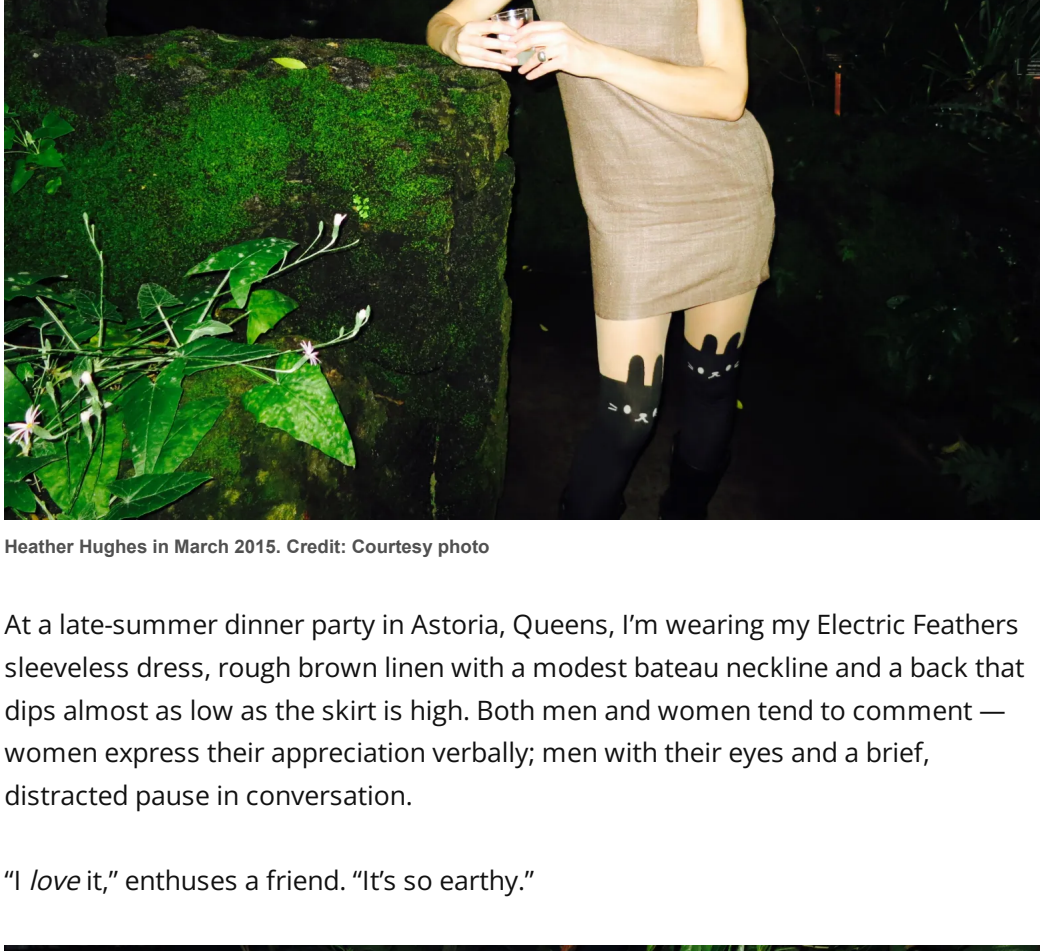


# I will always be the hick from Goosepecker Ridge

by **Opinion Contributor**  
September 14, 2015



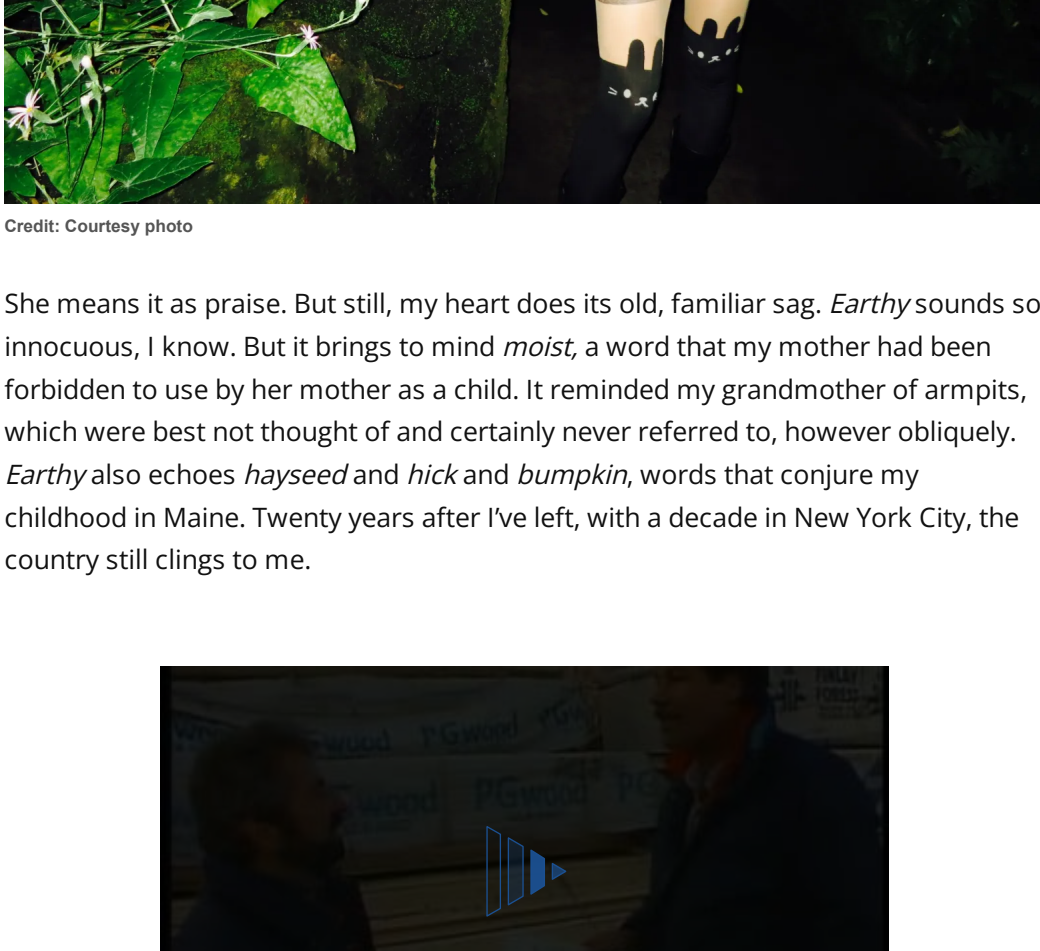
Heather Hughes in March 2015. Credit: Courtesy photo

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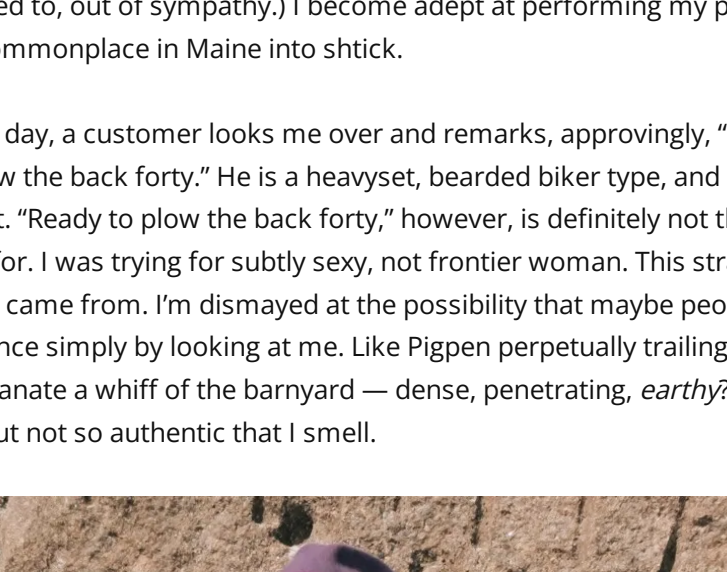
At a late-summer dinner party in Astoria, Queens, I'm wearing my Electric Feathers sleeveless dress, rough brown linen with a modest bateau neckline and a back that dips almost as low as the skirt is high. Both men and women tend to comment — women express their appreciation verbally, men with their eyes and a brief, distracted pause in conversation.

"I love it," enthuses a friend. "It's so earthy."



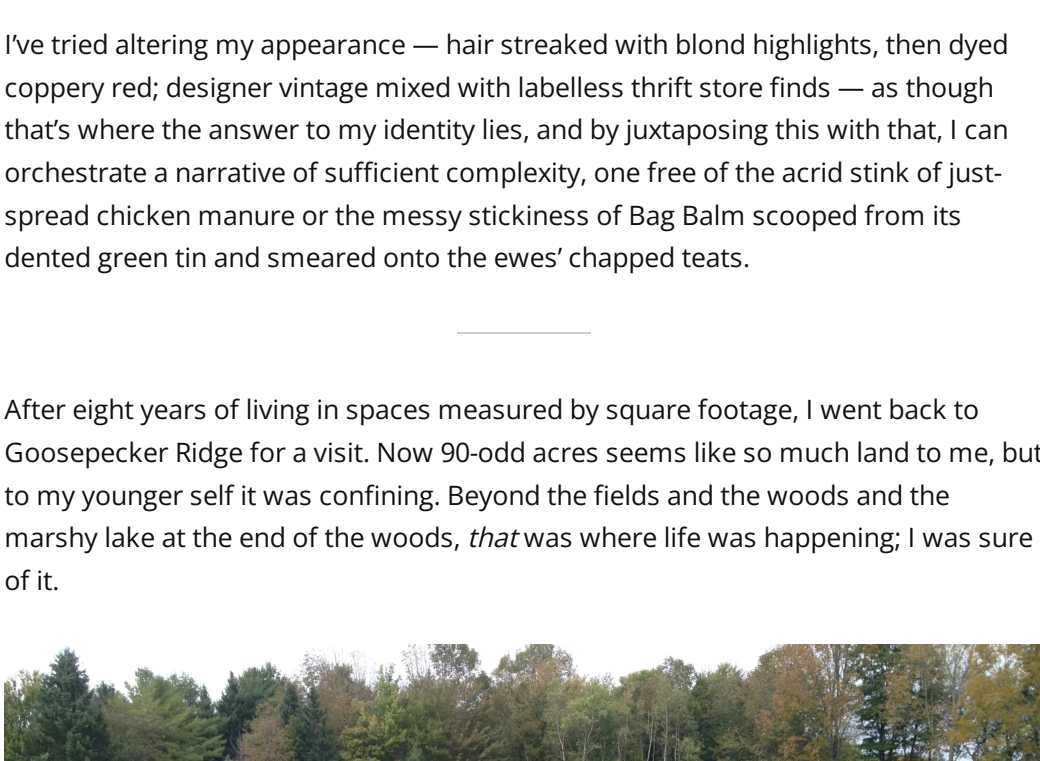
Credit: Courtesy photo

She means it as praise. But still, my heart does its old, familiar sag. *Earthy* sounds so innocuous, I know. But it brings to mind *moist*, a word that my mother had been forbidden to use by her mother as a child. It reminded my grandmother of armpits, which were best not thought of and certainly never referred to, however obliquely. *Earthy* also echoes *hayseed* and *hick* and *bumpkin*, words that conjure my childhood in Maine. Twenty years after I've left, with a decade in New York City, the country still clings to me.



A sheep farm on a dirt road with the comically lewd name of Goosepecker Ridge proves to be ripe material once I leave the farm. I make jokes about how my mother was a ballbuster, literally — she was responsible for castrating the male lambs. (My father refused to, out of sympathy.) I become adept at performing my past, turning what was commonplace in Maine into shtick.

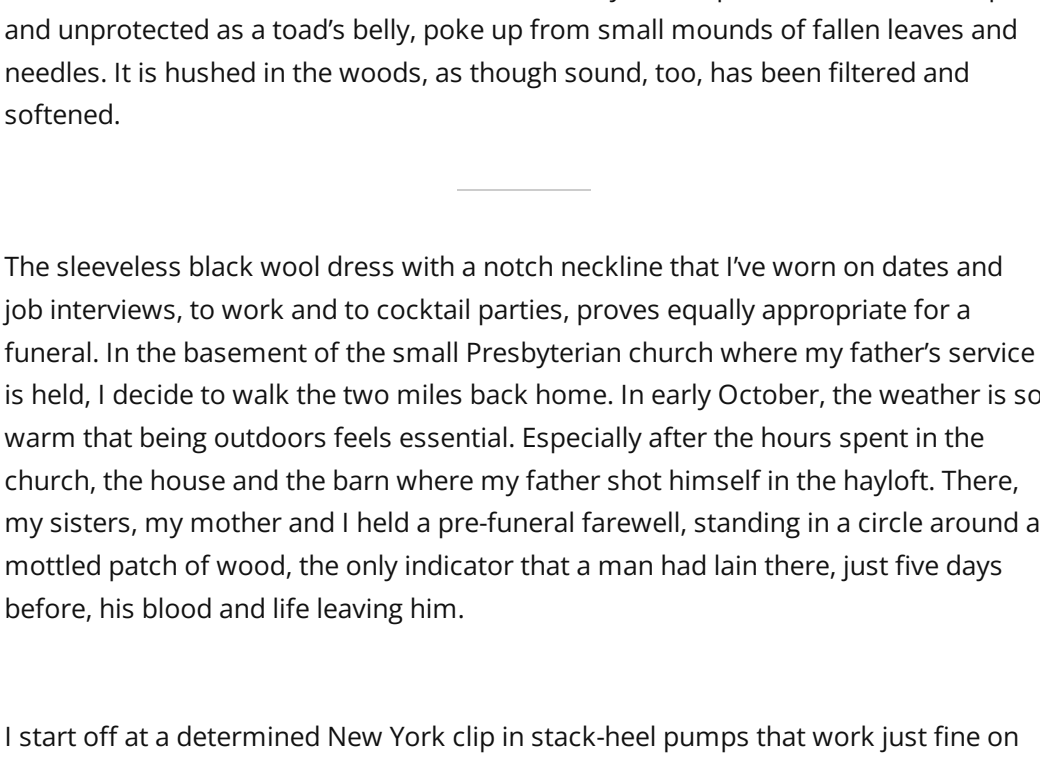
At work one day, a customer looks me over and remarks, approvingly, "You look ready to plow the back forty." He is a heavyset, bearded biker type, and I can tell he wants to flirt. "Ready to plow the back forty," however, is definitely not the look I had been going for. I was trying for subtly sexy, not frontier woman. This stranger has no idea where I came from. I'm dismayed at the possibility that maybe people can tell my provenance simply by looking at me. Like Pigen perpetually trailing a cloud of dirt, do I emanate a whiff of the barnyard — dense, penetrating, *earthy*? I want to be authentic, but not so authentic that I smell.



Credit: Courtesy photo

I've tried altering my appearance — hair streaked with blond highlights, then dyed coppery red; designer vintage mixed with labelless thrift store finds — as though that's where the answer to my identity lies, and by juxtaposing this with that, I can orchestrate a narrative of sufficient complexity, one free of the acrid stink of just-spread chicken manure or the messy stickiness of Bag Balm scooped from its dented green tin and smeared onto the ewes' chapped teats.

After eight years of living in spaces measured by square footage, I went back to Goosepecker Ridge for a visit. Now 90-odd acres seems like so much land to me, but to my younger self it was confining. Beyond the fields and the woods and the marshy lake at the end of the woods, that was where life was happening: I was sure of it.



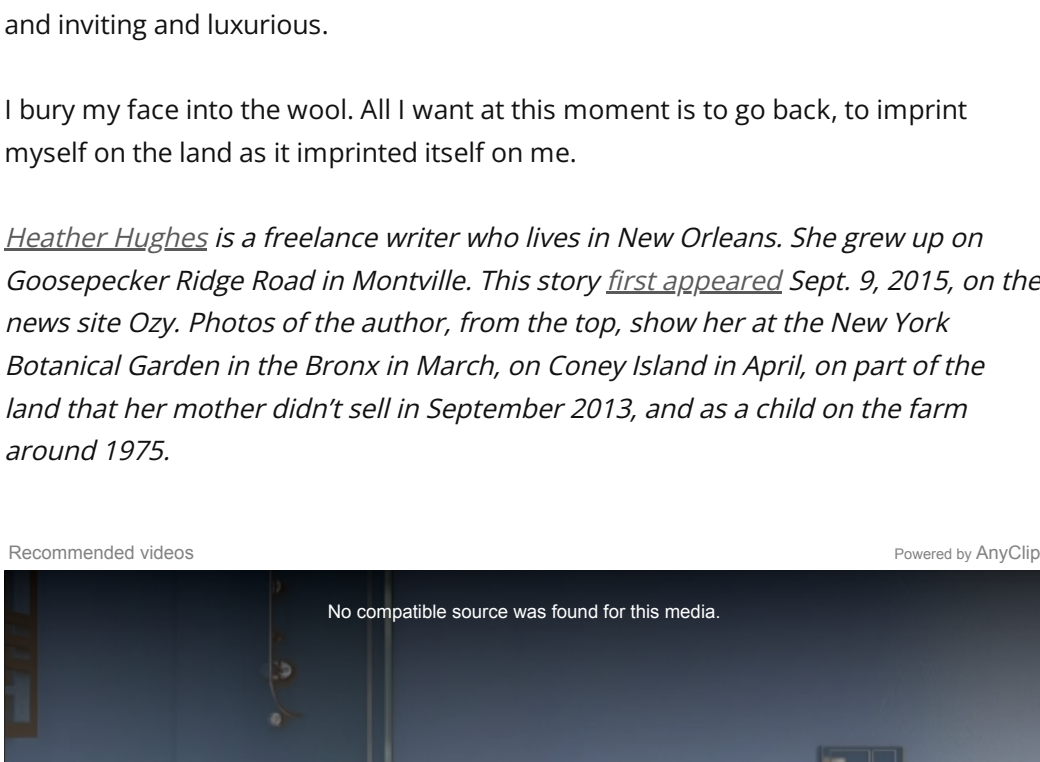
Credit: Courtesy photo

In the woods, the light changes, filtered through the branches of the pine and birch and ash that reach and stretch. The smell of decay is ever present. Mushrooms, pale and unprotected as a toad's belly, poke up from small mounds of fallen leaves and needles. It is hushed in the woods, as though sound, too, has been filtered and softened.

The sleeveless black wool dress with a notch neckline that I've worn on dates and job interviews, to work and to cocktail parties, proves equally appropriate for a funeral. In the basement of the small Presbyterian church where my father's service is held, I decide to walk the two miles back home. In early October, the weather is so warm that being outdoors feels essential. Especially after the hours spent in the church, the house and the barn where my father shot himself in the hayloft. There, my sisters, my mother and I held a pre-funeral farewell, standing in a circle around a mottled patch of wood, the only indicator that a man had lain there, just five days before, his blood and life leaving him.

I start off at a determined New York clip in stack-heel pumps that work just fine on sidewalks. But by the time I've reached the fork where paved Pleasant Street meets Goosepecker Ridge, I've removed the shoes and carry one in each hand. My stockings will be ruined, chewed up by tar and gravel, but it doesn't matter. With each step, I spread my toes as wide as I can.

A year later, when my mother sells the house plus 20-odd acres, two of the items I salvage are a rusty horseshoe that hung in the mudroom and a sheep pelt that had been sitting in the attic for more than a decade. The pelt exudes such an intense smell of lanolin that for several months my cat refuses to set foot on it. She pads around it, her nose wrinkling tentatively.



Credit: Courtesy photo

I curl up on the pelt. It's a creamy off-white that exists only when lambs are newborn or sheep are freshly shorn. In time, this pelt will take on the grayish cast of an adult sheep as I track the bits and pieces of everyday life onto it. But right now, it is clean and inviting and luxurious.

I bury my face into the wool. All I want at this moment is to go back, to imprint myself on the land as it imprinted itself on me.

*Heather Hughes is a freelance writer who lives in New Orleans. She grew up on Goosepecker Ridge Road in Montville. This story first appeared Sept. 9, 2015, on the news site Ozy. Photos of the author, from the top, show her at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx in March, on Coney Island in April, on part of the land that her mother didn't sell in September 2013, and as a child on the farm around 1975.*

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