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The editors wish to thank Western Michigan University’s Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College.

The mission of the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College is to provide an exceptional undergraduate experience for high achieving students, to inspire in our graduates a thirst for the lifelong pursuit of creative inquiry and discovery, to provide our students with the skill and passion to address critical challenges, and to foster personal responsibility informed by a global perspective.

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.

I am privileged to have been able to help form the 15th edition of The Laureate, and to be privy to the publication process of these talented authors and their impressive work. I was fortunate to see the seemingly disassociated mix of individual pieces turn into a cohesive whole. As the pages turn, the journal’s lilt shifts as each piece contributes confidence and uncertainty, reminiscence and progress, contentedness and longing. The Laureate staff appreciates Western Michigan University’s undergraduate student body’s eagerness to share their work and to help compile this year’s edition.

I have to thank the assistant editors, Nicholas Alti, Emily W. Recchia, and Mary Maroste for their invaluable contributions. Furthermore, thank you to the Design Center and Gwen Frostic School of Art for their expertise and contributions.

Similarly, thank you to the Lee Honors College faculty, Dr. Carla Korestsky, Jane Baas, and Jennifer Townsend, for lending their support.

For offering their expertise and time to enable The Laureate to continue to record authors to further improve the quality of our online journal, I would like to like to thank Western Sound Studios, particularly the director John Campos, Asha Fernanders and Joe Samyn for recording and editing, and also Alexander Tobin for offering his assistance and knowledge of the process from the previous edition to make this year’s recording possible.

Thank you to Becky Cooper, for her guidance and attention to detail made this edition possible. Through this process, I have not only become a better editor, but also a better writer. Working with several parties, across a sizable student body, with multiple faculty, has taught me just how laborious and large scale the creation of such a body of literature is. It also taught me how rewarding it is. I hope you find reading these pieces to be rewarding, as well.

M. Andrew Bodinger
Editor in Chief
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Ache in Portuguese, Cristal Cardoso Sao Mateus</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halloween, Drew Heuermann</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 12th, Jared Sebastian</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gravity, June Rose</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters I Never Sent, Heaven Barlow</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris Ave After Church, Mary Maroste</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i’m never believing in god, Kay Tarleton</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapture, Ben Koval</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love in the Other Places, Danielle Kropveld</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When The Person You Love Treats You Badly, Emily W. Recchia</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rinse Cycle, Miranda Lopez</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When My Sister Was A Girl, Heaven Barlow</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocktail Hour in East Berlin, Mary Maroste</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am Wild, Courtney Bedrosian</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Portrait with Booze and the Kamasutra, Heaven Barlow</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAM, Jack Marsden</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cracks in the Pavement, Ben Koval</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking out a Window, Bradley Miller</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye Over Whitehall, Sarah Mead</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>258 French Hands, Emily W. Recchia</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 12th, Jared Sebastian</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Stuyahok, Donielle Hart Owens</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Influence of the Moon, Adam Schwallie</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Portrait at Dinner, Mary Maroste</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Café Down the Road, Bradley Miller</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Saturday Night, Jackson Kocis</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That I Would or Could Not Stand, Danielle Kropveld</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscape of Toxic Ferns, Mary Maroste</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I find it funny that tears are salt water. It makes me wonder if the sea is made of sorrows.

Driving down the bridge that connects the island to the mainland, middle of winter and eighty-five degrees out. Thirty Celsius but Americans insist on being different. They are like the punk kid of the planet.

Salt water.

Airport buzz. The smell of cheap coffee and diner grease and newspapers and tears. I like to look at people and imagine where they are going. I am sure that even if they tried, they wouldn’t know about me. I am going away.

Saudade.

Saudade is a word in the Portuguese language with no direct translation to English. It refers to the feeling you experience when you long for someone or some place.

I can only ache in Portuguese.

“You will be OK, Cristal.”

Sunflowers.

The innocence of my cousin in thinking that I could take flowers with me. I took them and after she left, I gave them to random people at the airport. Someone had to make a good day out of this. People would kill for this and yet I feel like a blind guy in a gunfight. We say that in my culture.

Crossfire.

God bless you and God walk you through this journey.

Thank you grandma, thank you pa. I will be back soon. I will be a journalist, then I will be back and we can all be together again.

Cross signal.

“Take this with you.”

We say God must have been Brazilian. He must have been Brazilian and then he left, just like me. God doesn’t give snakes any wings, we say. Funny, the things we say. Legend claims that, maybe a century ago, one of my relatives was eaten by Indians.
Anthropophagy. Literally. My family stares and I stare. The screen says "last call," but I don't want to go. I could turn around now and forget all of this nonsense. I could go home and take a nap. But I won't because I need to see this through. "If it doesn't work out, don't you be ashamed of coming back."

Underestimated.

Ma'am would you like these sunflowers? I can't take them along.

Salt water. Saudade.

I remember the exact moment in which I switched to English. I was drunk for the first time and my thoughts got scrambled, then it was all in English inside my head. Shoes house car vodka I lost my shoes. Why am I thinking in English? Vodka cup mirror ugh you look like shit I can't think and I can't feel my teeth and sleep sounds good. Toilet bowl spins goodnight.

I had eaten sushi that day.

I like aisle seats because I can get up to pee without waking up my fellow travelers. I am thinking it doesn't matter now because the crying is probably bothering everyone, anyway. Every flight needs a crying baby. My stomach hurts, but I eat anyway because I know there won't be food again for hours. I chow down on pollo con papas because most Americans think that Brazilians speak Spanish. We. Do. Not.

No se habla.

Eyes open and I can see myself gaining distance from my home. Eyes closed and I can see my family going home and drying up their tears. I can see them gathering around the table and drinking coffee and talking about what a wonderful opportunity this is. I can see my mother crying herself to sleep. So I eat and eat and take sleeping pills. Eventually I fall into a medication-induced sleep, exhausted from all the feeling. (Home)land (security).

Thank you for flying with us.

Fill this out. Cristal. Fingerprints please. What is the purpose of your trip? Get into the system. Border control. Buenos dias, Crystal. I am a student going to the Western Michigan University but as I look at you officer, I'm going to be real and say that I'm almost certain this was a bad idea. I am super excited terrified. It will be a great experience I don't know what I was thinking mr. officer. Thank you, have a good day, Krystal.

Chrystal.

Welcome.

Lock your doors like every proper Brazilian does and put your valuables in the safe and call Mark and Cassie if anything happens. First night alone and I could certainly use a glass or twenty of wine as the night progresses silently in my new apartment. The stars are different in this hemisphere and I am different in this hemisphere.

Salt water.

My place admittedly has been a mess since day one. I wash all clothes on the same load and eat grilled cheese for every meal. I used dish soap to do my laundry for weeks before I realized it wasn't for clothes and I do the dishes while singing Frank Sinatra and I honestly just don't have a clue because Rosa did all this for me back at home, while I sat on the counter and discussed the soap operas with her.

Spoiled fucking brat.

Saudade.

If I eat pizza again for dinner, I am bound to lose my shit.

Being alone is hard because I don't really know how to do it. I get emotionally unstable every now and always and talk to myself and stuffed animals until my boyfriend comes to save me. I don't know why he hasn't dumped me yet. I would have. He is a saint because I am no easy job.

Love.

I am lucky because I have my real family and my host family. They love me and protect me and believe in me enough to pay for the WMU tuition. They tell me I am the future of journalism and I even believe them sometimes. I am lucky because I have Nolan M to love me and kill cockroaches whenever I have any. He cooks me meals that aren't from a box and cares that I have no winter clothes and holds my eyes when salt water tries to carry them away. He is the feeling of comfort and the smell of cigarettes and pine trees. He is sanity.

I am lucky to sit at Waldo Library and brainstorm all of it and go home to a bed and eat pizza and do it all over again tomorrow.

My mom tells me to eat fruit and drink lots of water and that she wants Nolan to come visit. My dad tells me he wants to have a talk with Nolan and falls into laughter because we both know he isn't that kind of dad.
My mother and father recently got divorced and I fear for my sister and her sanity. I am lucky because I get to be away and forget all about the broken glass inside my chest.

In case of emergency break the glass.
I take English with all the American kids and it is exciting because I don't feel like an underdog. I need perfect English if I want to be a journalist or I can just change my major.

Eloquence.

You are literally a piece of shit.

Now it only hurts when I laugh. Whoever said that was a genius. I laugh all the time.

If you fall and no one else is around to listen, does it still make a sound?
I love going to class and drinking coffee at Sprau tower every morning.
I might not love it as much when the ground is coated in snow and I am coated in despair, but I love it now. Coming home is the hardest part. Sometimes I feel like I go days without human interaction. School study clean the house sleep school study.

I am fine most of the time, but sometimes I wake up in sweat not knowing where I am. I pinch myself to make sure I still exist.

I ache in Portuguese through the snowfall
exams
money problems
lies
karma
nightmares
self-doubt.
Saudade.

My brother's face looked odd that night as if it were part of the broadcast that shone from the T.V. as it illuminated his slumbering form.

Light gray, almost white around his lips and along his jaw and cheekbone.

He was still wearing the garments of a Samurai on his twisted body.
I wore the loose fabrics of a ninja, per his request.

"A nice one, though."

I saw an old soccer ball in the corner that he had taken back out.
It had been years since it had tasted our touch.

And then that was our last night really before I headed out to the coast.

I put an old Power Rangers blanket on him and then slept next to him on the floor hoping that his hand might drop down and touch my face during the night.
In my grandmother’s house, there is now a Christmas tree. I sit on the couch watching her spin in slow, crippled circles, adorning her dining room with insect-like accuracy.

“I used to be able to do a lot more, but now I just get so tired.”

My grandmother says she has sixty-four minute teapot ornaments for the tree. She sets apart a whole section of the tree for them with a chain of white frills in the shape of a triangle (see def.: anointed). I am to hang up white ribbons (outside of the Temple) as she sets to work selectively placing the teapots (a crystal one from Bobby and Cheryl sits in front of a glowing green bulb to sparkle; the first one ever hung, on their very first tree in the 50’s, gold, paint-chipped; one that belonged to her mother, over a hundred years old, doesn’t seem to have aged a day) shards of time cross her vaselined hands to be placed to shine in the glory of remembrance. She says that teapots represent hospitality, that’s why she hangs them on the tree. Mentions the ornament made to look like two Starbucks paper mugs, one bearing her name, the other bearing the name of her second husband, who sits in the TV room watching Westerns, a giant sack of a gibbering retired cop. My grandmother calls him velvet-wrapped steel. He bought me a car, said it’s because I’ve kept the faith (I abashedly nod my head). Then my grandmother says quietly, of course, she has the other one, too. Shows me a teapot ornament made to look like it’s made out of gingerbread, holding a picture of my grandmother and her first husband, my grandfather. She sets it back carefully on a bottom branch.

“That’s a hard thing to go through.”

She tells me he is a good man, her current husband. She sounds like a car salesman in a showroom, like my mom does sometimes with her new husband. We go into the basement to get more boxes. There on the shelves are Mason jars packed with vomit-green fingers of beans, dirt orange and olive relish. One packed with what looks to be pickled vulvas and labia majoras. These bright jars form the wallpaper of my childhood memory of this house. Tired, my grandmother desists her decorating. I fall asleep on the couch. I wake to the sound of the radio coming from her bedroom and a live presentation of a radio show from the TV. The soundscape forms geologic layers, tectonic plates shifting and grinding together, moaning and trying to make sense—the scattering of languages unable to comprehend, lost in the endless sea of the unmeaning of things, robots talking to each other, occupying a void, the world’s greatest tragic play taking place, and it has no audience. My grandmother sits me down and half-commands me to eat some cookies and English toffee. The milk is thick and rich. On the table is a baby doll she bought for her granddaughter, my niece. The elastic bands in the box make it look like it’s being strangled while smiling cherubically. Recluse me, I slurk off again to the basement. They don’t know I hear, but they talk about me and my something of a girlfriend.

“You know, I’ve been thinking. I just don’t know how they can’t find a church,” says her husband. I wonder if my grandfather would ever say that, and if so, should I even miss him? Skin burns. My grandmother and him speak and see as though the whole world around them is slipping into hell and dancing in glee. They listen to other grandmothers, wives of popular pastors, on radio shows that warn of Communist presidents, and speak of the men who flew planes into “the World uh-Tower Trade Centers,” men who had devoted themselves to a cause beyond death, beyond whatever human toll their mission would bring, because of unwavering faith that there is no god but their God.

I am buried under the weight and groaning of my grandmother’s house, in which there is now a Christmas tree, upon which hangs tiny teapots, weighing a hundred tons each.
The Melanegro children watched their father. They knew their father. They loved their father.

"Do you love dad?" Monroe asked his mother, the others too young to ask such questions. They all sat under the apple tree in their garden, enjoying the late summer's fruit drop.

"I do," she replied.

"Why?"

"Because he's a good man."

They all listened to their mother.

"Where does dad go?" Louis asked his older brother.

"He goes to work," Monroe replied.

"What does he do?" asked Bianca, the youngest.

"He tells other people what they should do," Monroe said.

"Why does he do that?"

"Because someone has to," said Monroe, proudly.

The children grew, and their parents grew apart.

"Where's mom going?" Bianca asked.

"She's leaving," Louis said.

"She's not leaving, they're divorcing," Monroe corrected with the sense of responsibility inherent to all oldest children.

"Because dad's losing it," Louis said.

"Dad's not losing it," said Monroe, "he's just—he's just sick."

"Mom doesn't like being told what to do," Bianca said.

"And what would you know about that, stupid? You're just a kid," Louis said.

"Am not."

Before it happened Monroe had been complaining about men who followed him to work and listened to him sleep through the vents. He visited his father in his office to ask for help, only to find his father absorbed in the dominoes he would stand upright and then knock down individually.

"Please," Monroe repeated.

The father said nothing, but Monroe watched as his question was answered in his father's tears. Monroe left the office and went home.

Their mother found him when she came to the old house to see if his father had gone to work that day. She found him in the foyer. She cried mothers' tears before she cut him down and told his siblings.

Louis and Bianca sat at the table in one of the countless rooms they didn't need to a house they couldn't share.

"What are we going to do about dad?" Bianca asked.

"I don't know," Louis said.

"He's not well."

"I know."

The conversation between them was awkward. Each wanted to accuse the other of wrongdoing, but neither was certain where the fault lay.

"He's getting worse."

"Is he?" Louis asked.

"Did you see him in his office today?"

"I don't visit dad at work."

"I don't either, but I was called in because he was standing on his desk, roaring."

"About what?"

"I don't know, it was...incoherent," Bianca said, "but when I tried to get him down from the desk, he started kicking at me, screaming, calling me mom's name."

Louis didn't say anything; he stared down at his coffee. He hoped one of Bianca's millions of responsibilities would take her away from him soon and leave him in peace.

"It's your responsibility, Louis," Bianca said.

"Why?"

"You're the oldest now. I'm still in school; what are you doing?"

"My life's more than dad."

"You're not doing anything: that's what you're doing."

Louis said nothing. He only stared out the window, looking at that old apple tree, looking at all the apples laying on the ground, rotting in the late fall. There was no ground large enough for the two of them to share.

"So you're just going to let dad go? Look at this," Bianca gestured to the room they occupied together. "All of this? This house we live in? That's dad. Our money? Dad. Our school? Dad. You're just going to turn him away?"
Louis was silent, shamed and angry for having been shamed. Bianca cried.
"Do you even miss him?" she asked.
"Who?" he answered.

Louis walked through midnight into the endless halls toward the garden entrance. Time had come and time had gone. Louis walked through the door and into the garden, passing the trees and their fruit, still nestled highly in their branches, and thought of his sister. He gazed at the engraved stone, once new and now old, affixed to the ground, and thought of his brother. He had gone to talk to his father, to visit him in his new home, but the conversation had been fruitless.
"Dad," Louis had said. He stared down at his father, bedridden and deteriorated.
"..."
"Dad, it's me."
"..."
"Your son, dad."
"..."
"I don't know what else there is to say. I don't know what I'm supposed to tell you. Are you even listening? Can you hear me? Is there anything you want to say to me?" he asked.
"..."
"Bianca will have to take care of you. You're hers now."

Louis walked through the garden and out the gate, leaving behind the old house and its old occupants. From the street, he looked back and saw the home in all of its grandeur, its imposition. The two women walked around the garden again, the older one for the first time in years, the other for the first time in days, too soon for either. They stopped at the named stones at their feet, one new joining one old.
"I loved this tree as a kid," Bianca said.
"I know. I did too," her mother replied.
"I love it now, too."

The tree before them was barren, the apples all having fallen long ago.
"Who planted it?" Bianca asked.
"I think it was your grandfather."
"He must have liked apples."
"He did, in his own way."
Dear Red Hair,
I saw the fire in your mother’s eyes
when you grabbed my hand 3 minutes
after meeting me.
So I twisted my tongue down your throat
until she tasted brown sugar.

Dear Family & Friends,
You do not need to turn on the flash when you photograph me.
Yes, this is my real hair. NO—you cannot touch it.
My grandmother was born here. My mother was born here. I was born here.
If you take off the last two letters, you still can’t fuckin say it.

Dear 6’3’,
You were supposed to come when the leaves turned brown.
Now the trees are bare and my feet are wet.
I told my family about you at Thanksgiving.
They think I’m a liar.

Dear Freckles,
You kissed me like a stumbling apology.

Dear Ex,
Your mother and her can share combs.
She doesn’t know what it’s like to
Be a fetish.

To whom it may concern,
I have HIV.

Traffic stopped in a storm, mosquito snowflakes sucked smoke from the tired exhaust, on the radio the same song played four times. Shapes started to appear differently, a wooden Jesus danced on the dashboard, model trains in place of footprints. When the clock struck nine, feathers appeared, glued to cracked shoelaces from my grandfather’s musty red Converse. He told me one day he would put them on and if not fly, at least hover, or run faster. It never happened, his hair grew to match the shell of a cracked egg, and he showed me dried seahorses he’d been tucking under cushions embroidered with small blue flowers. Everyone begged him to stop building forts out of peach skins he stole from the Salvation Army. Last Sunday I drew wasps among the banks of his rivering veins, and their sting stained his knuckles the color of a day-old lemon. His index finger traced morning prayers into groves of quarters stamped with state parks, I wrote them out with lake mud in my sandbox.

i still remember what it felt like to swing beneath you,
noose tight at the base of my jaw, pale blue
lungs empty except for rasping excuses of your repercussions of the flesh
my flesh.
i never questioned why all i clung to was the breathing,
crippled toes wound tight on the mattress
white cinder block, the bubbled paint
anywhere but his eyes in their sockets, my sunken expression
grossly reshaping: why i tend to fuck with my eyes closed
because i had outgrown ‘afraid’ by not looking,
resigned myself to the dips of the ceiling, its silent cracks;
tiles don’t need, they can’t pucker
there are no elbows in plaster zigzags, their creases don’t form shoulders
one stucco wall can become an obsession
when your legs gradually begin to stop kicking
i don’t remember days or tremors or sounds, only the muffled cough of it snowing,
the mint green of the sink basin, the dull of my sores
i can’t remember the ‘no’s or his last words but i remember the smells
a blank face, my grim body
some nights when the shower bled onto the bathroom rug, i could still feel it gushing:
the sting, the panicked heaves erupting from my sides
the pound of the overhead fan, its violent throb beating into my arms
as i shrunken down to where the waves of the drain could hit my back,
tight corners balled into a fist, spitting tears and gagging,
trying not to know what i may never remember
pain was never in the school books with brown paper covers,
their captions cradled with strangers, how to keep a drink in your hands
what they didn’t tell me about was the bricks, the hate in every day noises
you trace a finger and it’s there again: the bite at my collar,

the scream of my knees, feet dangling
my memories are of cut-off air—but where were his hands
the loosening of my gut at my back—was your hunger worth my rot
textbooks don’t tell you how his palms worked down into the skin where they fixate on your pulse
and deprive you of it
mucus stuck to my lips, kicks pinned to the ground
religion never explained how a man can creak beneath you,
close himself around your hips and dissolve, fear caught in the rope,
eyes glued to the door frame, the shadow next to your feet
the hollow crush in your ribcage when he shudders
my pride wasn’t dragged from a gun
he whispered hail marys and i kept silent
he read the bible on his arms
welcomed numbers,
my numbers. my statistics.
school girls reading their homework,
highlighting our bruises, taking notes on decaying ribs
printed examples never mentioning break downs,
the bloody drip of a feeling,
the greed they breach with their eyes, the definitions of rape
prayer didn’t settle his cravings, confession didn’t lull his ache,
keep the gore from within me, cotton taste at the back of my mouth
‘slyme’ isn’t a symptom: it’s the need to swallow five times more then you should to push it back,
three walls sinking into your wrist
i don’t remember what it felt like to lie beneath him,
clothed thighs tight at the base of my hips, pinned down
throat empty except for the rasping screams of him basking in the flesh
my flesh.
i never questioned why all i clung to was the breathing,
lips pressed to the blue screen
the gloss of the walls, the beat of his static
anywhere but the bulge of his rosary beads, my spinal column
grossly reshaping: why i never believed in god
a fan turns
and blows with languid ease

and a man
turns a head
like a dog to food

and listens
to the
sound
of his breath

goes out

waiting for his son
to come home

LOVE IN THE OTHER PLACES
Danielle Kropveld

RAPTURE
Ben Koval
WHEN THE PERSON YOU LOVE TREATS YOU BADLY

Emily W. Recchia

When the person you love treats you badly,
stop waltzing.
Check the mirror,
check the stove –
kill the plants you never watered.

Hide the spare key,
silver and dented from wanting,
inside your left cheek.
It will sit in that pink pocket,
rubbing against brittle
gums and soft resentment,
for maybe forever,
or maybe until next Tuesday.

Don't let the mailman in.

Your pots gleaming in the sink,
clock breaking every midnight,
sermons you wish you'd never heard –

you sing your own body electric.

You will never fit her
left-behind jacket.
Its pockets bulge with emptiness,
hood draped against your neck,
the loose buttons brushing
your stained clavicles,
descending,
dependent.

CAST OF CHARACTERS:
JANE. Mid to late 20s, a student, doing laundry
PETER. Mid to late 20s, a dropout, also doing laundry

TIME AND PLACE:
A laundromat in Galesburg, Illinois. The present.

RINSE CYCLE
Miranda Lopez
At rise: In a small laundromat in Galesburg, Illinois. There are two washers and two dryers visible along with one table in the center of the stage. PETER and JANE are nearly alone in the store, sitting in folding chairs at opposite ends of the stage, waiting for their clothes to finish washing. JANE is talking on the phone; PETER is looking down at a sketchbook, tapping it gently with a pencil, glancing up once in a while to look at JANE from across the room.

JANE
(On the phone:)
So then he looks at me, right at the end of dinner and says, “Oh, you should know, I’m not looking for anything too serious,” and slides his hand down my thigh. I didn’t even get to finish my chocolate cake before he tried to take me home. I’m telling you, these guys are like wild animals.

(PETER shifts in his seat and clears his throat in an attempt to get JANE’s attention, unsuccessfully.)

PETER
Excuse me?

(JANE continues to talk on the phone, ignoring PETER.)

JANE
Yeah, finding a decent guy who can hold a conversation, maybe does something other than play video games and scroll through Tinder all day? That too much to ask for? (Beat.) Get out more? I’m in school all day and doing homework all night… I get out… Kind of. (Beat.)
(PETER clears his throat and stands up, almost crouching, JANE glances at him.)

PETER
Would you mind…

(JANE looks at PETER while still talking into her phone.)

JANE
(On the phone:)
Hold on.
(To PETER:)
You’re interrupting my phone call.

PETER
I’m sorry, I just, I’m trying to do some work and, you’re talking on the phone so loudly. I can’t focus.

JANE
Mom, I gotta go, some creep has been listening in on our conversation (Beat.) Love you, too.

(To PETER:)
Satisfied?

PETER
(Beat.)
No, no, you misunderstand, I’m not trying to be a creep or anything. I’m sorry, I just, have some sketches to do and I came here to try and get some work done.

JANE
You’re very rude, I was trying to talk to--

PETER
Your mom… I heard. (Beat.) Sounds like you had a bad date, too.

JANE
Rude and nosey, huh?

PETER
How do you expect anyone to not hear your conversation when you’re shouting into your phone? You might be ruder than me.

JANE
That’s not--

PETER
Anyway, thank you for stopping, sorry about being a creep and sorry about your date. The guy sounds pretty shitty to me.
JANE
Well, we can agree on that.
(A ding is heard. JANE picks up her laundry basket and walks to the washing machine section of the laundromat. She begins putting the wet clothes into her basket.)

PETER
So what happened?
(Another ding is heard. PETER picks up his laundry basket and, like JANE, walks to the washers and unloads his wet clothes, placing them into his basket.)

JANE
I don't really want to talk about it. Especially to someone I've never met.

PETER
Will you just leave me alone? I really don't have the patience for this right now.

JANE
I just want to get my laundry done. I'm sorry my phone call annoyed you. Don't you have work to get back to?

PETER
I don't really want to talk about it. Especially to someone I've never met.

PETER
So you'll shout about it over the phone with your mom in a public place filled with people you've never met, but you won't talk about it in that public place, with someone who would actually like to discuss it with you. That makes sense.

JANE
I just want to get my laundry done. I'm sorry my phone call annoyed you. Don't you have work to get back to?

PETER
If you didn't notice, you're not the only one with laundry to do.

JANE
Excuse me? That is really none of your business.
PETER
Annoying? Because I want to talk to you? Come on.

JANE
Fine. Where are you from?

PETER
Galesburg, Illinois, born and raised. I had every intention of getting out of here as soon as I could read a map. Still here. Still having a hard time with maps. That, and I can’t afford to live anywhere else. What about you?

JANE
My name is Jane Walker, and I’m from Chicago originally.

PETER
Chicago, like suburbs or Chicago, like skyscrapers?

JANE
Skyscrapers, I suppose?

PETER
Wait… Why would you leave Chicago for Galesburg?

JANE
Everything is too fast there. I had no time to catch my breath.

PETER
How awful, a fast-paced life in a city, who would want that?

JANE
You’d be surprised how lonely it is, living in a crowded city.

PETER
So you left a busy city because you felt alone, and moved to a city with a fraction of the population to find, what? Loads of people?

JANE
Ha, no, I left the busy city because I felt alone, and moved to a city with a fraction of the population to find… myself, I guess. (JANE shifts in her chair.) I came to go to Knox, to become a better writer. I decided to stay because I’ve never felt at home anywhere else.

PETER
So you’re a writer?

JANE
I’d like to be.

PETER
What does that mean?

JANE
It means that I’d like to be a writer, but I’m not currently writing anything. And I haven’t… recently… been writing apart from half-assed assignments for my professors.

PETER
How recent is recently?

JANE
I don’t want to say.

PETER
Come on, Jane, there’s no judgment here.

JANE
Like, a year?
PETER
You’re joking. You spend money to go to a school to learn how to be a writer, and now you’re not even doing it?

JANE
What was that, I recall you said not too long ago, about… No judgment?

PETER
I’m sorry. Why the lack of writing?

JANE
I don’t know. Lack of inspiration, I suppose.

PETER
Maybe you’re just looking in the wrong spots for it. What do you do in your free time?

JANE
I do some volunteering, I read a lot, I like to work out…

PETER
Alright, I know I haven’t known you for long, but I know that’s bullshit.

JANE
Fine, I spend most of my time sitting at home, eating and watching Netflix. I spend my weekends going on dates with people I met the week before, usually on a dating site. The dates, more often than not, go nowhere, and I end up wishing I would have stayed home instead, where putting on makeup and pants is not necessary.

PETER
Now that’s more like it! But those don’t sound like the best places to be searching for this… inspiration.

JANE
Where should I be looking? The laundromat?

PETER
(A ding is heard from the dryers. JANE and PETER are looking at one another from across the laundromat; they ignore the sound of the finished laundry.) I think it’s you.

JANE
I mean your laundry is ready…

PETER
(Beat.) I think it’s me, too.

JANE
Oh! I meant that, too. Yeah, I’ll go check on my laundry. Which is what we were both talking about.

PETER
(Goes to the dryers. Each step seems calculated. Another ding! is heard, JANE gets up and walks to PETER. They both begin unloading their clothes and putting them in laundry baskets. JANE drops a sock onto the ground without noticing and PETER picks it up, putting it under his laundry basket, unbeknownst to JANE. JANE picks up her basket and walks to the center table. PETER follows and they stand on opposite ends and sides of the table.)

So anyway… Inspiration?

JANE
Yeah, you know, a spark. Something that makes me excited to get up in the morning and deserves to be written.

PETER
You think you’ll find that on Netflix and dating sites?

JANE
I guess some part of me does. Modern romance, you know?

PETER
Ha! I highly doubt Tinder and all ten seasons of… what, Grey’s Anatomy? Constitute modern day romance.

JANE
Eleven.

PETER
Sorry?
JANE
There’s eleven seasons of Grey’s Anatomy on Netflix.
(PETER stops folding and looks at JANE, who continues to fold with fervor. She keeps her eyes on anything but PETER.)

PETER
See what I mean?

JANE
I don’t know what you’re talking about. And… I don’t even know you…

PETER
Oh stop it, you know what you need? You need to stop looking for… whatever it is you’re looking for, within the confines of that goddamned digital world you surround yourself with. You complain to your mom about a bad date, fine, that happens to everyone. But next week what are you going to do? Sit in class and scroll through guys who are in the same rut that you are? Is that what you want to do? Doesn’t sound like a fun time to me.

(JANE stops folding and looks at PETER.)

JANE
Hey! You can’t make me feel bad for how I spend my time! And fine, if you can, then I can do the same to you. If my habits are so flawed, then enlighten me to the exciting life that you lead. Please, I’d love to hear the marvelous and thrilling ways that you spend your time.

(PETER looks down and begins to back away from the table, looking away from JANE.)

PETER
We’re all flawed individuals.

JANE
… Flawed individuals?

PETER
Yeah, I mean, who are we to judge one another, really.
JANE
We’re both just talking.
(JANE returns to folding this time more slowly.
She glances at PETER and he, too, returns to folding.)
You know, I feel comfortable in this town,
but there’s just something missing. It’s hard to explain.

PETER
No I understand, I feel the same way. I’ve lived here my whole life. I want to
leave every day, but at the same time I think if I went anywhere else, I’d always
wish I would have stayed here. It’s not that bad of a town, actually.

JANE
I’ve lived here for a few years and I can’t say I know too much
about the town, unfortunately.

PETER
Yeah, there’s a railroad museum… The inventor of the Ferris Wheel was born
here. (Beat.) That sounds super lame now that it comes out of my mouth.

JANE
Ha! No, that sounds as interesting as I could have anticipated.

PETER
Yeah, there’s even a railroad festival here every summer, if you can believe it.
(Beat.) We’re big on railroads here.

JANE
Oh wow, nothing says crazy college town quite like a railroad festival.
Galesburg is wilder than I imagined!
(JANE starts moving her piles of folded clothing around the table.
She looks confused.)
Shoot.

PETER
What’s the matter?

JANE
I’m missing something.
(PETER does not look up from his folding.)

PETER
Aren’t we all?

JANE
I’m missing a sock. I have one without a mate.
(JANE holds up the lone sock so PETER can see it.)

PETER
Let me help you.
(JANE and PETER begin looking all around the table for the sock.
They lift and shove piles of clothing. PETER grabs the sock from under
his laundry basket and holds it behind his back without JANE seeing and
then continues to help her look.)

JANE
But yeah, it’d be nice to have someone in my life I could hold a conversation
with who didn’t have some sketchy ulterior motive. Someone who inspires me,
but lets me be my own inspiration at the same time. Am I making sense?
(From wherever they are searching the two pause and look at one another,
holding the glance for a beat. They return to searching.)

PETER
You just crave a life for yourself beyond the ordinary. I feel like most
people want that… Most just don’t come out and say it to random people
they meet in laundromats.
(From wherever they are searching the two pause and look at one another,
holding the glance for a beat. They return to searching.)

JANE
Don’t you want that, too?
PETER
(PETER plants the sock in one of the washers while JANE’s back is turned.

JANE
I guess you’re right. Maybe it’s worth a try, though? Maybe there’s something
in this town that can inspire you. Me, too, for that matter.

PETER
I think I’ve got what you’re looking for.
(PETER reaches into the washing machine and comes out with the sock that he
had been hanging on to.)

JANE
(To herself, and the audience.)
You know, I’m starting to think you do, too.

PETER
(Pulling his head from the washer, not hearing JANE’S previous line.)
I found your sock.

JANE
(Beat.) Oh! That’s great.
(JANE reaches for the sock, the two hold it for a beat.
They look at one another.)

PETER
All right, then, looks like you found what you were looking for.
(PETER hands JANE the sock and turns toward his laundry pile,
gathering his items in the basket and returning to his original chair,
preparing for his departure.)

JANE
(Beat.) Peter?
(JANE looks at PETER, sock in hand.)

PETER
Yeah, Jane?

JANE
Would you maybe want to go get coffee?

PETER
(PETER turns awkwardly and looks at JANE. There is a pause.
He scratches the back of his neck.)
Well, I have…

JANE
(Cutting off his response.)
Yeah, I should get going, anyway.

PETER
(Beat.) Yeah, I should head out. I still have those sketches to do.
And looks like I’m not going to find my muse in a laundromat.

JANE
(JANE begins fidgeting nervously with her piles of clothing.)
Oh. Okay.

PETER
Okay, well then maybe…
(PETER pauses, turns, and looks to JANE one last time,
JANE holds his glance for a beat.)
I’ll see you the next time I need to clean my underwear, huh?
(PETER exits.)

JANE
Yeah, catch you later.
(JANE begins loading her laundry into her basket and then stops,
still clutching the sock in her hand.)

End of play.
She had the biggest bedroom with a Dream Cast, Nintendo and PlayStation, but made me wash her clothes for Monopoly money. *She is my sister*, is all I could say.

It started with a zigzag braid pattern straight back. my mother yelled “you look like a boy” and forced her fingers into her greased scalp until the zig zags were gone.

Her preference to boxers over thongs flung my mother into a panic. her fists and barrels and keys and mugs violently kissed my sister, left her cafe cheeks a black Tahj Mahal. I offered her my last Lemonhead when it was over, but she refused and snuck out the back door. My mother saw her and locked it. It was seven Christmases before I saw my sister again and when I did, she was he.

Somewhere it is midnight & I am dragging my wooden dog across the kitchen table, leaving me breathless & gagging. The window opens & a tailored suit of an army man pins fireflies over my nipples, tells me to calm down, zips my knees together. 

On the corner of the counter a basket filled with sliced apples & war paint, reminds me of my mother. A bat wrapped in a blue blanket sucks blood out of oranges, my brain beats heavy & wet against the oak floors; *I wore the wrong perfume, my black bra broke.*

Iron in my blood sinks, math problems etched into the table hold water, weather, remind me of my father. I put a Band-Aid on a scar that healed three years ago, the window cracks & the egg in my stomach sours. A tailored green suit of an army man throws margarita glasses at the wall, tells me to tie my hair back, buttons my bones back in place. 

On the counter, blue flowers in a silver mug grow bigger I mouth Plato into my cereal, my eyes glaze over; *In another life I was Athena, I never had a headache.* Somewhere, a raccoon swallowing a nail in a junkyard, I collect splinters from the table, my toes uncurl.

*When my sister was a girl*

*Heaven Barlow*
I fly with the owls at night, I see with the eyes of an eagle sharp edges against soft curves I'm not who I should be.

Can I breathe in the light, cast shadows and soar high with the skyscrapers and not know where I am going?

Leaves flow with half-formed minds, up and out to the world below, escaping the touch of life's roughest bark. Alive and well untamed within themselves, boiling in their skin, running until lungs give in to the free spirit that consumes me.

Is it possible for the soul of an animal to run rampant in a human body? Just because I can hold a fork and a knife doesn't mean that I am not as wild as fresh spring wind, as it courses through grass A never-ending whirl of sunlit tendrils I can brush my fingers across the face of lesser mountains because they are just as deserving. I deserve to live as I want, not as I should, trapped within a hurricane. I refuse to be told what to do, but when the light shines on me, I'm caught in an arctic freeze, My body a home to stones, pressing down. I'm buried with the eyes of Man, but my vision is razor-edged. Eagle eyes seeing what cannot be seen by narrow-minded souls. I can see because I am Wild.
When even the blue label scotch seems to disappear down
the Holy sanctuary of your throat and the fillet expands your
belly but you’re not quite sure if you ate. When the red stamped
blue powder melting under spoons bent back like a child playing with
paperclips doesn’t fill your veins quick enough you begin to
wonder, if you would prefer being a modern day Lady Macbeth or Annabel Lee.
You see, you’ve read all those Shakespeare plays, the Bible, the philosophy of Freud,
Emerson and you just kept trying to find it. Looking for it during
the butterfly, the peg, the visitor, the curled angel, afternoon delight,
the bridge, deep-stick, doggy, the crouching tiger, the waterfall and
splitting bamboo, no one ever answered the question: to be or not to be.
You think you’d be okay with never seeing Egypt from space, swimming in the ocean or
owning a pair of Louboutin’s. It happened somewhere between leaving
your mini mansion home and working your full time job with full time
benefits and 4 vacations a year. They give you incentives like wellness bucks,
so you fill those days off with free green tea massages, yoga and a gym membership.

You work your calves like mules until they are tighter than the ugly Christmas sweater
your grandmother knits every year because grandpop died December 25th 8 years
ago. When your grandmother cups your face in her palms like the Qur’an, when her
teeth are slick with the memories of tear gas, hounds and batons, when she is choking
on her grandmothers tears she
tells you: “I marched so you wouldn’t have to.”
So please just understand how there just ain’t enough MLK quotes on this
earth to reverse the angry and shame you feel when watching men of your
bloodline cower and all you can do is go to school. And hide, hide the belt
welts that plague your outer thighs because mama didn’t like you reading Zane,
mama didn’t like you reading Carl Webber mama didn’t like you reading about
Tyrell in the projects eating pork chops even though we lived in the projects and
she still cooked ham hocks and brown skin people were always a white man’s project.

Experiment. Henrietta Lacks and the Tuskegee Airmen. And all you can do is go to
school. Go to school. Go to schoolgotoschoolgotoschool and suddenly it’s 3am and
you’re lying in bed waiting for that fourth Unisom to kick in so you lean over and kiss
E&J, and Bombay slaps your ass but you can’t speak because Morgan is tightening his
grip on your throat until you call him Captain

and Mr. Grey Goose is licking between your toes and Johnny Walker crawls into your
bed because he has to be a part of this orgy too and all you think about is how it all
started when you were 15 years old. Reading all those Shakespeare plays, and all
those philosophies but somehow, no one ever answered that age old question from
the 17th century whether to be or not to be.
It was Christmas, and he was the only child of only children. For the previous four years, his parents had spent the holidays alone together, erecting and festooning plasticy-smelling trees out of tradition and societal expectation and not of love or family solidarity. Though his father was more than happy to keep it that way, given the state of affairs; his mother was sick of the isolation, and decided to bite the bullet and accept Connor’s invitation to spend Christmas with him—and myself. That was about six months before his death.

Given her effervescence and overall charm and vivacity, it was easy to forget that this was a woman who allowed her husband to throw away their son without so much as a protest, and as such, I was not so easily won over—the feeling was mutual. Margaret found my tendency toward frankness and stoicism irritating, given her expectation that Connor would always marry an effervescent, charming, and vivacious schoolteacher, and not end up dating a somewhat scruffy and slightly tech-obsessed sports journalist. Connor, however, was overjoyed to be able to spend Christmas with the doting mother he hadn’t seen for the lesser part of a decade.

“I hope that she didn’t fight much with my father over her decision to come,” he said, muting an uncomfortable anxiety on behalf of his mother with a disquieted—yet still charming—exasperated laugh. The fact that he was still capable of empathy toward this woman amazed and perturbed me. Again, I fell in love.

“Yes, and hopefully they weren’t too upset over the fact that they disowned you, the poor things. I can’t even imagine how that must have looked.” Usually sardonicism rested solely in Connor’s realm, but I couldn’t help myself. He shot me a playful glance that said something along the lines of, “Yes, yes, I know what you’re saying, and I’d agree with you if we were talking about anyone else—but this is me, and this is my mother, so keep your opinions to yourself, douchebag.”

The house, as always, was charming and grand, though this was only the second time I had been in it, the first since his death. Connor, though an idealist at heart, was someone very much held prisoner by his past. Even after his parental abandonment, he would show me pictures of his delightful, old-style home, and he would speak, bitterly, of how we would go back one day, a family, and spend the holidays there in celebration.
“And we could get a picture with father right by the fireplace – I’m sure by that point the both of you would be chummy, throwing footballs all over the place, and – I don’t know. I’m sure I’d be pregnant by that point, too.” The sarcasm dripped, burlesque, from his voice. He would often use this tone when he spoke of his parents after they had blasted him from the family tree. We would exchange bitter ironies, poultices upon his (now old) wounds, and he tried his best to hide his desperation. (I didn’t like talking about his family, because of the barely hidden desperation.)

Margaret, wordlessly, led me upstairs – I had no idea where her husband was, and for my safety I hoped it would be kept that way. They had a grand staircase, and as we ascended I was given an ample view of the foyer. I saw that Connor’s enormous portrait had been put back upon the wall, his death having absolved him. In the portrait he smiled, young, ironic, but warm and though he faced the foyer, he appeared to be gazing, with blue, tolerantly amused eyes, upward. At something out of reach. It amazed me how brilliantly the portrait captured his humanity. (It hurt, brilliantly, to look at.)

The house was immaculate, and the intricately tiled floor of the grand entryway might have shone brilliantly had any light been let into the house. Beautiful, likely commissioned, art lined the walls: the calligraphy of a few of the corner signatures on the pieces was familiar, as was the art styles of some of the pieces themselves. I realized that Connor, having redecorated my apartment, must have commissioned art from some of the same artists, or stolen some of them from his old home, at least. The fact that he had wanted to make my home resemble his old one saddened me, but I decided not to dwell on things like that now that he was gone — his spirit, gone, at least. I wouldn’t have gone there in the first place had he left nothing substantial behind.

This manse, as filled to the brim with art and personal possessions as it was, couldn’t help but feel empty as this lone woman brought me to the old room of her – former? – son. (The grandeur left me feeling empty, not impressed.) It was at the end of a comfortably carpeted hallway, with beautiful oaken doors erected along the sides of the lengthy passage, all closed. We stopped for a moment, and she inhaled, removed from her breast pocket a tiny ring of keys, and she – why did she keep the door locked? – unlocked the room and pushed the door inward.

We both, for a moment, were taken aback, and I had to close my eyes and sharply exhale, as if pained – I suppose I was. “So this is where you took everything and dumped it, then?” I said, more bitterly than curiously. We were much too young to have written anything resembling a will – though Connor was always talking about his “death napkin” – and as such the family reclaimed most of his possessions, hoarding them in the bedroom their son used to reside in and leaving me nothing but memories, a few stories he had written for me, and “my” old sweatshirts (as soon as he moved in, he immediately claimed every piece of comfortable torso-wear he could find. They still smell like him. They smell nothing like pastries).

Were there a permanently lit candle, this might have looked like an upscaled memorial for a child lost in a school shooting – I suppose you could draw some parallels. The first thing that greeted you as you walked into the door was a smaller version of the portrait displayed downstairs, leaned against a stylishly modern vanity that faced, open, toward the entryway. Though, individually, the items might have brought together an ensemble, completed a room, or beautifully decorated a wall, everything seemed packed, as tightly as possible, into such a relatively small space that the ugliness was palpable. This room turned pleasant memories into ugliness.

“We had to put it somewhere,” Margaret sighed, my presence already having exhausted her, the room having exhausted her. “Take it and go. It’s in the far corner.” She gestured toward the metal box in the corner that contained the second corpse, and she turned from the room and exited, waiting for me outside so that she might lock the door again. She didn’t want to have to look at her son’s face anymore, not in this room – not that he would have met her eyes, anyways. They were focused on something else, something more important.

The box, though relatively large, was rather light, and it fit comfortably in my arms. I considered, briefly, bringing along its accessories, but I decided against it: one reason being that I’d have to come back upstairs to grab them, and I wanted to rid myself of this place as quickly as possible. The things in this room—the varied collection of favorite books, the monochrome tapestries depicting urbanity, the beautiful journals, scarcely written in due to the accessibility of a word document—though they’d be nice to have, were deemed not mine to keep, and being in this room, all of them crammed together as if
meaningless objects, made me sick to my stomach. But these things, though his, were not him. He treasured them, but he did not inhabit them. What he inhabited was either dead in the ground, or dead in my arms – and the box would suffice for my needs. Though he was no longer with me, this, at least, might be resurrected. Preserved.

With his things no longer decorating the apartment, there was a palpable physical absence in my living space.

Having attached the power cord to the box, plugged it into the wall, and connected the monitor, mouse, and keyboard, what was once dead whirred back to life with a cough. The box tower was large, rectangular, black, and I had it set aside my desk. The whirr of the fan was wonderfully familiar – late into the night, I would hear the noise of the fan and the clacking of Connor’s typing as he wrote about his day or concocted a fanciful tale. The more he wrote, the more he put into the machine, the greater his imprint upon it. He, like most of us, arranged his life through files and folders, solidified identity through networks and kilobytes. Onto this machine he externalized his person, having curated a living space that, itself, came to live. I’d always found it amusing that we used the same term for the fundamental building blocks of both selfhood and storage: memory. (He wasn’t here, but there were traces. I was looking for the traces.)

I was reminded of the way that my mother reacted when my younger brother died, her life now measured through episodes of weeping. She would smother herself in his clothes and belongings, and his scent became both salve and toxin, stemming or enhancing the flow of tears. (He wasn’t there, but there were traces. She was looking for the traces.)

He kept a collection of photos within a folder (Photos) in the corner of his desktop. The folder was an extension of the cloud through which all of his photos were uploaded, so regardless of the quality of what he took, it ended up there. He had the habit of adding descriptions to each of the photos, revealed in tiny, understated white textboxes that would appear when someone hovered over the thumbnails. “A stony hillside, and the two paths came together in the shape of an L. You’re on the right, but the left side of the picture disappears into smoke. A finger over the lens, I think.”

“The moon, a streetlight.” “Stars in the moss. It’s just rained.” “Telephone poles, bridge may be icy in cold weather, three cars ahead of us. You’re driving.” “My feet and the edge of the hospital gown. This room smells like clean death. I think you’re asleep in the corner.” I smothered myself in these descriptions (salves and toxins, looking for the traces).

A word document (Death Napkin) was left, unceremoniously, in the center of the desktop, and I double-clicked.

Hey, you,

Listen, I was looking, again, at that website of prompts the nurse showed me the last time we were in the clinic, and I saw one that was deliciously broody: “Write a letter to a loved one prior to your imminent death.” I’ve been in a bit of a macabre mood lately, so this one stuck out to me and I knew I had to try my hand.

The more that I thought about it, though, the more I realized that this wasn’t exactly just an exercise in thought – this was something real, and scary. Scary for you, at least, you codependent. What would you do without me? Well, the answer to that, obviously, is mull over my computer and maybe try and decipher something out of what I’d left behind. Actually, that sounds exactly like something you’d do.

You always chastised me for not putting up a password on this old thing. “What would happen if somebody stole it?” you said. “All of your personal information would be right there for the taking.” I always told you a white lie, something like “I’m lazy,” or “I’d probably forget what it was anyway.” Truthfully, though, I’ve always fancied myself a fan of the tales where a reclusive grandparent would pass away, and then the grandchild would find the key to his desk drawer, stumble upon his journals and unlock the worlds of infinite mystery and wonder that the old man had left behind. I wanted to leave behind something infinite, mysterious, and wonderful – yet how would I do that if I was the only one that knew the password? That just wouldn’t do.

Good thing, too, because you just waltzed right on in and started snooping around, didn’t you? I decided to just place this document right in the middle of the desktop so you’d find it, though. I wouldn’t want you thinking that I’d hid this somewhere, giving you the go-ahead to ferret around my other folders and find
They follow a specific order as they intertwine and tangle with each other; they sit glistening in the puddles of the past fallen rain.

A bird, a crow actually, looks on shifting its head left, then right. He wonders where to drop the screw held in his mouth, stolen from some mechanic changing tires, as he sits on the telephone wire unaware of the meaning of the cracks in the pavement; infrastructure unable to keep up with the shifting weight of traffic jams.

Shut the fuck up resounds from the street below—a man yelling at a homeless plea for a quarter—

and so, dejected, the homeless plea shuffles away, wary of the cracks under the puddles, carefully avoiding them worried for the wellbeing of his mother’s spine.

High-rises sprout, clean shaven,

something like, I don’t know, fanart I’d stolen from the internet or horrible old poetry I’d hidden away and forgotten about.

The point is, cutie, is that you’re expecting from me some great revelation, some great surprise, something that would shift your perspective of events and shatter you to your core. And I’d loved to have left something like that behind if I were creative enough or if I’d known that you might find it. Unfortunately, bucko, there is no revelation. There is no surprise. There is only you, left in a darkly lit room, trying to find meaning in the documents of a person you already know everything about. There is only me, typing this as you lie asleep in the bed behind me, knowing that there is future where you exist in a world without me in it. I’m not worried for me, but for you—like I said, you’re such a codependent.

There’s no twist, so I don’t really know how to end this—and you know how I am with “ILU’s” and “PDA’s,” so don’t worry. I won’t muck up the letter with any of that. Just keep this safe, okay? Save it to a flashdrive or something and keep it in your breast pocket— and you’re always in business casual, so I know you’ve got a breast pocket. No excuses!

There was a muddy picture formatted into the word document after the words had ended, and I hovered over it with the pointer. “I tried to capture a picture of the night sky, but my finger covered the lens. We’re holding hands.”
next to housing complexes pocked with missing bricks and broken windows, home to the man they call the flying dog man because he promises one day I’ll sprout wings and I’ll be the one barking from the sky and shitting on all of You.

but the suits don’t believe it so they occasionally throw dimes or nickels or pennies at him to shut him up as they enter glass palaces to render calculations on a glowing screen that decides the fate of some blue collar factory worker six hundred miles away.

He steps out of the office looking down at his sparkling black leather shoes and feels a wet lump hit his sleeve.

He looks up for answers and is greeted back with a cackle and bark I told you so

ripples through the air.

LOOKING OUT A WINDOW

Bradley Miller

I hum along to the city streets, They are deep and impersonal and sudden. The patterns are predictable. The cars are varied, but bound up all in a cluster. They snarl impatiently in heat and stifling air a hot shower in a room with the door staying shut, or a tiny room with many people and no open window. The heat sticks to your skin and you sweat, like a bad night of drinking in South Beach.

As I stare out, on this lonely Sunday, I picture that I might know the man in the Volvo. The grey Volvo, returning from church alone with his hands gently cradling the wheel, sensing soft leather and desperate to be forgiven. He waits for his love to appear, and turns the music louder. It is an 80’s tune he usually knows well. He caresses the notches in the dial, distinct, as the music tunes out his existence.

I also thought I might have been the woman, walking beside what appears to be a husband. Being 45 and still walking the same streets Being born and perhaps dying here, as well. She squeezes her husband’s hand, he doesn’t squeeze back. Angst shoots into her mind and simmers in silence. Her man is checking his stocks on a phone. The glass he presses his fingers against feels stone-like and stiff. He pokes near the middle – a transaction is complete.

Some say I have the appetite of a houseplant, needing only to be watered upon pure necessity. But to speak truth, my soul is the jazz, elegant tune, riotous and calm. I slide my fingers down the window, the wood is old and it pricks my skin, A shock, a little splinter interrupting my view. I begin to lose interest in Angst Woman, Stock Man, and Mr. Volvo. Their lives are not mine and I have things to do.
She understood 9/11
fourteen years after the fact.
Heart swathed in rain boots,
dress catching arrows,
she sat on top of the Eiffel Tower
like a varicose weathervane.
Buildings shrank back
into their roots,
buoyed by black rubber bands
under a chalk moon.

Two stars laughed like coyotes
slouching toward Bethlehem.
The rest of the sky was silent.

Cattle disappeared from dry fields,
replaced by 258 French hands.
The skin gave way to boxes, to pulpits, to white

knuckles scraping against burnt air,
pulling up petals instead of weeds,
asking why this hurts,
why this happened,
will it thaw.
My sister was sick once over Christmas vacation while I was staying with her. Her tub was backed up and every time someone showered, the water never drained, and had to be drained by hand using a large bowl, feeding it into the bathroom sink. She asked if I could drain the tub so she might open up her capillaries with a shower. I obliged and dug each scoop of the bowl as low as it could go, hefting up the marbly water, again and again and again. The skin—dead, pale, sloughed-off sin—swam in bits in that cold burial of a baptism. It festered within, then, the sickness, growing from her to me, travelling casually like an old friend. It possessed my body by morning, snapping every tendon, sapping every muscle, turning my constitution to slush. It was harsh ablution. I felt my insides rust. I was Paul-stricken to my bed, dependent on the care of others. Death toyed with my head. Everything turned brown and offended. The sickness flipped and kicked and danced inside me. Hours, hours, hours in that pain, reeling without rest but for a moment’s mind-darkness. I became bodily bedmates with my sister’s sickness, until it finally flung itself from my bowels out through the tunnels of my mouth and into a waiting pail. I found my body was mine then, and got up, and I saw myself in a mirror, a ghost in both my eyes, staring out from the darkness.

"Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples!’ ‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’"


past the gully, now—imagining a forevergaze, looking on and on and on and on to covering of tall, breathing grass, now—Nushagak far below, mountains I cannot reach

stones crying up through my feet—grab branches, make sure we’re alone, kiss them, sink my teeth in, taste them walking through the tunnel of alders into the light.

Oh, God—

how mysterious You are

excuses made for carrying red rocks in my pockets—fellow worshipers, it’s not enough to squeeze them, rub them. [dear hardGodlove, come and clean me] I want to, want to, want to go past the gully, now, where I find them

find me
THE INFLUENCE OF THE MOON

Adam Schwallie

Take the stars down from the sky
Neatly fold up the sun
(don’t crease it
Place them gently in a box and set it out to sea

An orchestra of birdsong still peals however,
In concert with the beating drum of the engine in a Mack truck
(though they’re off tempo
(or there is no tempo

Turn that shit down. The air is thick, but it shakes just as well
Perhaps bliss exists in a vacuum –
(maybe that’s the point
(you still think there is a point
(and that’s adorable
(and that’s why i still love you

There’s no place for your hands to go and your ankles
Deflect off one another violently
There will be no peace in our time
(whose?

Notice that the tide always comes back. Wishes
Don’t keep the careening Earth from its drunken stumble through space
Look with sober eyes – they’re still in the box
(i never forgot

Let us see if you were careful enough not to crease it.
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.

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 slats 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 our lives 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 '50s 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, at that time. That is not to say that my writing (or situation) remotely compared to her. 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 grandfather's old house, my old house, and our old high school. That was how it ended. I said goodbye 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.

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.

TYPICAL SATURDAY NIGHT
Jackson Kocis
The very first shape I made was the shape of the great barrier reef. Coral cut my foot, handfuls of marbles spilled into my open wound. One was an egg, the egg of a bright green bug. The clinic didn’t treat bugs.

Was anything saved? asked the toad in a blue coat with gold buttons. A red wagon, a snowball, chapped lips & the memory; rain puddles covered in dust. The landscape was repopulated with more toxic ferns. This is a story about living with defeat. 3 of 5 posters on my wall were wet, I was a bad influence on the gerbils at the pet store. Each of my scars received a name & they used their names against me. I wasn’t the only one using my toothbrush, man slime, red wine, foam. The toad wasn’t sure which was the prayer.