk. Their legs span the width of the container. In one tank, two sit stacked on top of one another. I stop to ponder their existence and then take a photo using my hand for scale. The gesture feels surprisingly tender.



The 6 train is delayed. An MTA employee steps through the open door and says, “Is there a problem here? Anybody spitting on anybody?” Blank stares, silence. “No?” He moves on and the train starts.



Every morning I walk through a construction site. It has its own little weather system. Spray of mist, cloud of dust, gray puddles. The air is cooler under the scaffolding walkway. I look through the windows—the ones roughly carved into the plywood and covered with plexiglas—and remember an image described to me by a dairy farmer at a wedding last summer of a cannulated cow. A cannulated cow has a little window surgically installed into her gut so that you can check in on her multi-stage digestive process as she produces your milk.



At the bottom of the stairs, a plastic bottle of piss.

At the bottom of the stairs, a full Grande Starbucks  
Pink Drink: the kind with dehydrated strawberries in it.

A small girl walks down the stairs behind her father. She stumbles but catches herself on the railing and lets out a squeak that sounds like an animal. She looks up at her father to catch his eye and then glares at him as if to say, “why didn’t you carry me down the stairs,” or more simply, “this is your fault!”









Two strangers. A woman helping another woman carry her stroller up the stairs. The woman helping makes conversation. "I have the same stroller," she says. "It's light, but the thing is, it's only as light as the weight of the child."



Walking through Union Square Station at rush hour. This is a coveted spot for musicians because of all the foot traffic. Today there are two men on djembe drums. The sound fills the large space. I am compelled to stop even though I'm running late. The sound and the movement are strikingly synced, as if the drums are driving the crowd onward and without that sound everything would suddenly come to a stop.



This text is an adaptation of a presentation given at the Varese Group meeting in Binio, Italy in July 2019. The title was added after the fact. Thanks to Leslie Dick for reading the road signs aloud as we drove down the Italian autostrada. “Tutte le direzione” translates in English as “All the Directions.”

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