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The Laureate Eleventh Edition

Bridget Dooley

Western Michigan University

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Bridget Dooley, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in the spring of 2011, successfully completed the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 09, 2012.

The title of the thesis is:

*The Laureate (2012 Editor in Chief)*

Ms. Becky Cooper, Lee Honors College

Dr. Nicholas Andreadis, Lee Honors College
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The Laureate's Mission is to provide undergraduate students at Western Michigan University a place in which to publish their works of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and other creative works. The Laureate strives to be a professional and engaging journal that appeals to all.
This year marks The Laureate's eleventh annual edition. As Western Michigan University's only undergraduate literary journal, The Laureate provides a unique opportunity to commemorate and showcase Western's most talented writers and artists. Although The Laureate began as a journal for solely written work, we have since expanded to include visual art, as well.

The Laureate is a work of student expression both in content and process, given that students hold the reins in regard to both editing and design. Myself and three editing assistants, all undergraduates, were responsible for culling and editing all submissions, while the publication's design was created by a team of students led by Paul Sizer at the Gwen Frostic School of Art. The Laureate is a testament to the creativity and skill of Western's students. Still, this journal could never have come to be without the dedication of those who have supported us. First and foremost, I would like to thank Becky Cooper for providing her much-needed expertise and enthusiasm throughout this long process. I also want to extend a special thanks to Lee Honors College, The Design Center at the Frostic School of Art, and Western Michigan University for their support of this project. Without the advisors, assistants, authors, and instructors who guided us and helped to spread our message, The Laureate would not be possible.

The 2012 edition of The Laureate is as diverse and kaleidoscopic as Western's students themselves, with pieces from many genres and many perspectives. The pieces here-in run the gamut from devastating to hilarious, but that's not to say that this collection is discordant. As you turn the pages, I invite you to take note of how these widely varied works fit together. I think you'll find that Western's students have a great deal to say about their place in the world, their views on adulthood, and their adoration of East Hall.

Without any further ado, I am happy to present the 2012 edition of The Laureate. I hope you'll love it as much I do.

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You called it my spy car.
I was your James Bond, crouching
in the woodchips of rocket ships and enemy fortresses,
cleverly disguised as yellow plastic—

the street light flickered orange
as electricity skipped across a florescence of puddles
not yet splashed through.

We shouted “bang” at the dark
as if telling the world to play dead would stop time,

(our words hitting the cogs and chipping the teeth
like the slide that chipped mine)

yet even the leaves are rusted
and falling while the trees shake their bare branches like bones—

(when did I outgrow this skeleton place?)

I took you to East Hall
and we watched the vines grow into the classrooms.

Everything is evolving. Everything is falling apart.

The chairs are still there—
clicking together like the clockwork of ourselves.

In pictures, the flash smooths
over shadows. I was a photographer once.

I used to buy roses, too.

I wonder if the children played in the ashes,
and made angels on their backs

in the powder of their mothers’ bones,
pretending their arms were really wings

made of flesh, waiting to stretch
and take them through snatches of a sky
too perfectly blue.

Now I write poetry.

(You wouldn’t pose with headstones)

I can paint souls into the boots of the Gestapo,
and pretend that death never comes in technicolor—

only black and white.
An empty tank
means you’ve forgotten
how to interact with the enemy: the neighbor
who you meet on the same side as the gas pump
and since he is foreign to me,
I feel as if I am sucking in the oil that is his,
so I stare off by myself,
not knowing what he really
just said during our final transaction.

Underground is where I reside, where a caption
of time is kept on the frame of a landscape painting.
It seems most logical, right here:
In my first-floor apartment, they said
it would stay cool
because the building was built inside
the land.

Being social doesn’t mean the same
thing anymore. I change myself, and sit here,
content with the warm glow
of a candle
and this thing called literature
dripping from my tongue.

My dad’s house smells like dog piss
and sometimes seasoned salmon
with steamed vegetables. Nights

I can chew the support of a father figure
that I wish wasn’t so salty,
but you would probably think is tender,
flavorful. There’s a woman I want to marry.

Her two bedroom apartment smells like candles from the mall
with names like motivation, success, and dedication. I can taste future
when I open the door and all my senses flare up

like I need money for the honeymoon already. I always wish my nose was congested
when I walk into foreclosed homes, but I’ve ingested that stink and it’s stuck with me
and on the day I buy my first Cadillac, I’ll get a poverty scented air freshener.
I am reading about a man who has no name, and no body to confide in. He retired early to his underground, and was seen insane by every undergrad in ENG. 1350.

And in my eggshell state, I rationalized with him. I stood beside his notes all night, used them as company, and if a dream were ever to come true I want this one.

All the while, my urgent neighbor above me talks endlessly at midnight,

on his little device called communication.

I might be the bedspread—dangling at the edge of your bed: 3:04 in the morning.

October still makes dreams and I must have done something last night, left a window open—yes: a dream swimming stuck with me and Freud never showed himself.

I had a moment upon waking, upon eating away at certain parts: certain moments of a dream appear in everyday things, link it to Déjà vu, the smell of the familial that I felt and wore before. The past, never too far behind the window never leaving the frame.

THE INTERPRETATION OF DISSOLVE

by Kenneth Jakubas
It might have been over breakfast, over morning coffee, that the senses danced, released themselves to the mercy of this dream, a silk thing, like the bedspread after 4 am always a lost memory like the cold October or a basement revisited amidst the must.

Certain movements of a dream appear in everyday occurrences, link it to when you make the bed, the flakes of a dream releasing form, dancing in front of your only pillow—and the blankets.

The blankets never want to settle.

THE ROYAL WEDDING OR MAYBE I’LL GET IT WHEN I’M OLDER

by Carman Goodrich

Who is that? Who is who?
The guy in red. That’s William.
Oh. He’s the groom.
Oh, okay. I thought it was that other guy.
Peace be with him.
His summer hands
swimming with the others.

Peace be with him.
The dentist with the shale jacket,
his teeth following his own sermon.

Peace be with him.
The grade school secretary,
hair red and wispy as her blouse.

Peace be with him.
The old man in the cardigan, who
found beauty where none else could.

Peace be with him.
His cracked leather sandals
recently oiled like His skin.

Peace be with him.
The collared young man,
wondering if he’s ever missing out.

Peace be with him.
To all of them.
Perhaps without them even knowing.

Where have all the
seconds gone?

One neutrino encircles—
its spark never ending
; vestiges entombed.
Racing light
on stolen
time.
In the summer I rode
Rode in the car from Detroit to Cincinnati through Louisville and so on
Rode until that Montgomery sign caught my eyes
The sign told me I was there
That I had made it and would soon be at brother’s
It told me that soon I’d be lying on tan carpet
With my hands behind my head
Hearing scandals
About momma and daddy
And our other folks
With a crooked grin stretched across my face
’Cause I loved it
Loved how brother would fill in the holes for me—
The youngest
Briefing me with the tales from the past
Showing me what colors looked like
Before they blended
And before I existed
Sometimes it was funny
What things were like before yellow met brown
And made copper
Then it got sad when yellow met brown
And made bronze
Though it was sad
I was ok because I had brother
He was like what daddy could’ve been
If he hadn’t been beaten down so
Brother didn’t let me miss a thing
And summer after summer
I rode and rode
Until I became whole
There is an orchard growing bandages and potatoes that cannot cook.

There is a door that only opens for barkeeps and collection agents.

There is a child holding hard on a radiator, floating, feet in the air, out over Atlantic City.

**SAMHAIN CITY FABLE**

*by Sean Stoto*

Down Vine Street, slushing through yellow leaves, kicking through sticks and stacks of broken glass blanketed with jet stream. Teary-eyed trumpets sound through windows and doors and cracks in concrete.

Nearby a life is sprung from between the thighs of some salt-wrung woman.

Nearby is a boy jumping in front of the bus I just missed.
A boy and a girl stood in the center of a busy flea market. The girl looked around her. She saw tables lining every wall and forming aisles in the open area—a maze of memories. She saw one table topped with towers of old books, their leather covers worn and faded. She saw a man’s fuzzy head peeking out above one of the stacks. She saw boxes and boxes of dusty vinyl record albums and heard her parents’ voices somewhere very far away as they sang along to Seger. She saw piles of costume jewelry; bracelets with every other cubic zirconium missing and necklaces tangled together in knots. She saw displays of homemade Christmas tree ornaments, the glittery glaze covering their surface beginning to peel away to reveal a transparency underneath. She saw giant paintings leaning up against concrete walls and tiny price tags with not-so-tiny prices stuck to the back of the canvases. She saw a bored woman listlessly scanning a rack of second-hand winter coats. She saw an antique lamp in the shape of an elephant with a light bulb screwed into the end of its trunk. She saw a small tin box filled with black and white photographs and colorful postcards. She saw all of these things and thought, for a moment, about point of view. She turned to the boy on her left and asked him what blue looked like. He told her it looked like blue.

They say you can’t hear the music without having to dance. Grab the hand next to you. Your feet move in perfect synchronization, as if these movements are more a part of you than just something. A cigarette hangs out of your mouth. You hang out of a window, hum a tune with no words. You’ve heard it before. But make it up as you go. When you lay your head on concrete, You know that concrete is concrete.

One of those nights. A star is near the moon.
Will you please stop slipping into something more comfortable? I can't stop ironing my work clothes.

When I talk about masks, I’m not referring to the body and its attachments, just jars of buttons and how we sort them.

The anteater is both family man and local terrorist. Green beans like to dress up in nice suits and dream about life after death.

If I am to be the executioner of a stubbed toe, I’m also the giggling observer of a pain I refuse to accept as my own.

This is what it means to live forever: You light each candle with another candle and soon you have a full cake in all its frosted glory, your surrounding family frozen on an inhale, everyone secretly hoping you don’t have the lungs to blow them out all at once.

Scientists invented yes and no in the 1950’s. Poets are working on maybe.

When choosing soup or salad, I consider the time a friend called me a silly Buddhist and then hung himself.

I don’t know the answers, but I hear God’s got a killer publishing deal for his theory of the body’s electrical grounding. Something about love and the absolute zero of dirt. Then again, my grandpa climbed telephone poles for a living.

What I mean is, if you stand in line at the patent office long enough, eventually everyone will owe you money.
One thousand moose graze
in the curves of the cerebrum,
their brown lips and yellowed teeth
gnash at the balsam firs of thought.
In the confines their solitary bodies collide
and mate, separate.

Snow, and the carcasses are solid.
Ravens come and peck and clean,
and the bulls drop antlers
into the crusty lichen and gray matter
that litter the forest floor.

Calves nibble in the crevice
between hemispheres of left and right,
as ferns hail the savory sun,
unfurl, reach to each other,
a hovering blanket through the forest.

Superior waves lap the shore, wet the rocks.
Cow and calf forage, get fat.
This year’s antlers grow
larger than the last and branch
and mesh tight to neurons.

Frigid waters chop the shore
while the moose pick thoughts clean.
The autumn is short,
snow is here, water turns
to ice and a bridge appears.

A pair of wolves arrive:
male, female.
Their turn to mate, populate.

45 miles long,
9 at its widest.
A brain, an island.
We are apple picking in October sun
when I toss a fruit to you, plucked
from the tree, red,
but not the red of a Radio Flyer,
rather the red of a male cardinal
who watches from above.

Too many episodes of Cheers
and I long for Boston—
baked cobblestone streets
of U.S. history,
cooled by the salt of the sea.
I step on them, headed
for the next crab cake,
stone-ground mustard on the side.

Then again maybe it’s Seattle I want—
where I’ve never been
but remember from a childhood
full of Frasier.
I can go up the Space Needle,
to the top, where I pierce
the sky and start new in
the unfamiliar familiar city.

You catch the apple and it is black
against your hands. The skin flakes,
falls to the ground, scattering
into brittle leaves
and soggy earth, shouting to me.
It’s time to leave, to go, for good.

A spirit was trying to slip out of a little body,
as a television cast light on the California king.
Some gibberish documentary about
Carl Sagan with slides of the cosmos cascading
over closed eyes, making them cold shades of
blue and silver.

Also, in a dusty bestseller, a seven headed beast rose
from the sea, with ten horns and crowns.

The little body hated twilight zones like those,
when the senses floated away,
leaving legs sore and stretching.

Trying to convey disapproval that day,

with arms too short to cross
over a tiny chest. The inherent loneliness
of human being hadn’t even entered the picture.
Instead, an intimate relationship
with seven imaginary friends,
moss, swings, tears and monsters worse
than those in closets.

According to Public radio the apocalypse was rescheduled
on October 21st 2011; the world is right on track for
complete earthly destruction.
The leader of the cult says sinners won’t feel fear.
They’ll just slip peacefully to sleep.
Spirits freed forever
from little bodies.
Because in every electrified nerve of my ever-aching body
the heat of your architecture stirs—
a child, a river, a beast,
seven red-breasted nuthatches and the scent of moon
colors the pages of my arms with the songs
of your arms and all they’ve carried
I recite letters written by strangers and buried
depth behind feathered lockets and closet spiders and
even deeper still, I sit atop castles of gazes
each rendering my heart’s walls more pliable than moments
before knocking out entire hallways to make room for
soliloquies of your tenderness that I breathe
between my dreams, then wake to see sleep
so I begin again.

CRADLED IN A CATAPULT

by Emily Elizabeth Scott

We never found the chanterelles we set off to harvest,
you caught a blue gill.

In quiet contentment we ate it,
with the beets and potatoes saved from dumpsterdom
wrapped in foil, baked in the bonfire with salt and a teaspoon of molasses.

We built an effigy to Fromm
then departed.
In Doc Martens, I walked toward
the rising sun, you set off in the opposite direction,
through Kalamazoo, down river toward larger lakes.

Thanks be to carbonated hearts
withstanding the harshest westerlies.

When I escape this un-caged buffalo era,
I’m going to settle south of infinity,
and rest my tired eyes on the whimsical,
sore from this incessant counting.

SOUTH OF INFINITY

by Seek Constance
LIFE LINES

by Sarah Bertman

People are in their hands.
Fat folds of flesh
are a baby’s first grasp of world.
Innocent as their minds,
soft as stork feathers. Born empty.

Starry vines of life carve out niches
and hands become books of history,
shake a critic’s reading.

Hands of a pianist are nimble and thin.
We watch spider fingers move sound.
Hands of a farmer are thickened by work,
blackened by soil.
Hands of a mother are not soft.

Age is not time, not space.
Age is life which pours from the years
like a giant mosaic of fire,
etching its path across naked skin.

A great-grandfather points to each crease.
Each life line a story, he says.
This one’s my war.
This one’s my fall.
This one’s my baby.
DEATH AT THE LIBRARY

by Jesse Duke

I watched a man die as I was sitting at a computer at the public library. The paramedics never rose their voices, the librarians never uttered a shush, and I never finished writing that paper. I have never felt so alone. It was the white sheet draped over the body, it was the endless distance between the body and the ceiling, it was the homeless man who was still asleep in the corner, a book propped up between his thumb and forefinger, head tilted to the side, half drooling on his coat. I watched a man die, something paramedics understand well, about as well as they understand the need for silence, about as well as God’s understanding of the universe, this silent expanse of stars that die without warning, a blink, a flash, a darkness that leaves Him staring in disbelief, His fingers trembling, unable to think of the word for humanity, which is not unlike the way I felt as I watched a man die a second time. This is years later. My buddy from the army is home for two weeks. It is the summer before my eighteenth birthday and he is teaching me how to smoke cigars. He pulls out his laptop and starts playing a video. This is a helicopter covering my platoon he says. The video is grainy. Crosshairs dance across the screen before settling on a man. That’s the enemy he says. The screen shakes and two seconds later, the man is replaced by a cloud of dust, the red glow already fading from his body, gooseflesh climbing up and down my body, and me, absolutely stricken with a loss of appetite, of breath, of the daylight left on that Sunday afternoon and the green, green grass.

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Tuesday evening. The tar on the toll bridge is so grey that it almost loses itself in the colors of the ocean below. The sunset is a fire poker, glaring hot and pointedly through the windshield, as we beat a swift trek over the water. I’ve got the music on low as my sisters and I talk high speed about the day, which happens to be my sister’s sixteenth birthday. I feel unstoppable. My foot slams a little farther down on the gas and we almost hit the car in front of us. I laugh at my timing. Cherokee, the kind, quiet one, asks in a worried voice from the backseat for me to slow down. Savannah, the birthday girl, the ferocious fighter, tells me to slow down. I back down to my signature granny-like driving, my sails deflated. We pick up our cousin McKenna, and head to McDonald’s for shakes.

The sun is gone by the time we get to the beach. Sitting at a drive-thru in McDonald’s took the last of the light out of the evening, not to mention 20 bucks from my pocket. From the public parking lot, you can hear the roar of the Gulf of Mexico, and smell the heavy scent of salt water, the sand like sugar, blowing from the beach to the tar of the lot. Giggling, we tiptoe towards the entrance, feeling the luscious squirm of sand between our toes.

Most of the buildings near the parking lot are abandoned because of the hurricanes from last fall. They stand eerily, giant and dark, like pot-headed thugs, intimidating the night, their tops melding into the dark black-blue sky. It’s surreal. The sky looks like the kind you see on Disneyland rides, and the ocean is just a sound effect until you are close enough to really see and feel its touch. We are high as mother-fucking kites off the sheer atmosphere.

Savannah draws a heart in the sand with her big toe; Cherokee and McKenna have a sand fight farther along the beach. I stand and look at the moon hitting the Gulf, mesmerized by the beat of the surf and the colors of the evening. The lights of the restaurants towards the more populated end of the strip bleed onto the sand, but refuse to mix with the water or the sky. The beauty of it allows me to enjoy the untouched aspects of this city, a happy denizen of the nighttime.

I sit down on the sand and stare. Eventually they all come down to sit a little behind me, talking. I am too far away in my own mind to hear them.

“What’s that?” one of them says.

I turn around, “What’s what?”

“That,” says Cherokee, pointing out into the water.

Standing up, I scrutinize the water, blind to whatever it is they want me to see.

“What are you guys talking about?” I ask laughingly back, certain they must be pulling a joke on me.

“Something big and glowing in the water,” Cherokee says back, her voice trembling slightly, fearfully.

Unable to see anything, I walk a few feet toward the water’s edge. I gaze as deeply into the water as I can before giving up once more and turning around.

McKenna calls to me, “It’s RIGHT there!” She comes up behind me, with Savannah and Cherokee trailing along. “Can’t you see it? Its right over there, over by the dock, down there.” She points over my shoulder, down the strip towards the restaurants and the remnants of an old dock.

The only thing I can see in the water is a plain everyday buoy, placed there so boats know where the water is too shallow.

“I don’t see shit! Guys, all I see is a buoy. If you’re talking about that little bit of a light down there, it’s probably from that.”

“No, it’s farther out than that. It’s right under the water, and it’s bigger than that, glowing purple.”

I laugh at her, “Glowing purple? You guys are trying to play a prank on me.” I make a move to walk closer down to the water to see.

“No! Hannah!” They shriek together.

“What? I can’t see shit from here. I’m going down to see if I can get a better look.”

“Don’t go down there,” says McKenna, her voice bubbling over with fear.

“Why? What’s the big deal?”
“Because, there’s something down there. It’s just bad whatever it is,” Savannah says.
“Tell me what it looks like.” I smirk, sure that this is a joke they are trying to sucker me into.
“It’s down there, glowing in the water, big, and glowing in green and gold and purple. I don’t know how you can’t see it, but I just get this feeling that if you go down there . . . It just keeps giving me this feeling in my head that it would hurt you.” Savannah spat out angrily.
“In your head . . . Right,” I say.
I believe in the unknown more than either of my sisters, but skepticism keeps people from making jackasses of themselves. A telepathic glowing thing just lying in wait in the water for some teenage girl has too much of a cinematic twist to be plausible. Savannah and McKenna like to play pranks, and they might’ve talked Cherokee into going along with it.
Cherokee pipes up. “Hannah, it’s there. Savannah isn’t lying. I hear it in my head, too.”
“We can all see it but you,” says McKenna.
“Well, if it isn’t a joke, let me go down to see.” I reply, walking firmly past their shoulders down the beach, toward the water. I wasn’t going to let them fool me, and there was a part of me that wanted to prove my guts, my invincibility.
“HANNAH!”
I laugh to myself at the obviousness of their lies, but there’s one fact I can’t refute—Cherokee is a terrible liar. She falls apart and laughs when she even thinks about lying. This gives me a little bit of plausibility to chew on but not much. I ignore their shouting and pleading from the top of the beach and march directly, stubbornly, into the water. The panicked screams crescendo.
I laugh, and yell out to them, “See? Nothing down here, I’m fine!”
“Hannah! Come back here! Christ! Get back here!” Savannah’s yell rips through the dark and the thump-splash of the surf. It hits the core of me, her fear. It seems ridiculous but honest.
I stomp back out of the water, cackling like an old hag up the sticky dry beach. “I’m fine! Nothing hurt me guys! There’s nothing down there.”
I finally look into their faces, and they’re stark white with fear, eyes big around as tortilla shells. I begin to re-evaluate my position. They could be in contact with something that I couldn’t see. And maybe, for once, I was being the insensitive one to their paranormal experience.
“Wow. You guys were really freaked out.”
Savannah tears into me, blue flames for eyes. “You think?”
Silence. We stand huddled together, my legs dripping, breaded in a fine coat of sand. Night closes in on us, circles around us like a shark, breathing its cold, sordid breath on our faces. The pounding beat of the surf sounds menacing, like the drumbeat of a tribe of cannibals.

“I want to go home,” says McKenna.
“Yeah, Hannah. Let’s go home,” Savannah says with just the slightest push of command to her voice.
“Okay, okay, if you guys are really that worried.” I say jokingly, trying to play it off. I want to ignore it. I want the atmosphere to be light and playful like earlier. But it wasn’t going to happen no matter how hard I tried; things are too heavy to lift off the ground again. Whatever it was sucked us dry, even me, the one who doesn’t even have the ability to see or communicate with it.
Their fear courses into me, making my pleasant mood feel forced, faked. As it flows into me, it pools and balloons, growing, ripening into a fruit of confusion that weighs heavy.
We walk back to the car in silence. The taint of our experience follows us like a phantom into the car. I am still muddled . . . what had they seen that I hadn’t? I turn on the car and pull onto the highway. After dropping McKenna off, I press Savannah and Cherokee for answers. Savannah refuses to talk about it beyond a “Yes” or a “No.” Cherokee sits mute in the backseat, eyes wide in the rear-view mirror. And I drive on, rolling down all the windows, playing Jimi Hendrix on the radio and waiting for the stars to come closer.
The man squirmed in pain as Alex slowly, methodically, bore the needle into his skin. “Shhh,” Alex cooed, wiping away the blood with a crisp white square of paper towel. “Don’t wiggle around like that. You’ll make it harder for both of us.” He dug the needle in deeper, drawing it across the man’s arm, marking it. The man let out a soft whimper, trying his best to bury the pain, to not show his weakness. “Good. Stay still. Or you’ll ruin my canvas.” The needle dug into the man’s arm, sending shock-waves of pain up through him. “A tattoo is supposed to be painful. They’re born from pain.” Alex wiped away more of the man’s blood. “And anyway, you’re the one who insisted on getting this yin-yang permanently scarred on your body, so quit whining. And for crap’s sake, stop squirming.”

Alex let the hot water cascade over his head as he scrubbed away the day’s sweat, ink, and the almost-too-sanitary smell of the tattoo parlor, the smell that no amount of scrubbing seemed to scour away. As he stepped out of the shower to dry off, he examined himself in the mirror. Despite being nude, he appeared fully clothed; there was more ink visible than his own flesh. His hair had been buzzed off—his own handiwork—but had begun to poke through his skull just enough to justify a trim. He had more piercings than he did friends. Looking himself in the eyes he forced a smile, and dressed himself. His favorite Black Sabbath t-shirt was beginning to feel a bit snug. He knew he could stand to lose a pound or fifty, but being thin just didn’t seem very metal.

He emerged from the bathroom back into his tiny, one bedroom apartment. Nobody was there to greet him other than his small, black cat, blinking at him from across the dark room. His living room was hot, dark, and stuffy. Alex turned on an old brass lamp next to his couch, and suddenly the room exploded into a flurry of colors, patterns, and textures. Every square inch of every wall of his apartment, from floor to ceiling, was covered with quilts, each more intricate than the last. He had hand-sewn each, and they represented years of painstaking work. Quilting was the one thing his grandmother had taught him before she’d left him forever. In fact, it was the only thing anyone in the family had ever taught him. His parents, his aunt, his uncles—they all viewed him as an oddball, the weirdo, the black sheep. Their affections were instead poured on Alex’s sister, the honor student, the cheerleader, the college grad. When sewing he could feel his grandmother’s presence in every square, like he’d never lost her, and it filled him with the sense of self-worth that only she had ever given him. He gazed around the room, admiring his craft. “I guess I only feel comfortable with a needle in my hand, huh?” The black cat only blinked in reply.

He dropped his full weight onto the center of his old, green couch, its holes long since patched with shiny streaks of silver duct-tape. It sent a plume of dust into the air, the particles dancing in the small amount of sunlight creeping in through the quilt-covered windows. With two broad sweeps of his massive arms he cleared the debris off of the coffee table in front of him. On the left side he piled junk foods, and on the right, his sewing kit. In the center, he set his latest project, neatly folded. “I finish my masterpiece tonight,” he said, carefully unfurling his newest work. The cat jumped up next to him, curled itself into a tight ball and fell asleep, prompting Alex, subconsciously, to give the creature’s ears a gentle scratch. “It’s for her, you know.” He let out a long, soft sigh, holding his needle to the scant light and carefully feeding the thread through its eye.

The girl working counter at the Scarred for Life tattoo parlor was the only thing that could distract Alex from his typically immaculate sketches. Her short, dark hair was accented with bright streaks of hot pink. It framed her round face, which housed a collection of metal that could possibly rival Alex’s own piercings. Her name was Ruby, and his powerful crush on her usually reduced him to a blathering idiot in her presence.

They’d known each other all their lives, or at least that’s how it seemed to Alex. In the sixth grade, he had asked her out via a homemade Valentine that read, “I can’t heartly wait to take you on a date.” On the back of it she had quickly scribbled, “You’re too late, I’m dating Nate,” and handed it back to him. Sophomore year, in an incredibly misguided attempt to woo her, he had learned to play guitar. He stood outside her window each night for a week straight, playing songs he’d written for her. He was mortified to later discover that she slept with earplugs in, and hadn’t heard a single chord.
On the rare occasions he’d had the courage to simply and directly ask her to go on a date, her response was usually one she’d seemingly selected from a short list: “You’re sweet, but you’re just not my type,” “I’m seeing someone else,” “I’m really busy with school right now,” and occasionally, a simple, swift, painful “no.”

The man screamed, and struggled to compose himself. “Think about it,” Alex began, ignoring the man’s discomfort. “A tattoo is a manifestation of pain. They’re born through emotional pain: something or someone you love so much, you can’t let them ever be further away from you than your own skin.” The man winced, nodding slowly, but not speaking. “They’re guided by creative pain. That’s my pain. The pain of being unable to live up to your vision, or the pain of having your vision limited by others.” Alex didn’t think the man was listening to him. Not really listening, anyway. He wiped away more blood, the clean white paper towel becoming a dark crimson. “And they’re made—as you’re experiencing now—through physical pain.” The man kept his eyes tightly closed, responding to Alex with only a slow nod.

The needle dove through the surface, plunging deep, breaching only moments later and soaring high into the air. Alex drove it through the fabric of his masterpiece with quick, precise movements. He was driven—by what seemed to him to be nothing other than divine inspiration—to work at an impossible, feverish pace. Each patch was a part of him, an extension of his physical body. It was as if he was sewing his own skin into each square. Sweat glistened on his large, meaty head as he sewed in the final patch, directly in the center of the quilt. It showed an image of a large, red gem, its radiance stretching out towards every other square.

Ruby didn’t know the real him. She knew the fat guy. The metal head. The guy covered in ink. The guy who hadn’t stopped asking her out since they had started middle school. Today was different. Today she would see the real him. Slowly, with his masterwork tucked beneath his sweating armpit, he approached the desk.

“Hey Ruby.”

“Oh, hey Alex.” She was chipper, polite. Alex was sure she felt uncomfortable around him, though she didn’t divulge this by her tone. Though far from the keenest of observers, he had noticed that, after she had rejected his previous nine attempts at asking her out, she had begun switching shifts with whomever she could to avoid sharing work hours with him. But he was undeterred because he’d finally finished the ultimate symbol of his affection, and he knew that when she received it, she would see who he truly was.

“This is for you, Ruby. I made it.” He awkwardly thrust his arm out towards her, the quilt clutched in his massive fist.

“You sew? Seriously?” He handed her the carefully folded spread, and she took it gingerly, unfolding it slowly, suspiciously, as if she were expecting something to jump out of it and bite her. Alex watched as she took it in. He watched her eyes as they moved from patch to patch, each of which represented a different design from his tattoo portfolio. Her expression was hard to gauge, but Alex knew when she’d reached the all-important three patches in the center: an illustration of himself on the left, of her on the right, and the brilliant ruby, shining between them from dead center. Her eyes went wide, and her hand shot to her mouth. “Oh, Alex.” Tears began to well in her eyes, and her voice trembled. “I’m sorry, I can’t. This is just too much. It’s really too much.” She thrust the quilt into Alex’s chest, exiting the room quietly, as quickly as she could.

Alex could barely move, barely breathe. As he came to his senses, he took two large, red pushpins from the counter. Slowly, silently, he walked across the parlor and back to his chair, looking up at his wall of designs. He put pins into the top corners of the quilt, and then stuck it to the wall, covering his existing portfolio. He fell into the chair, gazing peacefully, unmoved, at his life’s work, sewn neatly into a perfect square. For an eternity the only sound was the parlor’s buzzing florescent lights. The silence was abruptly punctuated by a ringing bell, and Alex looked instinctively towards the door. A young woman had entered. Ruby had not yet returned to her post at the desk, so Alex rose to help the woman.

“Does it hurt?” she asked him.

“It does,” he told her honestly. “But anything that’s going to leave an impression on you is going to have to hurt somehow.” The girl nodded, and began to admire his quilt.

“You can do all these?” she asked, motioning to the images on the quilt. He could, he assured her. They were all his original designs. She picked the one she liked the most—a koi swimming in a pond—and sat down. Alex picked up his needle, approached his canvas, and found that he was comfortable.
Scene

SETTING: An art museum. TIME: Day.

(The GIRL stands on a pedestal roped off from a group of onlookers. Her arms are at her side, with her palms facing out to the visitors of the art exhibit of which she is a part. Behind and around her are other sculptures and paintings, but the crowd has gravitated to her. She is in a white silk slip, her skin is powdered white as well, and pale. Her wrists are dripping with blood onto her palms and it contrasts with the whiteness of her skin. Her hair falls halfway down her back, messy and uncared for. In front of her, a marble plaque reads: Love Is Not Romantic. The ARTIST stands by silently, studying the GIRL. Several people are situated around her. At her right are DIANE and HOWARD, an unhappily married couple. Near HOWARD, behind the GIRL, is MARIE. On the GIRL’s left side are professors CECIL and DOMMER.)

DIANE
A little dark, don’t you think?

HOWARD
No.

DIANE
What do you mean, no, Howie? The girl slit her wrists. That’s not dark to you at all?
HOEARD
I guess it’s a little exhilarating.

DIANE
Is that how you feel? Like you want to slit your wrists?

HOWARD
I just mean that we’re witnessing something that you don’t normally get to witness. Certain things are kept quiet. But this is forcing you to look at it.

DIANE
(Annoyed.)
And what is it then, that you see?

HOWARD
That there can be beauty in sadness and desperation. That maybe the struggle in life is something we forget about or refuse to acknowledge because it makes us uncomfortable.
You’re uncomfortable right now, aren’t you?

DIANE
Of course I am. Isn’t this supposed to make us uncomfortable?

HOWARD
(Shrugs.)
Maybe it’s romanticizing the ability to take your own life in your hands and just do something!

DIANE
I definitely disagree with that. People do just fine existing without needing to kill themselves to feel alive.

HOWARD
Sure, sure, but maybe it’s just about taking the plunge. Maybe it’s trying to tell us just to stand for something…

DIANE
You’re thinking too much into it, Howie. She’s just a sad pathetic depiction of a girl who isn’t strong enough to deal with reality. She’s selfish to take that way out. Pathetic.

(MARIE walks off, expecting HOWARD to follow her. He does not. Instead, he stands before the GIRL a little longer, and MARIE moves next to him to get a better look.)

MARIE
(To HOWARD.)
What do you think of it all?
(Holds out her hand)
Hi, I’m Marie.

HOWARD
Marie, I’m Howard.
(Looking back to the GIRL.)
There’s a lot to think about, I guess.

MARIE
Sure is. I’ve been staring at this girl for a half an hour now and I’m still not sure I understand. It’s so sad… to resort to this. The idea of eternity. It scares me.

HOWARD
But look at how good the artist makes it look. I mean, she’s in white, such a pure color. A light color.

MARIE
Are you insinuating there’s good in this?

HOWARD
Sure. Isn’t there some good in everything. At the bottom, isn’t there at the very least something to be learned?

MARIE
It’s so hard to justify her suicide as something to learn from, though.

HOWARD
Maybe that’s part of what the artist is trying to say. Maybe that there’s something to be learned from such a horrible outcome is a testament to the inexplicability of life.

(DIANE reenters, storms to HOWARD and glares.)

DIANE
There is nothing to learn from this, Howard, except that maybe I should keep a better eye on my husband! Is this really happening again?

MARIE
Is there a problem?
CECIL
Perhaps to emphasize the idea that there is no meaning in her life at this point. It's very Beckett. You can die of old age feeling accomplished.
You can die of old age with meaning to your life.
(A pause.)
Look into her eyes. Do you see that?

DOMMER
What?

CECIL
There's determination in them.

DOMMER
(Worried.)
Well, I wonder how long she's been standing there. She's probably tired.

CECIL
No... no, it's not as simple as that. Maybe it's meant to represent the hope and determination to mean something again.

DOMMER
It's a stretch, I think.

CECIL
Hear me out. There was once meaning to her life, and she lost that. Something happened that changed everything. Maybe it was her father being too tough on her, putting too much pressure on her to go to college and make something of her life. Maybe he came into her room at night and touched her... whatever the case, there's darkness now. She's lost all sense of purpose. Follow me?

DOMMER
Yes, but I can't say I buy it.

CECIL
In life, she has nothing. Maybe she's hoping that her death will mean something again... or that death itself will bring her a new identity and a new purpose. Maybe death is what she hopes will bring that meaning back into her life.

DOMMER
Back into her death, you mean.


MARIE
Yes, her death. Maybe the closest she’ll ever come to feeling alive is that last breath she’ll take as she realizes eternity awaits her.

DOMMER
You’re talking on the girl again, aren’t you? You’ve moved from existential thought back into the showroom, back to that pedestal.

MARIE
We always come back to the same things. Our minds have a gravitational resting point.

CECIL
So you mean to tell me that this girl’s suicide is nothing? It has no meaning?

MARIE
Maybe to her it does…but we don’t know enough of the story for it to mean anything to us.

CECIL
So is most art, then—in your opinion—purposeless?

MARIE
A lot of it is, yes…but the fact that it can stir up some emotion in people even without a purpose is what makes it beautiful.

(LILY and EDSEL enter. LILY grabs EDSEL’S arm, pulls him to a stop. Both stare at the GIRL for several seconds without speaking as the rest of the onlookers quietly mutter their thoughts on the piece. By this point, the GIRL’S hands are shaking and each of her breaths take longer to complete. Each time she blinks it takes longer to open her eyes. She looks weary. LILY speaks first.)

LILY
I don’t like it.

EDSEL
You don’t like much nowadays.

MARIE
Maybe. I don’t know. That’s the beauty of art, I suppose…and life…no matter how much you think about it, everyone gets something different. What could be a failure to one person could be the most noble solution for another.

DOMMER
(Overhears, quietly interrupts.)

CECIL
Yes, of course. What do you think of it?

MARIE
I only wonder if you’re thinking too much into it.

CECIL
What, exactly, do you mean?

MARIE
I think you found the revelation because you dug for it.

CECIL
Most enlightenment comes from examination.

MARIE
Yes, sure, but oftentimes I think there’s no real enlightenment.

CECIL
I politely disagree.

DOMMER
Let her make her point, Cecil.

MARIE
I’m only wondering if perhaps we’ve been trained as human beings to look for explanations and meanings where there are none. Isn’t that the essence of religion? An answer for things we can’t explain? Maybe sometimes it’s actually not that complicated. She could just be dying. I mean, it’s something we all do. There’s no poetry to it, no meaning behind it. It’s just the only guarantee in our entire existence.

CECIL
But you don’t think that how you choose to greet that impending certainty has some sort of meaning to it?
LILY
It’s spooky, Ed.

EDSEL
That’s why you don’t like it? Because it’s spooky? That doesn’t make you afraid of scary movies, or walking to the liquor store at night.

LILY
I don’t know why I don’t like it but I don’t.
(A pause.)
It’s just art, right?

EDSEL
Of course it is.

LILY
She doesn’t look too good.

EDSEL
That’s probably part of the point. It’s just art.

LILY
I don’t like it.

EDSEL
The beauty of art, I guess, is that you’re free to make your own interpretation, right?

LILY
It’s obscene.

EDSEL
A lot of people think what the Greeks painted was obscene, too…and all those Roman statues with their penises out…

LILY
Showing that stuff is different than suicide. Genitalia is the beauty of the human body. A suicide goes against nature. I don’t really like the idea of having to experience self-mutilation. There should be a sign nearby warning us this is here so I could have chosen not to expose myself to it.

EDSEL
Maybe that’s part of it…the surprise. And if life imitates art, or whatever that saying is…

LILY
I have enough shit going on in my own life, Ed. Shouldn’t the places I go for fun spare me that?

EDSEL
Because the world revolves around you, right?

LILY
I’m not saying it does. I’m just saying…maybe the artist could have given us a break from the darkness of the world.

EDSEL
(Smirking at LILY in amusement.)
Maybe that’s why he dressed her in white.

LILY
Stop making fun of me.

EDSEL
I didn’t realize this would shake you up so much.

LILY
Of course it will. She’s dying in front of us!

EDSEL
Relax. It’s just art.

(The GIRL on the pedestal moves suddenly, sits cross legged on the pedestal. Her action is followed by gasps from the crowd. The ARTIST beams, beside himself with glee and happiness as everyone is now forced to look at his work in a new light. The GIRL on the pedestal props her elbows on her knees and rests her head in her bloody palms. She is no longer silent. The crowd watches for about a minute as she struggles to breathe. Blood is dripping down her forearms, onto her knees, her feet, the pedestal.)

CECIL
It’s so simplistic…but the depth of the message is sophisticated.
DOMMER
Beautifully tragic.

MARIE
You can almost feel it in your own chest.

LILY
I don’t like it.

EDSEL
Now it’s art in motion, right?
(To ARTIST.)
Right?

ARTIST
Have you all been so busy overthinking that you disregarded the sign?
Loving too much, and in the wrong way, is a vice. You trust people and
they hurt you. You give them everything and they maim your soul. And when
it’s over? You can never again be who you were before you loved.
You’re an imitation of the person you once were. And you end up alone.
We all die alone.

(Lily on the pedestal looks up when she hears his voice. Her face
is smudged with the blood from her hands. The look in her eyes,
the determination she once had to stay standing, to stay still, is gone.
There is nothing there now. The girl on the pedestal is a hollow shell,
an imitation of the person she had once been. The struggle to breathe
now is almost too much. She is slipping away.)

ARTIST
(To the girl on the pedestal.)
You handed me your life and let me snuff it out.

(Dommer and Edsel jump over the rope to get to her. Dommer pulls her into his arms and
checks for a pulse. Edsel calls 911 as Lily, Marie, and Cecil stand there
in shock. The girl’s dress is ripped and dirtied. Her powdered skin
is disrupted, and now she is impure. Dommer checks for a pulse and
finds none. He stands with her in his arms and looks at the rest of
the onlookers in shock.)

DOMMER
(To ARTIST in disbelief.)
You fucking killed her.

ARTIST
We all did. You talked her existence down to a triviality.
You’re as much at fault if I am. Perhaps more.

LILY
(Horrified.)
So she’s really dead?

ARTIST
Most certainly.

LILY
How do you know?

ARTIST
Isn’t it obvious?
(A reflective pause, in which the entire cast remains silent.)
We've run out of things to say.
Life in Harlem gives a person more than his fair share of troubles. Sonny finds this fact out for himself; he strays away from his music and becomes addicted to heroin. In the end, his music saves him; he is forgiven and starts again with a clean slate. He finds truth and beauty in the dialogue of the band members, and hopes his audience will hear that conversation. In his blues he wraps the story of his culture, a point of unity for his listeners. Sonny’s music touches his brother, the narrator, especially. Their relationship is reborn, just like Sonny is redeemed. With his blues, he saves himself, his relationship to his brother, and those who truly listen.

From the very beginning of the story, Sonny and his brother have a troubled relationship. Guilt and unsatisfied expectations make up the majority of their dealings with each other. From the older brother’s perspective, Sonny cannot handle responsibility. From Sonny’s viewpoint, his brother does not understand him. He states, “You got to find a way to listen” (Baldwin 857). They face this tension and disappointment head on when the older brother hears Sonny play the blues. In this scene, Sonny becomes the more important individual, and the big brother gets a chance to step back and listen. The narrator states, “Here, I was in Sonny’s world.”
destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness. (862)

The blues, Baldwin believes, represents this story, this light in all the darkness. He uses the phrase, “light from the bandstand,” (86) to show how music forms a voice to tell not only of Sonny’s story, but of his culture’s tale as well. That light provides common ground for those in the darkness of poverty, drug abuse, and sorrow in Harlem. Their history brings them together, and in that unity they can overcome their suffering and transform it into their strength. We see that unity in Creole, a term for a hybrid of a French and black American. This mix of heritage gives the hope that in the future, cultural differences can be overcome; sorrows of the past can be unified to create something new and beautiful. That triumph, that understanding, is what Sonny’s music strives for. The narrator states, “We could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, and he would never be free until we did” (Baldwin 863). The band’s dialogue of music embodies this listening and understanding. They set the example for others to follow.

The blues affects everyone in Sonny’s Blues. It reaches to Sonny because it allows him a form of expression in which he is reborn. The music has meaning with the narrator, while it brings to light Sonny’s talent, and helps bridge the chasm in their relationship. To Sonny’s culture, his music gives a voice to the past, and with that, an understanding of one another. His listeners as well as readers find that with this understanding comes freedom, a unity in which fear has no part, where hope and strength for the future lies.

Work Cited
A RESPONSE TO BRUCE CHATWIN’S “THE ANATOMY OF RESTLESSNESS”  

by Kelsey Pitschel

The pages are so flexible. I can just mold the words with my hands, into my life. Mold whatever meaning he has set out to be determined into my own life, into my own significance. Take the words for what they are or are not and mend them into my own cast of being. Form myself, heal my broken thoughts with a cast I create from his undeniable wisdom and experience. Roll up the book, roll up the clay and imprint my own fingertips into the malleable foundation. Make it real. Make it pertinent. Make it mine. His words become mine. But it doesn’t matter if he wrote them first. It doesn’t matter if I will ever see what he saw as he placed the words on the pages. None of it matters, unless I make it mine. I take this determination that he placed so thoughtfully into the words and transform them into my own sculpture. Cast piece by piece, my form of clay.

If it is not clear as glaze, I am a potter, a maker of ceramics. I use my bare hands to be close to the earth just as wanderers walk barefoot to be one with the earth. I mold the clay, I am connected to it, it becomes me, and I become it. It wedges into the ridges of my fingerprints and stains my skin an earthly brown. It dries as a scab on my body, becoming another layer of my being. I am a nomad traversing through air pockets and grains of sand within my clay, just as worldly nomads traverse through sand and storm to endure their pilgrimages. To travel the world is to gather the dirt and mud to create the clay I will then mold. The means of understanding a pilgrimage in relation to my self is the same as molding the clay into another form or, as Chatwin writes, “travel does not merely broaden the mind. It makes the mind” (101). The Creation of earth is the same as the Creation of self.

My movements are as cyclical as the potter’s wheel itself: one revolution to fettle the form and another to solidify the symmetry, just as revolution in man is a form of cyclical identity adaptation, the fight to belong to one’s own name and cause. "When a revolutionary hijacker says, 'I’m married to the Revolution,' he means it. For Revolution is a liberating god, the Dionysus of our age. It is a cure for melancholy. Revolution is the Way to Freedom, even if the end result is greater servitude" (104). And so man serves for his new nation, nomad serves his seasonal land he follows, and I serve the project I am wholeheartedly pursuing.

I am often asked where my inspiration comes from. It is as elusive and footloose as the wanderer himself. It ambles across the landscape, tumbles over the rolling hills in search of an artist. Ideas live in the most natural of places, giving themselves to be materialized when they find an artist to be as wayfaring as the idea itself. And so when asked about my creative life and the way it is guided, I answer in the same manner Li Po did in response to cathartic journeys: “You asked me what is my reason for lodging in the grey hills: I smiled but made no reply for my thoughts were idling on their own; like the flowers of the peach tree, they had sauntered off to other climes, to other lands that are not of the world of men” (106).

Others who nurture this creative process as much as I do are Axel Munthe, Baron Jaques Adelsward-Fersen and Curzio Malaparte, writers who, as Chatwin states, “were writers of the self-dramatizing variety. All had a strong dose of Nordic sensibility. And all sought to expand their personalities in architecture” (151). More simply, these men were creative men. They created and understood the fundamentals of art; Munthe explains it well when he claims his acuity of man in respect to expression: “It was built by me on the principle that the soul needs more room than the body” (158). The human being needs more than his physical self to define his self. And in forms of creativity, like my own, artists seek expression in every possible way. It is the quest to see myself outside myself, to recognize all that I am in ways that may not be entirely my own, but external reminders that I am alive in the world around me. As opposed to placing myself in the domain of another, because “people are never reliable. Instead one should surround oneself with things, for they never let you down” (172). This judgment is a simple rebuttal to those who question my admiration and ardor of art.
Of the need for external inspiration, Chatwin writes:

In one of his gloomier moments Pascal said that all man’s unhappiness stemmed from a single cause, his inability to remain quietly in a room… Diversion. Distraction. Fantasy. Change of fashion, food, love and landscape. We need them as the air we breathe. Without change our brains and bodies rot. The man who sits quietly in a shuttered room is likely to be mad, tortured by hallucinations and introspection… We spend far too much time in shuttered rooms. (100)

So we should avert our gaze, we should look out onto the world of endless inspiration, for if we spend too much time in our closed room, we only look upon ourselves. Only so many things can be created solely from the self, if any. And whilst we peer into the cavernous hollows of our fragile beings, we notice the cracks and stains left by the carvings of our continuously coiling restlessness. Our eyes adjust to the dark and our ears collect the vibrations of our thoughts we wouldn’t otherwise hear. And so it becomes obvious, that we were never meant to know this side of us. Even in search of inspiration the depths of one’s self are precarious. I, too, fear what I do not know about myself.

If I were to be enclosed in a room without my clay or means of artistic expression, I would default back to unhealthy ways of introspection. I would sink into the darkness of my undefined self, and wait for the glorious moment when my palms would feel the clay adhering to my skin. I would long for the freedom of exploring, in my case, the world of pottery—in any case, the world itself. My toe would tap the floor and my gaze would narrow to nearsightedness. A nomad’s feet would have nowhere to tread as my hands would have nothing to mold.

And with all this time filled with creating, I have filled space to match. Other intellectuals deem this disastrous, with possession clouding our potential, including Chatwin: “And do we not all long to throw down our altars and rid ourselves of our possessions? Do we not gaze coldly at our clutter and say, ‘If these objects express my personality, then I hate my personality’” (114). But this seems unsettling to me, considering I’ve spent my whole life creating these “things.” The creations though, my creations, are pieces now breathing worldly air that were previously made stale within my mind. And even if the Ancient Israelites deem this form of possession unworthy of the simplistic lifestyle they favor, then so be it. I have the power to find myself in all places, even other than myself. I am often faced with the question, “Why are man’s real treasures useless?” (171). But I gaze at my “treasures” of arduous art and say, if life is based on utility, than why do we fill our days with frivolities like we fill our shelves with things? If our reverent works of art are so useless and detrimental to our wandersome beings, how can we so easily waste time? Are not the patterns of our footfalls and etchings of our walking sticks a trace of our artistic expression? Isn’t everything about us a form of ultimate utterance?

I want to become a great potter, to create things as beautiful as Meissen porcelain. But I have yet to commit myself more fully. I am aware of my closeness to my creations, and the focus of my efforts to devote myself to beauty. But I am beginning to turn off the spotlight and live within the floodlights, the infinite horizon. I am becoming increasingly nomadic in my metaphysical world view. The focus is not the object I insert myself into, but the absence of focus. It is proven that to walk a pilgrimage, with no boundaries, and with no spotlight there is less a chance of error to hinder farsighted epiphanies. Catharsis is not limited to the textbook definition of Nomadism. It can reach and stretch and coat the entire life of a being. Drip paint above a ball of clay, and soon the entire sphere will be swallowed with pigment. And just like the ever-extending horizons of the wanderer, I realize that I am everything about me. My self lies under my being, around it, above it, and within it. The shadows inside the vase I’m shaping shape me. I melt into the rhythm of the whirring and buzzing potter’s wheel. The grains of sand and dust collect under my fingernails and in the crevices of my mind.

And this gathering of self is not in the possessor’s sense of selfishness; this is an awareness of dimensionally inward and outward effects. I touch the loop tool and the whole act, the whole surrounding environment, the tool itself, my hand, the space between the two, all become my being. And when I think of it this way, all parts becoming me, I am no longer scared, no longer cautious of the final project or end result. My entire life, and all that I have created, is the end result.

Work Cited

He was guided by a concerned-looking young kid who held the door open for him, a kid who was apparently eager to finish his civic duty and get on with his life. I tried to ask the kid some questions, but as soon as the blind man was in the door, his guide was gone, and it was up to me. I was nervous to look him in the face, since he still had one dark eye, and I didn’t know if he would see me and think me rude. He was a burn victim, his face twisted and melted, along with parts of his arm. He wore black leggings under cut-off blue jeans and a full jacket with innumerable pockets.

“Can I help you, man?” I asked him loudly, taking him by the arm.

“How much for a warsh?” he forcefully mumbled through his deformed lips.

“One dollar and seventy-five cents,” I said. I didn’t know exactly how or when to help, when it would be appropriate, or what he might take offense to, so I was standoffish.

“How much for bleach?” he asked.

“That’s two-fifty for a bottle. I’ll bring you up to the counter,” I replied, and I brought him up there, his stick tapping away in front of him.

He paid with bills that he had stapled together in a pattern, a different pattern for different value amounts to keep them apart; I wondered whether this was necessary or not, appalled that someone might actually take advantage of his situation. But I guess it happens. You can never be too careful, no matter who you are.

I gave him the change and walked him over to the machine, where he washed his jean shorts and a few articles from his small backpack, and left him alone for a couple of hours, checking in on him every so often.

An elderly woman in the front had a concerned look on her face, the kind of expression you see when someone is thinking, “That man’s entire life must be a tragic, awful story.”

“Excuse me, young man,” she said, beckoning, whispering.

“How can I help you?” I asked.

“Is that man a veteran?”

“I don’t know who he is,” I said, sitting next to her. “I’ve only seen him once before. I’m not sure why there’s no one taking care of him.” My thoughts started to spill out. Working at the library I’d learned to talk to myself, and I’d become that kind of person who speaks without much hesitation or restraint.

“I don’t know why he’s not being taken care of, or why he’s not in a home where they’d look after him. I don’t know if he has any family. He

God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.”


People are always asking me how I like working night shifts. I used to have a back-pocket response like I do for my tattoos but like my tattoos those fade away, details of original intent lost to changing times and places and reasons. When I first started working at the laundromat it was freedom; it paid well, it fit my schedule, it allowed me time to appreciate those night thunderstorms that most miss and the conversations with goofballs that most people won’t have the opportunity to experience.

When Deandre quit it was due to some family problems, but I had already seen the weariness the job had taken on him, complimented by long drives to Lansing for custody battles. I saw in my co-workers a vague despair; a desire to not wake up and go to work; that somewhere between their moaning about each other and the small side-work tasks they did or did not take care of, there was a preconceived notion regarding how people should act socially and how they actually did. A very processed, very typical form of metaphysical rebellion common in minimum-wage laborers.

And then, after only a few months of work and only six days off, my summer was gone and all I had to show for it was a large chunk of college debt paid off. I got a new phone with Internet access. I started thinking about buying a car for the winter. The aspiration I’d had to drop out, back when I had my head above the water and had tasted that salty air again, was now six feet above me and I was once again thrashing about in the ocean of passive consumerism.

Then on a typical night of cleaning out the lint traps, when I stepped outside for a smoke, the blind man came back.

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He spent a lot of time in the bathroom; he took an hour and a half to dry his clothes, mostly because I forgot to check up on him enough, and he had walked around the store to the dryers by clinging to the wall.

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I waved down the bus and helped him on. The bus driver looked a bit confused, but I, like the last person to pass him off, didn’t say a word. I went back to the Laundromat because I had forgotten some books and thought about the night Deandre had called me at three in the morning to cover his shift because his brother had died. I found him in the back that night, sweeping dryer sheets off the floor, mumbling that he had to call a superior to make sure it was okay to leave. I urged him out, saying that I would take care of it. I only thought of this because of the sign posted in the back, printed in three different colors as if to stand out, which read, “Sick, Dying, Dead or Just Plain Lazy, Your Shift is Your Responsibility, You Must Cover and Have Approved Any Changes!” It’s another one of those moments when you look at yourself and your place in the machine and humanity’s place in the machine and think that you’ve probably done the best you could and you’ve really tried to help the people around you, and you’ve done a lot of community service and you’ve had your scrapes with the law and you’ve struggled against everything just to get by and at the end of the day you’re a lot like Deandre. And you’re a lot like the blind man. And you’re just passing through this place growing old and tired until you stop looking for anything and just accept the unfortunate turn of events that brought everyone down here, monotony beating the life out of you until you can only cling to survival. And when you live in that sort of place it all looks rather trivial and it puts a churn in your stomach that only an East Hall sunrise can cure.

must like his freedom, I guess.” It had just dribbled out, that phrase. As if freedom wasn’t exactly what I was looking for, too, during those moments up at East Hall in the morning sun when you realize there’s more to life than getting a job or a degree and you suddenly want to do things. Those moments when you’ve completely distinguished the difference between life and survival and find survival fairly trivial and unimportant when your ideals are like a hailstorm coming across a field over a tree line. With nowhere to hide, nowhere to hide, just you and your thoughts and your dreams and they’re so much more real in that moment than survival ever could be. A transcendental state of being. And you suddenly feel blind to whatever literal situation this world could offer, and you’re okay with that.

I have a friend whose grandpa died, a real firecracker sort of grandpa. When he was put in a home, slowly losing his mind to Alzheimer’s, he could barely remember some basic information about his family, but twice attempted to escape; he remembered enough about the lock codes on the doors, each time fighting back against the slavery of his own memory, of the wards, of anyone who held him back. Sometimes you weigh the joys of security and you weigh the hardships of freedom and in both cases you find that they’re not all that heavy.

The blind man wandered out front and found a seat and tried to sleep for a few hours, so I turned down the volume on the televisions to allow it. I was nervous my supervisors might come in and kick him out, but at six-thirty he started moving around, so I went back up to him.

“Where are you trying to go?” I asked him, loudly, politely.

“The bus stop,” he replied. My co-worker had just arrived and I asked her if I could clock out early and bring him there; she said this was fine. I took him by the arm and led him outside past the pizza joints and across the parking lot.

“So where are you from?” I asked.

“Grand Rapide.”

“Where are you trying to go? Do you have somebody waiting for you at home?”

“Well… I’m short of homelesh right now,” he drawled. “I’m going to the Mishion.”

He meant the Gospel Mission, the shelter downtown.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, “but I wish you the best…” So much more I wanted to know! Questions like, why are you still doing this? What is it about this you love? What is it about this life that makes it easier than just accepting help from a place that would take you in?

Nevertheless, I was proud of my society for a brief moment… that the goodness of people will help a person in need. That we wouldn’t just ‘put him away,’ that if he wanted freedom, he of all people deserved it, and we were willing to let him keep it, to have it tucked away somewhere in his chest in that world without light.
PHOTOGRAPHY
Incensed
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Suspended
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Celebrity
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Dawn

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