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## In the Café Down the Road

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## II. SELF PORTRAIT AT DINNER

Mary Maroste

My palms are cut,  
the same pattern as the maple tree  
I built my first real home in.  
5 transparent cardinals  
whispered in my ear &  
I slipped my father's socks over my elbows.  
*How was it possible that I was so quiet?*  
Every leaf changing color  
fit in the mailbox I nailed to my back,  
red flag peeled off.  
*In another life I grew tulips,  
I didn't sweat through my sweaters.*  
I sewed twigs on deer heads,  
my freezer overflowed,  
sour grapes, mix tapes,  
a painting of a rabbit.  
*I measured each apple  
I tried so hard not to starve.*

## IN THE CAFÉ DOWN THE ROAD

Bradley Miller

I believe in Billy Pilgrim. At the particular time I'm writing this, I feel as though I exist in two places at once. One of my favorite artists at the moment, Joni Mitchell, describes the process for recording her masterwork *Blue* as a kind of method acting, relying on her sense memory in order to become the persona required for her performance. In meditating on my own life, I thought this might be a helpful technique. I wanted to return to a place where I had previously spent a lot of time and try to write about it. Between the end of high school and when I went away to Western Michigan University, I mostly remember sitting. That sitting took place mainly in two coffeehouses. When the group tired of one, we went to another, drifting between them. For me, the summer of 2012 through the end of 2013 seemed a complete waste. That was, until I brought it back for another look.

As I'm sitting at Tongues, the first of the old hangouts, I feel as though I'm back to how I was two years ago. The dim lighting, the chintzy piano in the corner (a quarter step out of tune), the leather couches, and the exposed brick wall all remain. Here, I had played open mic nights, met lots of artsy types, and spent many days sitting outside smoking cigars with my friends. I decided to come back because I thought that by doing so, I'd trigger some inspiration to write. Though it's November, the winter already seems to be going strong. I'm in the downtown area of Wyandotte, a city a few miles south of Detroit that presses up like a thumb to the river. The last time my friends and I were here was nearly two years ago. At that time, I was still going to school nearby and I came down at least every other day to hang out with them. We made Tongues our home until we made our way to the Grind. If all you're doing is sitting and talking, it helps to at least change the scenery a bit.

The scene at the Grind, as at Tongues, remained static in my mind so it's easy to recreate. Sara came over to talk with us and give us free drinks. I had a few classes with her in high school, and now she plays the role of a barista who wants to be one of the boys. The place was practically empty, so my group pretty much had the place to ourselves. Like his girlfriend Sara, Pete was also a former classmate and he sat to my right. To my left, was my friend Craig who I've known since

elementary school. Across from me sat Rick, also a high school classmate. He initially made friends with us by pretending to be a bass player so he could jam with us. The four of us were a pack. We always sat at a table set on a small stage where you could move some of the wood slits with your foot. I always wondered if anybody playing up there noticed it. Then again, most of the place was falling apart, so it was likely nobody really cared. The Grind was on the decline. It had once been the place where Wyandotte's students and bikers would go. But, as the place deteriorated, most of them had moved on. The paintings on the wall never sold, some of the end tables near the couches had a habit of falling over, and the couches themselves were about 20 years old and full of holes. The coffee was only bearable because it was cheap (or free some of the time, thanks to Sara). The music the owner made the workers play was a stale mix of soft pop and Top 40 hits. It wasn't much, but it was ours.

As we were all born and raised Downriver, we approached hanging out like punching in and out for a factory job. Though a few major plants along the Detroit River closed, the area still mostly maintained the same working class feel. Our shift would usually begin around 6 or 7. We would stay until close at 10, and linger an extra hour with Sara as she cleaned up. We would then go over to the rundown Coney Island for a halfway decent meal. After smoking cigarettes outside for another half hour, we'd part ways. Other days, we'd replace the coffeehouse with the hookah lounge owned by two fellow Riverview High alumni. One of the owners, Joey, liked to tell people about how I had helped him pass a history class in high school and was therefore "brilliant." The hookah lounge was a bit trendier than the coffeehouses, but we got burnt out on that pretty quickly (no pun intended, naturally). No matter where we went, our activities always involved sitting and conversation. We never achieved much. We talked about our days and how we felt society had wronged us in some way. We were together, though, and that made it better. It seemed the strategic release of air gave us something to do in our otherwise unimpressive Downriver lives.

I would get a sense sometimes, especially on a cold overcast day, that I was utterly hopeless where I was. There seemed to be no reason to live in Downriver if you didn't have to. Even when you walked down to the river, you would see the view of Canada blocked by islands. The largest one's called Grosse Ile. Going down there, though, provided little relief from the boredom inside. When you looked across the water from Bishop Park, you'd see freighters passing by, often carrying ore from Lake Superior to the industrial centers along Lake Erie. This, in a way, must have had an impact on my outlook. The farthest you could get was the river, but it wasn't much of an escape, just an entrenched ritual of routine.

The things we talked about were like that, too. We would solve the world's problems and our own day after day, yet we remained. Nothing seemed to change, nor did it feel like it ever would.

However, I should point out that we weren't in a bastion of nowhere. There were more hip metro areas like Royal Oak, Ann Arbor, and Midtown Detroit within reasonable driving distance. I brought this point up, but I was usually overruled. We would stay and we would settle for what was familiar. I remained the king of the crowded fishbowl. In my mind, I could swim into the vast oceans, and would, one day. I would "Grow my gorgeous wings and fly away" like Joni Mitchell sings in "The Last Time I Saw Richard." As it turned out, though, my flight was something I engineered for myself. I could have conceivably stayed at Schoolcraft Community College until spring of 2014 but, maybe sensing how things were going at home, I decided not to. I grew increasingly restless as the year progressed. Four deaths in my family over the course of four months unsettled me: my great aunt first from old age, then my aunt from cancer, then my maternal grandmother from old age and complications from a stroke, and lastly, my paternal grandfather from cancer. The only constant in life seemed to be the group I had cultivated since my time in high school. We continued to come to the Grind and put in our hours, but more than ever, it felt hollow: talking without action, action without purpose.

By early September after a falling out between Craig and Rick, we were down to four. This was right around the time Craig got kicked out of his mother's house (again). He took his savings (mostly from bonds his grandfather gave him) and moved in with Pete to a rundown apartment, nestled along the Ecorse River in Lincoln Park. We moved our sitting sessions there, so our visits to the coffee house happened less and less often, which probably contributed to the overall feeling that things were going downhill – the apartment complex was in a more troubled, declining area. During the bleakest time of the year, it looked even more depressing.

These new sessions started out much like our other times together. We sat in the room talking and smoking, until the smoke was so thick we'd have to open a window so we could see each other clearly. The complex itself had the smells one would expect of a complex – built in the 50's and not updated since. Being formerly for working class singles, it contained decades of marijuana and tobacco odor. The stain in front of the door may or may not have been from blood. We hadn't decided. But there we sat. Even more confined and even less certain. It was manageable, for a while.

Then came the drinking. Craig recently quit his intense medicine regiment (anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication) and took to drinking right off the bat to fill the hole. With that came babbling confessions of love to Sara, fights with Pete, and an increased reliance on me to be there to diffuse the tension. Though I was getting tired of these sitting sessions, their frequency increased. Pete and Craig would both call me, one after the other. I was the glue that could keep them together. I knew that things were going to end badly.

Soon, I was more or less forced into taking sides. They both made appeals, until I finally made my decision. Out of history, I quietly took Craig's side. But as his substance abuse continued to worsen, Pete and Sara were there less and less, which is when Karl stepped in. Karl wasn't usually a fan of our sitting sessions. That was, until we introduced alcohol. After a number of drunken nights, our bond solidified. As the situation continued to unravel, we were asleep in the burning building. A little dramatic, yes, but it sounds about right.

By mid-December, the main supports started to give. The only option was to watch it fall down. Pete and Craig were now at odds over money and over Sara. I was dragged into these conflicts. Pete wasn't paying rent. So Craig finally worked up the nerve to kick him out. The conversation took a turn for the worse, ending with Craig throwing a puke-stained shirt at Pete as he walked out the door. Craig was a mess, and keen on telling me everything. I didn't know how to process it. These were my only friends, after all. The only thing I could think to do was write. That's when I'd say my writing really began—at 19. Everything else I'd done the five years before seemed to lack urgency.

When Joni Mitchell described the beginnings of her songwriting, she said that she would go down to the coffeehouses on Cass Corridor (in Detroit) and write. She created a private world for herself in the backdrop of her failing marriage to Chuck Mitchell and having to give her daughter up for adoption. She felt that writing, in some sense, was the only way to grapple with these issues. "Both Sides Now" and "I Had a King" were two of the most prominent pieces she wrote at that time. That is not to say that my writing (or situation) remotely compared to that, but I still found solace in her work. The music riveted me with honesty, yet it also was comforting. There were people like me out there, somewhere, sometime. Sitting, thinking, talking, but all the while knowing that there was something better. There was a light at the end of the tunnel if you knew where to look. However, that light would not come through the parting of the clouds, but through searching the depths of your own life for wisdom.

Pete finally moved out on Christmas day, leaving Craig with the rest of the lease. Craig's dad talked him into moving down to Alabama by New Years to get

a job and he called me a few days later to help him get the rest of his stuff out of the apartment. Craig called me a few days later to help him get the rest of his stuff out of the apartment. I went along, in a snowy night much like this one, to help him move his stuff out. We ransacked the place and took whatever we thought had value. We left most of the hand-me-down furniture, but we crammed the rest of the stuff in his Jeep. For some reason, we decided to drive around the area one last time before we both left. We drove past my grandparent's old house, my old house, and our old high school. That was how it ended. I said good-bye around 4 or 5 in the morning outside my house. He left the next day, but not before going to Sara's house to see her one last time. He bought her roses. She told him it would be best if he left. That was it. The group was finished. I left on the 4th to move into my dorm at Western.

After I left Tongues and the memory of our times together, I went to walk around by the river. I went to the dock as it was getting dark. The cold winds blew strongly off the water. I went over to the fishing pier and looked out. It was a still night, already dark by 7:00. I stood there at the end of the pier in the same spot I would go past when I rowed in high school. To the north is Detroit, and to the south, the channel leads to Lake Erie. I took my high school girlfriend here, once. We had been sitting on the edge and we were primed to kiss. Instead, as she leaned forward, I sang a song. I looked to my side and she wasn't there. The boat wasn't there, either.

The dark and grey light was broken up by the occasional burst of green from the buoys. I looked out farther toward Canada and felt strangely at peace. I knew I had to see this, I knew I had to be here. I had to, at this stage in my life, know for sure that there was nothing left here for me. I went back to the downtown area. I walked past Tongues and beyond to see what had become of the Grind. As I reached the spot, I felt like how I had felt so many other times. Approaching the building from the right side, as I always did, I saw that it looked the same. However, the second I stepped in, the transformation was complete. I looked around, the dingy couches and tables were replaced by a slick looking chain restaurant. The walls were repainted, with a bit of chrome trim on the fixtures. I went to take a piss and saw a Halle Berry poster on the wall in the bathroom. The place I knew was gone. I didn't stay to eat. I took one last look and walked out. As I exited into the cold, as I had so many times, I felt alone. The group was gone. So was the stale heartache, teenage angst, and endless days and nights of sitting. It was all gone.

Upon moving to Kalamazoo, I was in a state of confusion. I only remained in contact with Craig and Karl, but they were elsewhere. My roommate didn't arrive until a few days after I did. Meanwhile, the winter weather worsened (the worst in recent memory, some said). The weather kept everyone inside and I found it challenging to meet new people right away. I sat in the room with only my acoustic guitar giving me something to do. It seemed to be the only way I could purge the loneliness.

It wasn't more than a few days after I moved that Craig called again. He heard from his mother that the Grind had closed down. The owner ran out on the lease and the landlord repossessed the building. It was too perfect and too poetic to ever happen again in my life. Now it's a sandwich shop and I'm in a better place than I've ever been. But still, anytime I return to downtown Wyandotte, I have fleeting pangs of wonder and sick nostalgia. Not at what used to be, but at how small it seems now. I came back to get a glimpse of who I was then, but found that as time goes on, that person is harder and harder to find. But here, Joni has it right again: "Something's lost and something's gained, in living every day." This sentiment never seemed so poignant yet so brutally obvious. But, maybe that's what wisdom is. It tells you something you need to know but already do. Somewhere it's there, just waiting for you to come to it when you're ready.

# TYPICAL SATURDAY NIGHT

*Jackson Kocis*

The Setting:  
Dimly lit hovel  
Dusty and content  
Crowded table  
Resting on cement

The Monologue:  
Feed me death  
Breathe, next  
Swallow.  
Forget, now  
Ease into coma.  
I'll get there yet

The Question:  
House of dereliction,  
Where is your son?

The Sound:  
Plastic rings sire the smell of yesterday's perfume  
Cracks, while the spire mothers a familiar tune:  
'Ah svidi dah dum,  
Ah svidi dah dum'  
Or something like that

The Soliloquy:  
"And became the first time in a park.  
The only thing you can get the best  
That's life in general, you know  
Wind through a vacuum  
And illumine a sliver of pine"

The Conclusion:  
Let's do it again sometime.