When I get home

by

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Part I:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.
~Simone Weil

Why have I always been glad to leave?
~J. B. Jackson
Looking at Dinosaurs

At age seven I got my first map. A laminated map of Michigan. Mom highlighted the route from Farmington, Michigan, where we lived, to the Upper Peninsula, where we vacationed. Instead of asking, “Are we there yet?” I stared out the window at Interstate 75 and I asked where we were. I knew cities and exit numbers. I traced the bolded line that ran through the middle of the state, mentally marking off cities as we moved north: West Branch, Grayling, Gaylord, Indian River. When I spotted the Mackinac Bridge’s white towers through the trees north of Indian River, I no longer needed the map. I knew my way by landmarks: the Mackinac Bridge, the limestone carved out junction where we split onto Highway 2, Clyde’s Drive-In, the lighthouse-shaped souvenir shop in St. Ignace, Cut River Inn, Garyln Zoo, and finally Naubinway, the northernmost point of Lake Michigan where we turned toward Hiawatha Trail and our cabin on Riverview Drive.

At sixteen, I learned the road. I drove every chance I could. I fell in love with the expressway—I fell in love with going fast, with following green signs with white writing toward Michigan landmarks I knew.

“You can’t get lost on an expressway—you just follow the signs toward places near the places you want to go,” I remember telling a friend, probably while leaning back on a desk in high school homeroom.

But I got lost. A lot. Half the times I drove to Ann Arbor I missed my exit and ended up in seedy sections of Detroit. I refilled my gas tank at stations with bars over the windows and signs which warned about security and stealing. I slumped low in my seat as I tried to find the entrance ramp back onto the expressway in neighborhoods littered with adult video stores and vacant buildings. I learned where to keep my windows up and my doors locked—I learned how to insulate myself: how to stay calm and look for the way back home.
I started straying from home at an early age. As a kid, my parents put me on a leash when we went shopping. We called it a “hand-holder”—a Velcro armband that linked my wrist to my mother’s with a spiraled elastic cord. If I wasn’t attached, I wandered. I slipped into spiral clothing racks or burrowed beneath hanging scarves. I ran my fingers through beaded necklaces or crouched beneath the benches in the dressing room.

As I got older the hand-holder became Mom’s threat. She kept it in the outside pocket of her purse. When I started to walk away she’d pull the elastic cord from her purse and dangle it in front of me: *Do we need to use the hand-holder?* I hated being bound to her—hated the Velcro rubbing against my skin and the snap of the elastic when I strayed too far. When my mom pulled out the hand-holder and asked me if we needed to use it, I shook my head and shadowed her until she put it away again. I stayed close enough to keep my freedom.

I still wander. During a recent trip to Chicago, I slipped out of a conference to meander around the city by myself, weaving alongside Lake Michigan, cutting in and out of museums. I listened to my shoes clacking against the sidewalk and felt the February wind whisk my face. I sat on a bench beside Michigan Avenue, drinking coffee and watching tourists in scarves flutter by.

I called my brother from The Field Museum, “I’ve broken out.”

“Of where?”

“The conference I was at—I needed a break.”

“Where are you now?”

“Looking at dinosaurs.”

He wasn’t surprised.
My senior year of college I drove across the Mississippi with my boyfriend Jared to visit his family in Iowa. It felt like wandering. He picked me up after his class. I stood on the sidewalk with still-wet pinned up hair, wearing a trench coat and holding a lily for his mother. My flats smacked against the pavement when I ran across the road to meet him.

It was the first time I remember crossing the Mississippi by car. My family had driven to Wyoming when I was younger but I had no recollection of blue arches bridging slow-moving water.

I pressed my face to the window and felt myself moving west.

I watched the way the land unfolded as we drove—the highway wove up and down between long straight rows of brown corn. Everything about Iowa seemed straight, organized in rows and east-west highways that ran in straight lines over straight rivers. I grew up in the suburbs of Detroit in a subdivision that spiraled into sections with names like Glover Circle and Congress Court. I grew up with my grass sectioned off into commons, lined by the backs of houses. Rows of corn were new to me.

~

When I moved to Iowa, Jared drove me, tailing a trailer full of my family and furniture. I fished through his cup holder and found a pair of his sunglasses. I slipped them on and they slid down my nose. I looked at late August rows of corn through half-darkened eyes.

We unboxed my room with my parents and brother, Keith. Jared helped Keith haul the pieces of my bed and desk. I sat on the carpet arranging my books on the shelf by color and helping my mother decide where to hang my magnetic board and Monet poster.

My parents set up beige director’s chairs in my empty living room and we ate McDonalds on wooden tables I’d found in my Nana’s basement and painted white. Jared’s brother Ryan came to meet him so he took his food to go, while my family sat in a circle bent over too-short tables, eating salads from plastic containers with plastic forks. The brown bag of leftovers and plastic squeeze containers of extra dressing became the first contents of my refrigerator in my first house.
In the “My Documents” section of my computer there are two folders—one titled “House 1” and one titled “Iowa Pics” which I posted on the internet to a gallery labeled “Ames, Iowa, and the house on Beedle Drive.”

A photograph of my mother and brother sitting in my living room: My mom drinks from her Nalgene bottle, slippers resting on a silver cooler. Keith chews on his straw, bare feet arched sideways on the carpet, his Beatles book sitting on a plant stand.

A photograph of me, unloading my dishwasher for the first time: I’m wearing lime green running shorts and a bright blue New Balance T-shirt, legs still tanned from a summer spent running with my brother. A stained glass sign which reads “Café”—a gift my friend Emily brought back from a semester spent studying in Mexico—sits un-hung on my counter. An open cupboard beside the sink reveals three shelves—empty, except for my coffee grinder.

A photograph of the front of the house—a side view of our front porch: It was taken a couple weeks later, after my housemate had arrived in Iowa. A yellow broom is propped against the doorstep beside a wooden table Annie and I bought for ten dollars at a garage sale. We had to collapse my backseat to get it loaded in my car. Potted flowers sit on the tabletop—my housemate’s contribution. Around the same time the photo was taken I planted daffodils in front of our house. I spent an afternoon, digging fist-sized holes in my front yard, plopping bulbs, and patting the soil smooth.

I wanted to get my hands in Iowa—literally—metaphorically.

Two days after I moved to Ames, Jared drove me to the Iowa State Fair. I have snapshots saved on my cell phone of record-breaking bulls, bearded goats, three-pound pigeons in wired cages and of Jared bent beside a mass of lettuce twice the size of his head. We walked through 4-H photography exhibitions. We ate hard boiled eggs on sticks. We saw a sculpture of gymnast Shawn Johnson carved in butter behind a Plexiglas boundary. That night, Jared stayed with me in Ames—
we bought pizza from a local restaurant famous for their hand-rolled crust and took the bus downtown to drink locally brewed beer out of big glasses.

~

When I first moved to Iowa, whenever Jared and I walked through a field, I would turn to him, chin to my shoulder, eyebrow raised, and ask, “Is this the prairie?”

He would shake his head, “No Rachael, this is just grass.”

“Isn’t there supposed to be prairie in Iowa?” I toed the field in front of me, digging up tufts of grass and dandelions, pieces of an altered landscape—in a state where only two percent of the original terrain remains.

I grew up watching the storms come in on Lake Michigan—dark clouds hanging above the water which rolled toward where I would sit on the beach. One of my friends from the east coast told me that sometimes, when the wind blows the sea of stalks, the cornfields remind him of waves. Something about the endless straight lines appeals to a girl who grew up meandering, who wanted to stray from her mother in the mall to amble through the racks of clothing.

You can lose yourself here.

~

Whenever I try to write about Jared, he seems flat. He feels like a place-holder: A person that filled a spot on a map. We kept each other company while we waited for the rest of our lives to begin.

~

It wasn’t until after Jared and I broke up that I saw my first prairie—the landscape rooted beneath the lines. I began to seek out prairies and to become involved with their restoration—and their burning.

When the prairie burns it smells like popcorn. Smoke seeps up from the soil. In Iowa, I learned how to clear the way for the fire, how to rake back the grasses to create a burn line. I watched
fire creep across the grass, leaving soot-filled soil behind. I used the heel of my boot to stomp out lingering flames and returned to my car smelling like sweat and smoke.

Prairie grasses react to stress and change. Their root structure extends eight to fifteen feet into the soil, so after the fire finishes the grasses grow back stronger. When I helped build burn lines for controlled prairie fires, my arms ached from raking and my mouth got dry from smoke and sun. I watched how black the dirt became by the end of the burn. I saw tiny sprouts creep through ashes.

~

Once I asked Jared what I should do if I got lost in a cornfield.

“Just keep heading in one direction.”

When I decided to drive to Michigan to spend the three months in the Upper Peninsula, I drove north through Iowa and Wisconsin instead of up Interstate-75 through Grayling and Gaylord. I left Iowa at eight thirty in the morning and didn’t reach Riverview Drive until after midnight.

It’s weird to drive over thirteen hours without understanding the specifics of the route. I drove into downtown Madison, I should have detoured around the city. I wove up two-lane highways dashed by small towns and wondered where Wisconsin hid its main roads. I called a friend when I passed her hometown, Sun Prairie.

“I have no idea if I’m where I’m supposed to be. The road keeps disappearing into small towns and coming back out in a different spot.”

She laughed. “They tend to do that—just keep driving north. If you hit Canada you’ve gone too far.”

Just keep driving north: my trip’s mantra.

I was excited to a drive a new direction into the Upper Peninsula—to watch Route 2 lace between Lake Michigan and thick pine forests. But by the time I reached Menominee the sky was getting dark—navy blue, broken up by the green silhouettes of clouds. By Escanaba, the road and woods were completely black. I drove along Route 2 with only blinking yellow yield lights to mark
towns with names I began to recognize—Manistique, Gulliver, Gould City. A road sign reading, “Enjoy Prom—Don’t Drink and Drive” stood several feet in front of the Junction 117—my turn.

I didn’t want to climb into the crawlspace to turn on the water that night, so I warmed bottled water in the microwave to splash on my face before collapsing into bed with my clothes still on. The next morning I tried to retrace my route. I opened my atlas to page 114: Wisconsin. I wanted to highlight the path that brought me up north, marking exits I’d taken, and places in the road that I liked. But I couldn’t figure out the way I’d come. Wisconsin roads changed colors when they wandered through cities—they went from yellow with orange stripes labeled with a circular “151” to blue and nameless. I closed the atlas and gave up the idea of marking my path.

~

“You are here.” The wooden maps at the trail heads of state parks indicate your location with arrows or red dots. Mall maps do the same thing.

My first spring in Iowa I was running on the Iowa State cross country course, a field just east of my house, when I looked up at the Ames water tower. Cursive letter announced, “You’re here!” I swerved, surprised by the bluntness of the big blue proclamation.

I had to run horizontally across the field before I could see the whole phrase, “We’re glad you’re here!” I wondered why I hadn’t noticed the words on the water tower before—but was more struck by the idea of being “here,” of pointing to a spot on a map or in a field and declaring your location with an exclamation point.

I rarely use exclamation points. I use a lot of ellipses and dashes—but not exclamation points. Most of my punctuation indicates an unfinished thought rather than a proclamation. One of my friends has an ampersand (&) tattooed between her breasts. She says that you never end a sentence with “and.” Maybe that’s just where we are right now—the future is unclear. I don’t know where I’ll go next. I can map pieces of the past but I struggle to understand it. I can’t highlight the route that I will take next or even accurately trace the roads I’ve taken.
The morning after Jared and I broke up, I couldn’t find my purse or anything I needed to get ready. I drove to school with no make-up and my hair in a pony-tail, body crumpled against my steering wheel. I struggled to salvage the pieces of my routine. I didn’t tell anyone outside my family about our break-up for several days. When my friends finally asked me what happened and who initiated, it I couldn’t answer.

“I don’t know.”

The summer after I moved to Iowa, I drove up north alone. Maybe when wild people retreat they run to wild places. Cut flowers wilt but deciduous forests come back, forging through the seasons. Woodlands cover around eighty percent of the Upper Peninsula and there are only around twenty people per square mile with no major specialty stores or shopping malls. “You are here.”

Here, I marked the first mile of my run by the dead coyote decomposing in the middle of the trail. Here, I woke to the sound of sandhill cranes hollering. Here, I watched the weather in a river that ran toward Lake Michigan. Raindrops splattered the water’s surface. Sun turned the river-bottom-sepia brown. But when I told the staff of the running store that I work at in Detroit that I was spending the summer in the Upper Peninsula I got two reactions: “By yourself?” and “Why?”

My first year in graduate school, I often felt like I was pretending to be a grown-up—imagining that I knew what I was doing in my teaching job, my classes, or my relationship—calling my mother to tell her that I paid my bills or did my taxes like a small child playing store with a plastic cash register—wandering at the brink of adulthood. I knew when I went back to Iowa in the fall I would drive across I-80 by myself. I would park my car in the driveway and unload my summer duffle bags into my already arranged room. Maybe after I unfolded my clothing into drawers, I would sit cross legged on my comforter and sort through the pile of papers I had accumulated over the past year. Maybe after I finished I would lie back on my bed and think “I’m here.” But honestly, the roads seemed to blur together and I wasn’t sure what would happen next.
If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.
-Philip Larkin

A Brief Natural History

I grew up in Michigan surrounded by one fifth of the world’s freshwater. I spent my summers in the Upper Peninsula. At home in the suburbs of Detroit, I was within an hour of Lake Huron. I lived with lake effect weather. As a little girl I trick-or-treated with gray suspender snow pants under my princess costume. In high school I got frostbit twice while running in the snow. I still wore shorts every day during the winter. I liked breaking through powder with my bare legs—coming home with wind-burn cheeks and a snot-frozen face.

I read recently that some people call the Great Lakes the third coast or the inland seas--terms I’d never heard but like. I like being able to locate my home state in satellite imagery taken from space because of the distinctive lake-carved shape of the land. I like pointing to my hometown on my hand. When the seasons shift, I still want to be near the water.

~

When I was eighteen I moved to Indiana.

It wasn’t for aesthetic reasons.

When I visited Valparaiso University I was struck by the sparse ugliness of campus. Snow matted the brown grass. Naked gnarled bushes grew beside the 1970s freshman dorms. Freezing rain soaked through my jacket. When my family returned to the car after our campus tour, we found my dog huddled against the back seat with his tail between his legs, shaking.
We didn’t drive north of campus to Portage where the Indiana National Lakeshore spans the southernmost part of Lake Michigan. We didn’t climb Mount Baldy and stand knee deep in soft sand staring across the water toward Chicago. We didn’t drive along the long rows of corn and soybeans which span the highways south of campus or see the fertile farmland that resulted from the last glacier that slogged its way through the Great Lakes region. We didn’t run up and down the rolling roller coaster hills on 150 South or know that they came from soil deposited from the receding Wisconsin glacier 16,000 years ago.

~

In Indiana I watched the weather change.

A friend and I explored the 1933 World’s Fair houses at the National Lakeshore. We wandered through chipped steel, broken windows, and peeling paint, knee deep in dune grass. A quartet titled “a century of progress.” The Cypress Log Cabin. The Florida Tropical House. The House of Tomorrow. Armco-Ferro House. A man told us that they’d recently been auctioned off. The new tenants planned to restore them but the sand and the wind would it impossible for any structure to stand near the beach permanently.

When we saw storm clouds hovering over the water, we ran toward Lake Michigan.

We pulled off our sand-filled shoes and stood barefoot on the beach. We wanted to see the color of the water change. We wanted to time the storm.

My friend took a picture of me balancing on driftwood with my arms out and my hair blowing back in front of teal water and a purple sky. A couple minutes later I took a photograph of the Michigan
City smokestacks at the end of the lakeshore. The sky had turned dark gray except for a one fluffy clouded corner. The water looked black.

We sat down on the beach, digging into the cold sand with our toes. We watched and waited. We waited until a wave of rain cracked onto the beach—until wind made it hard to move and the sky got inky with clouds that hung directly above us. Then we picked up our shoes and walked toward my car, letting the rain fall in trails down our faces.

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The House of Tomorrow, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore

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When I was nineteen, I moved to England for five months.

In England it only snowed once. The day it snowed I walked into my art history classroom to find the lights still off and my professor standing in front of the window. She pressed her palms against the glass and stared out at the whirling white flakes. She stood there for a moment in the empty room before she turned to me and whispered, “It’s snowing.”
Most days it rained. When I got off the plane, with oil-slicked, ten-hour-flight skin, I felt the clamminess of the London air. When I toured Cambridge during my second day living in the city, wetness seemed to seep out of the old stone structures. I have photographs of the tour, where I tried to cut out the sky, to capture only the King’s College Chapel and Trinity Courtyard without any indication of the weather that surrounded them. I overexposed the shots so the sky looked white instead of gray. The manicured grass looks startlingly green in those pictures. During my tour, I learned only fellows of the University are allowed to walk on that grass. Small blue signs on every corner of the courtyard told visitors to please keep off.

It rained during the middle of the day, between eleven in the morning, when my classes got out, and dinnertime. I ran in the midday rain. I listened to my feet splash through the puddles and felt misty water on my face. It never rained hard. It wasn’t the cold I remembered from Indiana and Michigan winters, which blistered my hands and left my knuckles bloody. England’s cold got stuck in my throat.

Michigan is a peninsula. England is an island. The big bodies of water that surround them fill the air with moisture. But in England the Gulf Stream keeps the precipitation mild with warm, wet summers and cool damp winters. In England, I walked, stared, and floated.

The week before I moved to Iowa I built campfires on the beach every night. I played music on the car stereo and spun in barefoot circles on the sand. I ran along the cliffs of Lake Superior with my brother, ending at Chapel Rock beach where we sat in the Chapel River Rapids and let the water run over our legs. I slept on the back porch of my cabin and woke up to the sound of sand hill cranes squawking and splashing in the river.
On my last night in northern Michigan, thousands of mayflies emerged from the sand. They crawled up onto the logs of my campfire. The flames spit their tiny bodies out of the fire like popcorn. Mayflies peppered my hairline and burrowed in my ears. I peeled mayflies from the underneath my fingernails and dug them out from the inside corners of my eyes. I left the beach with windows rolled down--wind beating the bugs off my skin.
Crossings

The Straits of Mackinac span five miles. Once I saw a man swimming the distance. From two hundred feet above the water, I couldn’t make out his face or his swimmer shoulders. I couldn’t see whether he was wearing goggles or if he was slowing down. I saw a white Jet Ski floating beside him and wondered if he rested on it during his swim--to give his body a break or to take a sip of water from a plastic bottle. His silhouette was barely visible except for the striking contrast between the pink of his skin and the inky water.

As I watched him I imagined what it would be like to make the journey from one Peninsula to another through the choppy water--to swim the line where two of the world’s largest lakes meet. I wondered if he was cold, if the wind from the straits whipped at the drops of water on his back in between strokes. I wondered if lactic acid had surged into his arms, weighing them down with bruised, tender tiredness.

1.

The January before I turned twenty I kissed a boy I thought I loved on the northern coast of Lake Michigan. We parked my car on a residential road, crossed the highway, and crept onto the beach. In winter, Lake Michigan looks like the end of the world: Cold, ice, and wind keep the beach a secret. Wind-shaped stacks of snow curved around the shore. Bulbs of ice covered the exposed sand in between the mounds. Bergs from the lake gathered in chunks on the beach so that it was almost impossible to tell where lake began.

We tucked under the shadows of one of the masses of snow. I ran my hand along his face, brushing bulky mittens against his cheek. He ran his cold lips against mine. We were awkward against the ice, a mass of ski-jackets and snow pants, bent against each other’s bodies. We came
here, because we were both drawn to the cold—we took late-night walks that burnt our faces red and saw how long we could keep our bare hands from creeping into our pockets. At nineteen years old, we were very old and very young. Blistered, wind-stung: Not yet able to distinguish between stubbornness and love. At nineteen years old, we were unaware of our own vulnerability, hell-bent on sticking it out in the snow. For almost an hour, I stayed on the ice, with his arms wrapped around my stomach, watching snowflakes skitter across the ice, letting lake-water seep into my snow pants.

2.

To build near the water is to understand vulnerability.

Until 1957, nothing bridged the Upper and Lower Peninsula. No structure caught the sound of the wind blowing across the straits. Men who wanted to fish or hunt up north waited in Mackinac City to be ferried across the water. Parking lots clogged both sides of the straits. Tourists lined up for the “Vacationland” and rode across the straits on the boat’s gated top deck. They crossed the water beneath the ferry’s American flags, wrapped in wool coats and knit caps.

I’ve seen photos of the bridge being built: Glossy black-and-white photos. Images of ruddy men in overalls and hardhats welding cables to the suspension towers. Images of cement blocks, spanning like stepping stones across the straits. It’s easy to forget how vulnerable those men must have felt, strapped to metal poles hundreds of feet above the water. It’s easy to forget how the wind must have beat them—how they must have been blistered and bruised at the end of every day. It’s easy to forget five men died building that bridge.

~

Like human beings, bridges age, fall into decay, and require repairs. Without a full-time staff of painters, repairmen, and engineers, the volatile straits below would eventually engulf the bridge,
chipping away its skin, rusting its joints, and breaking its bones. A crew of over fifty maintains the Mackinac Bridge: Men who wear yellow vests and blue jeans. They clamp into the towers, hundreds of feet above the road, and scale the cables armed with paintbrushes and a tool belt. It takes seven years to repaint the entire bridge. As soon as the process finishes it begins again.

As a kid, I had a Mackinac Bridge routine. I sat on the plastic lunch-box my mother packed with car toys and watched for the bridge’s white towers. When the road left solid land, arching over the place where Lake Huron and Lake Michigan meet, I rolled down the window and listened to the howl of the wind whipping through the metal grates beneath it. When we reached the highest tower I would ask Dad to tell me the story of Leslie Anne Plouhar, “the lady who flew off the Mackinac Bridge.”

Dad would sigh, “Why do you like to hear that story?”

There was nothing epic about the telling: the woman was driving fast, it was windy, her Yugo went over the fence.

“Did she drown?”

“She was probably dead by the time she hit the water.”

The facts never resonated as much as the myth. The lady who flew off the bridge. Sometimes we called her the lady who blew off the bridge, because of the strong winds that carried her. Then I pictured the woman in the Wizard of Oz, cycling through a cyclone. But most of the time I imagined an older woman with wild hair and big sun glasses, sailing into the churning grey water below. I pictured her sitting in her car with the windows up, watching calmly as the Lake swallowed her. I saw her as flying. Not falling.
August 2009: We were on our way up north when Dad bent toward the steering wheel, no longer able to sit up straight. It was late, dark. Mom asked if we should to stop, Dad said he didn’t know. Every time Mom repeated the question she raised her voice. By the time we reached the turn-off for Interstate 131, Mom was yelling. Dad clenched his arms, reacting to the noise and the gut-cutting pain in his stomach. It may have been me who finally said we should pull off—my brother parked the car while Mom walked Dad toward the emergency room awning.

Keith paced in the parking lot of Northern Michigan Regional Hospital. I watched the tropical fish swim back and forth in the hospital waiting room tank. The lobby smelled like peroxide. On the couch behind me, a bearded father held his son between his knee, his arms wrapped around the boy’s skinny shoulders.

I didn’t see my Dad for the rest of the night but I heard he spent it hunched over, in tears over pain that the doctors struggled to pinpoint. Later, this image would haunt me: My tall broad father, bent on the ground, in a paper hospital gown. I pictured his face furrowing, his body clenching as he grabbed his gut. I imagined his yelps echoing down the tiled hospital hallway. *I couldn’t control myself. I’ve never hurt like that.*

By the next day we knew Dad would be okay. We knew the pain was caused by pancreatitis and the doctors had stabilized his morphine dosage. Dad sat up in his hospital bed with his plastic tray table extended across his lap. Mom stretched across the bed next to him, with half her body against the armrest, and the other half draped beside Dad. We looked out at Lake Michigan through rain-speckled hospital windows. When the room got silent, I took the first picture I’d ever taken using my cell phone. I snapped a photo of the lake reeling against the sky.

~

The doctors at Northern Michigan regional hospital wouldn’t release Dad until the inflammation in his pancreas subsided, so my brother and I continued the trip up north by ourselves.
We had no place to sleep in Petoskey. While Mom stayed with Dad, napping in the chair of his hospital room, Keith and I crossed the Mackinac Bridge by ourselves and headed to our parents’ cabin. Keith drove Dad’s car and I sat in the passenger’s seat, next to Mom’s still-packed car-cooler. When we crossed beneath the bridge’s tower by ourselves, I took my second cell-phone photo, sending an image of the white suspension cables to my parents in Petoskey.

The Algonquin call the Straits of Mackinac Michilimackinac: “great road of departure” or “the jumping-off place.”

I was in my early twenties before I searched for the facts about Leslie Ann Plouhar—before I wanted to see the woman whose death I mythologized as human. I searched the internet and newspaper archives for the information that could make her into a real person. I learned she was thirty-one years when she drove her Yugo off the Mackinac Bridge. A waitress from Royal Oak, Michigan—she grew up less than thirty minutes from my hometown. She died on September 22, 1989: the same year my brother was born. The Bridge Authority had issued a weather warning the night Leslie Ann Plouhar died. A combination of high winds and excessive speed swept her car over the guard rail. Official cause of death: a combination of blunt force and drowning, after falling 150 feet.

But I found nothing about her family. Nothing about her past. No photos. When I Google-image searched her name I found images of the car she drove: a 1987 Yugo—a square shaped-European car, with cartoonish square-shaped headlights. I still have to imagine her into being, to conjure her shape by myself each time I pass over the Mackinac Bridge.
I see her as frailer now. I imagine her waifish, with thin strands of brown hair drifting from her pony tail, still wearing her waitress uniform. I picture glasses with late late-eighties frames, coke in the cup holders, an open window and a lit cigarette. But I can’t conceive the details of her death—can’t imagine the scene of her car leaving the bridge, and when I try to find evidence the stories conflict. Was she distracted or just in a hurry? Did she look down to fiddle with the nobs on the radio or look up at the cracking storm above the bridge? Was she hurrying to see someone that night—girlish and hopeful as she crossed the straits, unable to process the danger all around her? She was seven years older than me when she died. Still young. Still barely an adult when she passed between the two peninsulas.

5.

At twenty-four, I drove across the bridge by myself. Until the summer after I started grad school, I’d never gone north without my family. After riding in someone else’s car across the bridge my entire life, the experience of crossing it myself surprised me. It felt like a ritual—a rite of passage--to roll down my own car windows, turn up my music, and let the wind from the straits blow strands of hair across my face. When the car skimmed off the pavement and onto the grates, the lake howled. The swell of air made my Honda hydroplane. Every time I switched lanes or sped-up my wheels hiccupped, skittering for a moment before I re-steadied. I let myself look up at white towers grazing the sky, let my stomach lurch at the way the suspension cables swooped down to the road between towers. The gas pedal vibrated against my foot as my car moved from the grate back onto the concrete. *Welcome to Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.* It marked a change. A crossing.
The heart is the toughest part of the body. 
Tenderness is in the hands 
- Carolyn Forché, "Because one if Always Forgotten"

Conservation

Three plywood tombstones stand on the beach at Whitefish Point. They’re wedged into three mounds of sand and surrounded by smooth Lake Superior stones. Thomas Bentson. Random Cundy. Bruce Lee Hudson. All three men worked on the Edmund Fitzgerald, a ship which disappeared from the radar in less than ten seconds. A Canadian fisherman found the lifeboats, shredded like metal cans, sides peeling from the center, exposing egg-shell cracked skin. No bodies were found. The memorial on the beach doesn’t mark remains, it marks what is missing.

When I was little, my family used to drive north to Whitefish Point on windy days to watch the water snap against the shoreline. Gusts of sand made it hard to move along the beach, made our eyes dry and our lips tight. I liked the way the lake felt on those wild weather days.

The summer after Jared and I broke up I drove thirteen hours to the Upper Peninsula to live in the woods for three months. I drove seventy-five miles further north to Whitefish Point on a Sunday to see the steel sky reflected in the lake. I applied for a summer job at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum because I needed to be at the point more often—to memorize Whitefish Point’s history, to see the lighthouse at night, to take my lunch breaks on the beach, to be there every day to watch the way the lake changed moods and shapes.

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Lake Superior doesn’t give up its dead. The eighty-mile stretch of the lake between Pictured Rocks and Whitefish Point Lake is known as Superior’s shipwreck coast. The Graveyard of the Great Lakes—home to over three hundred shipwrecks. The water is too cold for the microorganisms which make bodies float. Instead of bobbing along the surface, Superior’s deceased stay beneath the water
or wash up on the beach—sometimes twisted by gale force November waves, other times perfectly preserved by cold.

The founders of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum were Lake Superior divers. Men and women who swam through cold water to see ruins of wrecked ships, sifting through the artifacts that remained. They wanted to recreate the experience of wandering through Superior’s burial ground. They brought up beams from the bottom of the lake—they built benches from hundred year old shipwrecked wood. They placed bottles, teacups, spoons, and pocket watches scavenged from sunken ships in Plexiglas cases.

A case beside Whitefish Point Shipwreck Museum’s entrance exhibits artifacts from the Edmund Fitzgerald’s lifeboats. A blue lantern with the ship’s name painted in capital letters, still-packaged red flares, a matchbook with a print of a baseball player on the front. Beside the display there’s a photograph of the ship’s captain, Ernest McSorley, one of twenty-nine men killed when the Fitzgerald sunk. Face angular and weather worn, he looks directly at the camera.

Twenty-three years old: I spent my summer at the Shipwreck Museum observing people my boyfriend and I might have become. I watched a ruddy-faced father pause at each plaque, bending down to explain the significance of the artifacts to his seven-year-old son. His wife wore a backpack. She brushed back long hair, pushed up glasses, and asked me about the book selection in the gift shop. “Books are better than clothes to me,” she whispered.

What if Jared and I hadn’t broken up? If I’d married a weekend history buff with a masters degree in electrical engineering? Jared wanted to have children and would have taken them here. I pictured him with a kid on his shoulders, walking through the museum then wandering out toward the Whitefish Point lighthouse.
At the museum I sold tickets. I gave tours. I cleaned. A red binder under the museum’s cash register gives detailed instruction for polishing each artifact. Inside there was a handwritten note: “If you’ve been sitting still for more than ten minutes, there’s cleaning to be done! If you don’t know how to clean something—ASK!!”


Like the lake, the shipwreck museum preserved the dead. It ordered their stories and kept the past buffed and archived. The inside of the museum felt like a chapel—a dimly lit tribute to the lives lost on Lake Superior. Blue lights drifted over the displays. Gordon Lightfoot played on a looped pre-set stereo. A second order Fresnel lighthouse lens hung in the center of the museum, reflecting light beams on the blue carpeting.

I read once that as church attendance goes down museum attendance goes up—secular chapels of conservation. I wonder about our obsessions with history. Jared knew capitals, presidents, battles, and dates. I don’t. Instead, I sift through my past and try to understand my personal history.

~

Jared had a scar on his wrist—a line of small dots where a surgeon had stitched the skin. Jared ate his food clockwise, finishing one pile on his plate before moving onto the next one, not drinking any of his drink until he had completed his meal. When Jared was stressed from studying, his curly hair stood up in front from pressing his palm against his forehead. Jared called doing laundry: “doing wash,” a creek: “a crick,” and dinner: “supper.”

When Jared came to visit me for the last time, he brought flowers for my birthday. Four purple tulips, packaged in white paper with plastic tubes around the stems, to ensure freshness. I nearly knocked him over when he came to my door, wrapping my legs around his waist. We ran
water over the tulips’ stems and clipped the ends with kitchen knives. I looked for a vase while Jared read the directions on the plant food container out loud.

Jared and I never officially broke up—we decided to take a break. After two-and-a-half years of dating, we just stopped talking. I kept the flowers on my desk. I watched the water turn brown and the petals flake and wondered if everything eventually decays---if I am even capable of sustaining a relationship. When I finally dumped the water, I clipped one of the flowers to dry and keep as a reminder. I removed the photograph of Jared and me from the frame beside my bed but left the crumbling tulip on my bookshelf.

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Bill, who worked in the museum’s boathouse, was a watchman on the Arthur M. Anderson, the ship that corresponded with the Fitzgerald the night it sank. He saw the oil-slicked water above the wreck. He helped gather unused lifejackets from Lake Superior.

“Between you and me, I think McSorley knew the ship was going down and was just trying to make it to Whitefish Point to save his crew. Fifteen more miles and he would have made it.”

When Bill’s wife listened to the radio report about the Fitzgerald sinking she only heard that an ore tanker had disappeared on Lake Superior. The broadcast didn’t give specifics. Bill retired from shipping the following spring because the possibility of loss had become too real for his young wife and their young children. When I met him he told me that the Fitzgerald was only famous because of the Gordon Lightfoot song. He said the Bradley sinking on Lake Michigan in 1958 had been just as big a deal. But I heard him tell the story about the Fitzgerald sinking and his role in the wreck almost everyday this summer. He’d talk about the Fitzgerald during his lunch break. He’d bring it up to strangers on the beach.

There was a photograph of Bill’s captain, Bernie Cooper, hanging beside the Edmund Fitzgerald exhibit at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum. In the image he stands on the Anderson, holding a pocket watch. His eyes don’t meet the camera. He looks down at the clock. In my mind,
Captain Cooper, Bill, and the Anderson’s crew are bound to time—to 1975, to November. To the hours they spent corresponding with the Fitzgerald and to the time that’s passed since its sinking.

~

Sometimes it surprises me how little of Jared I have to hang onto: a handful of petals, a couple Christmas cards, a note he wrote me on my birthday. How can someone slip in and out of your life without making a permanent mark? We moved on easily, and now, it’s the way Jared and I drifted apart that stays with me. We could have ended up together, but we didn’t. We changed routes.

The summer before we broke up, Jared and I ran fifteen miles along Lake Superior. We ended at Chapel Rock beach where we sat in the rapids, letting the river run over our legs before collapsing on the sand. He came to visit me in the Upper Peninsula twice, both times with our college cross country team. We ran the trails and built bonfires on the beach at night. Once, after we went water skiing, Jared and I beat the rest of the team back to the cabin. He caught my hips in his fingers and told me that I looked good in my bathing suit. I leaned my head back against his collarbone. We remained this way without moving for minutes, still damp and smelling like lake.

My first week back in the Upper Peninsula after our break-up, I drove to Pictured Rocks because I wanted to run the route I’d run with Jared alone.

I stopped at a spot where the trail winds out onto the cliff’s edge and crouched along the crumbling surface. I sat down, swung my legs several hundred feet above Lake Superior and watched the turquoise-blue water crash into the cliffs. A seagull swooped, sailing down toward the water and my stomach lurch. I stayed for almost an hour: listening to the whomp of lake being sucked into the crevices of the stone and watching the waves run over Superior’s rocky bottom.

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As a child, I thought Whitefish Point must be a kind of Great Lakes Bermuda triangle. It wasn’t until my summer at the Shipwreck Museum that I realized that the Point and the lighthouse
were beacons, the last major turn on the way to the Sault Locks, the checkpoint that hundreds of ships failed to reach.

Great Lakes historian Frederick Stonehouse speculates that all lighthouses are haunted, surrounded by layers of tragedy. Some visitors to the shipwreck museum claim contact with the paranormal—unexplained brushes against their skin as they walk through the lighthouse, cold prickles when they stand in front of the exhibits. I attribute these occurrences to a place wrought with memory.

Maybe we’re all haunted by history. By the short distance that separated us from safety when we changed courses. So we try to understand the past, to order it, we place it under glass with a brass label.

~

In the summer of 1995, the Great Lakes Shipwreck Society, the National Geographic Society, the Canadian Navy, and the families of the men on the Edmund Fitzgerald came together to raise the Edmund Fitzgerald’s bell from Lake Superior. Divers cut the bell from the pilot house using an underwater torch and replaced the rust covered relic with a new bell—one engraved with the names of the twenty-nine missing men. The old bell broke through the water 1:25 pm July 4, 1995. Crew members’ families watched from aboard a boat called the Northlander.

In a photograph taken by Detroit Free Press photographer Al Kamuda a series of cords holds the bell just above the water. Sun beams off the surface of the lake, which looks clear and blue like a swimming pool. A man in a yellow diving suit floats just below the bell, with his arms extended upward.

The photographs didn’t show the families, but people brought roses, wreaths, and letters and released them into the water after the bell surfaced. When the Northlander pulled back to shore it left a layer of petals and paper floating on Lake Superior.

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That summer, I imagined skinny dipping in Lake Superior—slipping off my clothes and letting the lake sweep over me. But I never stripped past my sports bra. The cold waves cut red lines above my belly and I couldn’t let go the way I wanted to, couldn’t take my feet off the ground and push my body forward in the waves. Instead I stood waist deep in Lake Superior wearing my running clothes, shivering. Later, I took hot showers and watched my torso turn from white to pink to red as the water stung over the surface of my skin.

My last night at Whitefish Point, I went back down to the beach, not to swim, but to sit by the three tombstones, on the crest of the dune grass, back from the water. *Thomas Benton. Oiler. Random Cundy. Watchman. Bruce Lee Hudson. Deckhand.* I wondered if I would ever find something that defined me enough to write it beside my name on my tombstone. Bruce Lee Hudson, the deckhand, was the youngest of the three men commemorated on the beach. An 8-by-11 inch photograph of his face hung below his name. The sun-faded ink made his skin look yellow. He had shoulder length dark hair. One strand fell loose just above his eyebrow. In the photo he’s unshaven, stubbled, serious. “1953-1975.” Twenty-two years old—younger than me.

I leaned back in the sand near the memorial, legs bent at the knees, hair spread flat around my head. The ground felt cool and wet. I watched the light from the Whitefish Point lighthouse comb the driftwood snarled shore. When I got up the imprint of my body was still there, marking my shape in the sand.
When I think of you I think of moving water. I map us by Lake Superior, where we watched waves crash against the cliffs at Pictured Rocks, by the Fox River, where we stopped so you could touch the water where Hemingway fished, by Lake Michigan where we sat on the Chicago boardwalk watching the boats funnel by Navy Pier. I was on the move for the summer—living out of the back of my Honda, splitting my time between Detroit and the Upper Peninsula, spending between fifteen and twenty hours in a week on the road.

Movement was the reason we met—the reason we were both on the Whitefish Point beach writing a week before I went back to school and you went back to Belgium. I saw you, stubbled and serious, leaning against the banister, stopped to ask what you were writing, then stayed with you on the beach until almost midnight, talking about Coltrane, Neil Young, Hemingway, John Irving. About mythology, food, families, and loneliness. We went straight for the serious stuff. Without a cell phone signal, a permanent place to sleep, or people waiting for me, I was detached enough to get attached—to stay by the water—swatting mosquitoes and watching the Whitefish Point lighthouse light. You were a slim silhouette, back-dropped by the lake, wearing blue jeans and a wind breaker—occasionally slipping into a Scottish accent when you talked about studying Medieval Literature in Glasgow. You told me you pictured Whitefish Point as a driftwood graveyard—the place where Lake Superior’s trees go to die. When an ore freighter passed you said you imagined the ship’s lights as candles crossing the water, paying homage to the fallen trees. You asked for my e-mail address and I gave it to you.

Something about strangers makes it easy to disclose and easy to disappear. When you e-mailed two days later, it was easy for me to drive over an hour to meet you in Grand Marais. Easy to spend over ten hours with you, to hike twelve miles along the Lake Superior’s limestone cliffs, to eat
rosemary garlic bread and Laughing Cow cheese with our bare feet in the sand. It was easy for me to fall back against you on the Pictured Rocks boat tour, to kiss you in front of families who wore ponchos and asked us how long we’d known each other—and to keep kissing you in a parking lot, lying on the asphalt with your body beside mine. And when I dropped you off in Shingleton, it was easy to drive away, to slip off into the dark with my radio dial all the way up.

Our mistake was meeting in Chicago later that week. I bought a fifteen dollar bus ticket and arrived tired from traveling. I had no place to put my backpack. I wanted to shower, to change my clothes, to stay in the same spot for more than one night. You wrapped your arms around me and I wiggled away. That night we went walking with a friend of mine from college, who talked too fast for you to keep up with the conversation. You had to pee and we couldn’t find a bathroom. My feet got blistered from walking in my nice shoes.

I knew I couldn’t deal with slow, long-distance decay—with weekly e-mails about school and work and Saturday phone calls on Skype. I told you the next day on a circular couch in the Contemporary Museum of Art. I angled my body away from yours. You kept your hand on my shoulder.

When we left the museum, we went in different directions. I looped around the block and kept moving, around Lakeshore Park, down East Chicago. I wandered around the city, watching people rush past, weaving through crowded sidewalks. On Michigan Avenue, I walked into a man wearing a suit. I stopped to apologize and he walked with me for a couple blocks. Before he turned at Union Station, he asked me where I was going. I said I didn’t know.
Part II:

You can get there from here, though
there's no going home.
-Natasha Trethewey, “Theories of Time and Space”
“When there is nothing left of this city that you remember, write it down”
- Anne M. Rashid, “Empty Structures”

Occasions for writing

At age seven years old I found a Model-T in the woods of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. I was wandering through waist-deep ferns when I saw it, perched near the edge of a cedar swamp on an island of pine needles. It looked like a ghost-car—shattered headlights, fogged windshield, rusted skin, moss-wrapped floor boards. Grass sprouted through the cracks in the metal. I ran my fingers along the dented surface, peeling strips of rust from the hood.¹

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I grew up in a suburb of Detroit, when the nickname “Motor City” was still a proud one. When my first college boyfriend came to visit my hometown he noticed Detroit families drove the same brand cars. My family owned a Jeep Wrangler, a Jeep Liberty, and a Jeep Commander. Now we all drive Hondas. My father does woodwork for the auto-industry. He told us that he gets more business from Nissan and Honda companies than Ford and GM. Many American auto-makers import their parts from overseas.

But when went to the Detroit Zoo during my Thanksgiving break, someone left a card on the windshield of Dad’s Civic. A Real Detrotier would not be driving this. Then again, neither would a real American. The background was a flag. Dad took the card in his gloved hand, searching for a phone number or e-mail address, before tossing it in the plastic garbage bag that hung on his console.

¹It’s unclear when the phrase “rust belt” became a part of the American lexicon. Historian Sean Safford traces the first prominent public use of the term to 1984 and Walter Mondale, who criticized Ronald Reagan for turning America’s manufacturing belt into America’s “rust bowl.”
I fished it from the trash and slipped it into my purse—as if collecting evidence of everything we struggled to understand—the things we didn’t know how to fix in Detroit.

As a kid I told people my father worked as a carpenter. He wore jeans to work, woke up early, came home smelling of sawdust. When we held hands and prayed around the dinner table, my father’s fingers felt rough from feeding boards through table saws. I loved pressing my face into his stomach and smelling the wood he’d been working with all day. In my mind, he was like Joseph in the Bible. First and foremost: a man who shaped timber. When he wasn’t at work, my father built furniture for our family. He hand-carved a long bow that he used to go deer hunting. He made my mom shelves and me a large oak toy box with a “B” stained in the middle.

My dad does custom woodworking for the auto industry. He makes gauges to make car parts. It’s a specialty business. It’s also a family business. My papa started the pattern company that my dad and my uncle Steve now run. My uncle Paul also worked with them. Occasionally, Mom and I came by the shop while Dad was working—to meet him for lunch or to drop something off. Sometimes the men Dad work with were on break when we drove up, playing parking-lot basketball. Other times they were at their tables, wearing safety goggles and working power saws. When we walked by they smiled and nodded. They knew my mom, my brother, and me. They came to my family’s cabin in the Upper Peninsula to go fishing one weekend every year. They came to a Christmas party at my house every December. Some of them even played in Gus Macker basketball tournaments with my dad. I knew their names from dinner table conversations. I knew their faces from the family photo album.

Even before Henry Ford, Detroit was a city that shaped metal—at the turn of the century Detroit led the nation in the production of boxcars and stoves. A community of machinists. Detroit was called “The Arsenal of Democracy.” In a World War I-era photo from Henry Ford’s Highland
Park plant the men wear trousers, suspenders and white shirts rolled to their elbows. They stand with their backs to the camera in a cement floored room, bent over curved car backseats.

I don’t know how my father’s work would be different if he was an assembly line worker. Dad’s shop is not unlike Detroit’s industrial auto plants. Cement floors. Men wearing safety goggles. Machines that can chop fingers. The roar of the saws that makes it impossible to talk. Blue collar work.

Dad graduated college with a double major in theology and political science but many of his co-workers had no education beyond high school. They did skilled labor—a trade that takes more training than education. The type of work someone might have had an apprenticeship for a century ago—the type of work that has largely become extinct in other parts of the country (and is quickly dying in the city of Detroit—leaving a large population of unemployed specialized workers with no other education.) As of the year 1997, 22% of Detroit’s workers made durable goods. Only 1% of New Yorkers did.

When was in fifth grade Dad brought me to the shop on take-your-daughter-to-work day. He’d never let me come before. He’s told me that his business wasn’t the kind of work you took your daughter to. It was dangerous. That year I was only allowed to go because Dad wouldn’t be in the shop most of the day. He was delivering gauges to several local factories.

We woke early and got bagels before making our first stop. I watched him knock on the back door of a cement block building. A man wearing jeans came out and helped my dad haul a gauge from the back of his truck. The gauge was almost as big as me—a flat plywood surface with a network of small woodblocks glued to the top. Some of the woodblocks had green threads attached to them. It looked like some strange woodshop art project—a network of glue, lumber, plywood, and strings—until I watched the man from a factory place a car part in the middle. He bent down to adjust knobs and strings until part paired with wood. They fused seamlessly.
I began to see the pieces fit together. My father made wooden tools that help automakers shape their metal. I changed the way I talked about Dad’s work. When people asked, I told them my dad worked for the auto-industry. I said almost everyone in Detroit did.

There’s no large scale public transportation in Detroit. No subways. The “People-Mover” downtown is more of a ride than a mode of moving. It takes passengers on a one-way loop around two blocks of Detroit’s business district. Michigan Central Station, the city’s former Amtrak hub, stands boarded up and vacant. We’re a region shaped by expressways and by roads. The streets in Detroit are part of the city’s story—Woodward, Grand River, Eight Mile. The country’s first freeway, M-8, runs between Highland Park and the city of Detroit.

I grew up in a place where freeways crossed, clover-leafing from the entrance ramp. I grew up in a state known for transportation, for travel, for water. Part of the reason Henry Ford, a Dearborn native, decided to stay in Detroit was the Great Lakes. They formed a water highway around the state, making it an easy place to transport material.

The word Detroit means “strait”—a place where large bodies of water connect.

In Michigan we’re never more than five miles from a river or lake. But because of our lakes and our weather our roads fracture, torn at the seams by ice trapped in the asphalt. Our cars rust. Until recently, most everyone I knew worked in the auto-industry and drove new cars. Friends’ parents’ vehicles seemed to cycle out every couple years, like cell phones. Now, when I come home, I’m surprised to see what the weather has done to the cars Michiganders can no longer afford to replace. Like the Model-T I found in the woods, we’re a state slowly corroding—no longer an arsenal able to stand against nature.

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2 Built after the Detroit fire by Judge Augustus Woodward. One of the main arteries of early commerce in Detroit.
3 One of the principle pre-Interstate roads in Michigan, cut from early Indian trails.
4 The dividing line between the city of Detroit and its suburbs.
5 Fact disputed by the state of California who also lays claim to the country’s first freeway.
As a kid, I saw the seasonal shifts in my dad’s business. Spikes or drops in the amount of work he did were based on when car companies planned on releasing new models. Summer seemed to be a slow time—I listened to my parents talk in code at the dinner table about who had to be laid off and when everyone could “get back to work,” trying to decipher if “slowness” of business would affect my family. I watched the way they moved their hands, the way their eyes locked—the way my father’s forehead wrinkled and my mother’s face tightened. Once I asked my dad about how the economy affected his business. He told me custom pattern making was a specialized enough that swings in the stock market didn’t impact them significantly.

This was before GM declared bankruptcy, before the bailout of the big three. Before Detroit’s unemployment skyrocketed almost to thirty percent.6

My dad works for the auto-industry in a city that made automobiles an industry (rather than just a novelty for the rich.) People have been talking about the decline of American automotives since the 1970s (in 1974 domestic car sales dipped by almost 25%) but growing up in Detroit, I couldn’t imagine the business that straddled my entire city failing. Try to envision no corn in Iowa, no computers in Seattle, no skiing in Colorado, no tourism in Florida. Picture the businesses that define your hometown collapsing. Imagine almost half the people you know being unemployed. Can you do it? I still can’t.

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According to the National Bureau of Labor Statistics (as of January 22, 2010):

-National Unemployment Rate=10.0 (2.8 percentage points higher than last year.)
-Iowa Unemployment Rate=6.6 (2.2 percentage points higher than last year)

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6 According to The Detroit News, this figure is actually closer to fifty percent. National averages don’t take into account part timers or individuals who have given up their job search.
Michigan Unemployment Rate=14.6 (Highest Unemployment Rate in the Nation—4.4 percentage points higher than 2009, 7.4 percentage points higher than the year I graduated from high school.)

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In the fall of 2008, I began graduate school in Iowa. My mother began working at a collection agency. She took the job to help cover my brother’s college tuition. Around the same time my father stopped taking a paycheck at his job. He worked forty to fifty hours a week for no salary. He had to lay off all his other employs—including my uncle Paul and the other men I’d known since childhood. My dad left early and came home late. When he got home from work, he played guitar. He sat on the family room couch next to the dog, ordering chords into songs, working the strings with his fingers. My mom spent her nights by the computer, applying for other jobs—ones where she didn’t have to spend her days being screamed at by a woman who made her living from foreclosures.

I spent my days in Iowa teaching, taking classes, writing—still enamored with my new state, my new program, and my new friends. I started to call home less. I hated listening to my mom talk about how much she hated her job. I hated hearing the flatness in my father’s voice. I didn’t know how to interact with them as an adult. I forgot to send them a card for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. I forgot to buy them a Valentine before I saw them in on February 14th. Some months they had to remind me several times to send them a check for my car insurance. I put it off, forgetting that they’re not making much money either. It was reversal. My parents paid for my college and my car. Seeing them struggle, I saw my role in it. When they asked me about school or my relationship with my boyfriend Jared (which was on the fritz) I didn’t want to talk about it. When they tried to tell me about work, I didn’t want to hear it.

~

March 2009: I’m in my bedroom, near the window, pacing—phone pressed to my shoulder. I ran my fingers along the corner of my bookshelf as listened to Mom tally the things I’d done wrong. Things I forgot. Questions I didn’t ask. She increased her volume with each bullet point. The lack of card
on their anniversary, the lack of Valentine in February, the forgotten car insurance checks, my lack of curiosity about her job, her life, my lack of empathy about their situation.

_You need to start acting like an adult. It’s like you don’t care._

I didn’t apologize or agree with any point she made. I listened without saying anything. I looked out through the blinds at my snow-matted front yard. A boy with a backpack ambled past, hands in his pockets, face scrunched against the wind.

Mom and I have always argued. While Dad and Keith tend to retreat in conversations, Mom and I fought it out.

In fifth grade, Mom made me practice my viola, instead of just signing the practice chart like the other parents. She set a kitchen timer. I slumped in my chair and listened to it tick, pulling the bow over the strings so that the sound ripped from the instrument in a series of squeaks. It became our ritual. She made me practice. I refused to play well.

Growing, most of our fights ended sitting side by side on my bed, or hugging in the doorway of her bedroom, or drinking cups of coffee at the kitchen island. Dad once said, that one of Mom’s best qualities is her ability to move on, to shed her anger like skin—to end disputes with warmth. But neither of neither of us seemed to know how to do that on the phone.

Mom’s voice got quiet—almost a whisper. _Maybe we should stop talking. Maybe you shouldn’t call home for a while_.

She said that we were hurting each other too much. Maybe we needed space.

I slumped down to the floor beside my bed, pressing my knees into my chest, combing the carpet with my fingers. I remembered a conversation with a boy I had dated during college. We long-distance fought for several months before he called me to tell me we should take a break. It was after one in the morning. I didn’t fight with him over the phone because I wanted to go to bed. I let him go because I couldn’t imagine he wouldn’t take me back—couldn’t imagine him not being there for me.
With my family everything suddenly felt fragile. Home was breakable. I couldn’t stop my voice from shaking when I told my mom I wanted to work it out.

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My cousin Kyle makes music. He finished recording an album my first year in graduate school. He titled track four “Love is an Arsenal.” We listened to it over Christmas break, in my Honda, driving to a bar to Ypsilanti. He sat in the passenger’s seat and leaned back, watching my reaction. I listened to his lyrics. *Love is a pin, pulled out and dropped, as we chase stray grenades we pray never go off.* It was beautiful. A perfect articulation of the violence of love—the violence attaching yourself to anything (or anyplace.) The risk. The words came from a poem Kyle wrote.

I told him Detroit used to be called the “Arsenal of Democracy.”

In the poem, “You Can Have It,” Detroit becomes the backdrop for the story of Phillip Levine’s brother, who comes home late from working at a factory, drops his shoes on the floor and turns to the window to face a city that’s failed him. Levine remembers the moment from thirty years in the future. He writes, *I give you back 1948. I give you all the years from then to the coming one…Give me back my young brother, hard and furious, with wide shoulders and a curse for God and burning eyes that look upon all creation and say, You can have it.*

When I imagine the brother in the poem, I picture the black and white photos taken of my grandfather in the ‘60s, standing on his lawn in Detroit—white t-shirt tucked into trousers, high cheek-bones, dark hair parted away from his face. It gets under my skin—the idea that our families are bound to the failing city we’re from—the idea that if we desert a place, we’re also discarding its people.

~

7 moonlight streams in the window, and his unshaven face is whitened like the face of the moon. He will sleep long after noon and waken to find me gone.
My family:

-Uncle Paul: Worked for my father for almost twenty years before being temporarily laid off and then quitting. Has three kids (one with Cystic Fibrosis) and no health insurance, in the process of getting a divorce.

-Uncle Glenn: Went to Central Michigan University, studied English. Served as President of the Children’s Leukemia Foundation for almost thirty years before being phased out. He was told his patient-care philosophy didn’t coincide with the foundation’s recession era fundraising needs. Currently works at a construction site.

-Uncle Denny: Works in the same field as my father, no longer makes money in his business.

-Aunt Jan: A nurse. Works the only full-time shift left in her unit at Botsford hospital.

-Uncle Brian: In danger of losing his engineering job--spent Christmas Eve sitting on our couch texting his co-workers, trying to figure out if he had a career to come back to after the holiday.

-Aunt Suzann: Worked at Borders corporate in Ann Arbor, changed jobs about a year before the company cut almost seventy positions in her field.

-Mom: Studied accounting and finance in college, had an almost perfect GPA. Applied to almost one hundred secretarial jobs before she was able to find a position at a community college and leave her collection agency job.

-Dad: Worked fifty-hour weeks for two years without collecting a paycheck.

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October 29, 2009: Dad sent me an e-mail. Subject line: “Check out WAMU 88.5 FM American University Radio - The Diane Rehm Show.” Message: your dad was on npr today nationwide. check out the diane rehm show’s 10:00 AM segment at about 41:23.

There’s something strange about listening to your city’s problems talked on national radio--about Frank Sesno asking Hilda Solis, the secretary of labor, questions from the perspective of Detroit. CNN, George Washington University, and Middlebury College all profile Frank Sesno. In
online photographs he wears a starched blue shirt, glasses, and a suit jacket--dark hair parted to the side and brushed back away from his face. He smiles, almost too much, so that his skin stretches around his mouth. *An Emmy Award winning journalist with over 25-years of experience.* When I search for images of Hilda Solis, photographs of her standing in front of the American flag appear first. Lipstick and pearls in every picture. Her hair is always down, hanging in dark curls around her shoulder. Like Sesno, she draws her face around her smile.

There are no pictures of my father on Google. The first Richard Button that appears online is the 1940s figure skater—leaping across ice wearing black pants and a turtleneck, arms swinging alongside his body. My father doesn’t leap across ice, get photographed in front of flags, or beam at cameras. Dad only shows his top teeth when he smiles. He wears baseball caps. He works wood, hunts, and fishes. He cooks, takes photographs, and plays guitar. When I was little, he sat on the edge of my bed and played songs by Jackson Browne and James Taylor while I fell asleep. Even speaking, my dad’s voice sounds like a 1970s singer-songwriter: a rich understated tenor.

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Interview with Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis that prompted my dad to call into the station:

Frank Sesno: *How about manufacturing? People worry that we’re continuing to lose manufacturing jobs. Our industrial base is continuing to move overseas, undermining, not just the employment picture but our national security. What are the trends you’re seeing there?*

Hilda Solis: *Well I’m hopeful that we’ll see more investments made in renewable energy. ... We finally do have the technology to see those items manufactured here, on our ground, instead importing so I think that trend will occur and we’ll see more job creation. And we certainly have a workforce that’s ready to go and can be easily trained! So if you were an auto worker and you can...you can manage to get those skills transferred into new hybrid technology...*(trails off)*
Frank Sesno: So I’m an autoworker and I come up to you and I know this had happened and say to you: ‘When am I going to get my job back?’—you say?

Hilda Solis: I say... I’m going to direct them to one of our ‘one stops’...We want to encourage people to do that. Go visit our one stops...there’s three thousand of them around the country. There are jobs and if you can’t find a job, maybe look at a training program or a career program or re-do your resume, or find something that might help you get a new edge on what it is you want to do.

Frank Sesno: The problem is if I’m an autoworker in Detroit and that’s what I’ve done for the past twenty five years and I’m living in a place like Detroit, there may not be a lot of options for me. I may be fifty years old now and that’s a hard thing to do—to retrain myself, especially when I’m not surrounded by a sea of opportunity and help wanted ads.

Hilda Solis: That’s why we really want to move our economy into this renewable...

Frank Sesno: That’s going to take years. That may never do me, as the fifty year old in Detroit a lot of good...unless I get in the car and move.

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October 29, 2009: My Dad, “a fifty year old auto-worker” and small business owner, called NPR from his car to talk with the Secretary of Labor. He was on his way to the airport to pick up my Nana. He asked his question to one of the show’s screeners and got put on hold for twenty minutes, not knowing if they were going to take his call. He waited in the Detroit airport parking lot, cell phone pressed to his ear.

When my dad finally said “hi,” he drew it out, as though he was orienting himself to being on the radio. His voice was soft, shaky.

Dad: Hi...uh...I was wondering what the administration had done to look into re-addressing the North American Free Trade Agreement and the shortcomings there. I’m a small business owner, and ... I have to pay minimum wage, unemployment insurance, workman’s comp, and yet, (here, his voice gets stronger, deeper) we don’t hold our competitors, in other countries accountable to the same standards that we’re being held to here. So we’re being hamstrung right from the beginning. Now...

Frank Sesno: (interrupts) How many people do you employ Rich?

Dad: Well I have nine. Currently I have one to two. Our sales were about thirty percent of what they have been.

Frank Sesno: Your sales are thirty percent of what they were, so you’ve laid people off?

Dad: Yeah. Last year I would say that they worked on average about twenty-five weeks. So...

Frank Sesno: (interrupts again) Alright Rich, let me ask the secretary then to comment on your specific question: What are you doing to address these inequities, in just the cost of doing business within the context NAFTA?

Hilda Solis: Well that’s not fully under my purview...you have to keep in mind many of these agreements were agreed on decades ago, and we have to think about the ramifications.
(At this point my father’s call gets cut off.)

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I love NPR. I subscribe twenty-three different podcasts and listen to at least ten of them regularly. I like the intimacy of radio—it feels like overhearing an interesting conversation. But listening to my dad talk on NPR reminded me of watching him pull the card with the flag on it from the front window of his Civic. I didn’t like hearing him that vulnerable. I didn’t like listening to him being cut off—didn’t like hearing his voice stumble. I hated the fact that Frank Sesno asked my father the details of his business on national radio and I hated the pat answer the Secretary of Labor provided for problems so deeply embedded in the place I’m from.

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Before my brother even began kindergarten, Keith obsessed about Jeeps. My dad drove a black Jeep Wrangler. As a five year old, Keith would point out the other Jeeps on the road, and ask how many cylinders they have. V-6. V-4. V-8. Keith was literate in cars before he could read. He had his own toy motorized Jeep which he drove around the neighborhood, staying on the sidewalk, checking his blind spot, and tipping his cowboy hat to my mom when he drove by our house.

When I think of Jeeps I think of my brother—the way he loved them when he was little, and the way we shared one in high school and college. Cars don’t remind me of my father. The smell of sawdust does. The thing about manufacturing is you’re not assembling a whole—you’re crafting a part. Dad makes the parts that make parts. But despite the fact I don’t equate my father with cars, he’s affected by them. We all are.

In my Detroit Almanac, all the Detroit Ford factory photos are old. Black and white photographs of men in the 1930s and 1940s—the personification of Henry Ford’s assembly line promise: five dollars a day. In the 1933 “Detroit Industry” Diego Rivera murals, men work together to form steal from fire. Workers lean back, bracing the weight of their body against the heels of their
boots. They pull metal across a conveyer belt in a room lit by the flames of welders who work above them. It’s an idyllic image—one criticized at the time for propagating unions, socialism, and interracial work relations. Forging the fires of change. How do you portray the absence of that idealism? Of that industry? Photographs of paint chips flaking from abandoned factory ceilings? Images of empty parking structures with all the windows blown out? When the big three collapsed, Michigan began to crumble around it. It seemed impossible to find work without leaving the state.

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Sometimes, when I think about Detroit, I remember my cousin’s lyrics. I imagine us all chasing stray grenades--fingers always seconds away from being charred, because that’s the only way we know how to love the city or each other.

Recently, I went back to the spot where I found the Model-T as a kid and walk through the woods wearing jean shorts and a pair of running shoes. Pine branches and cobwebs tangled my hair. Mosquitoes landed on my legs, gathering at my sock line. I sifted through the pines looking for shattered glass and rusted metal, wondering if the car had completely eroded in last sixteen years or if there were still some scraps of it left, buried beneath the moss and ferns.

I found nothing.
I am here—
here where the desire to vanish
is stronger than the desire to appear
-Tony Hoagland, “Perpetual Motion”

Why I Run

Fall 2008, Iowa: I noticed the words right away. They floated against the beige brick wall. I was struck by the specificity of the phrase and the way it rolled off my tongue: Fatigue Detection Capability.

Nineteen miles into a twenty-three mile run, I ducked into Industrial Engineering Building II for water. Blinking away rings of light, struggling to acclimate my eyes to the dimly lit corridor, I bent toward the drinking fountain. The cold water dripped down my chin. My calves twitched, knotting up in fists right below my knees. I stopped drinking to reach for my toes but got my palms only halfway down my shins before I gave up. I snapped upright again and headed toward the wooden door labeled “Ladies.”

I stood in front of the sink for a moment, looking at the mirror. My face was pallid and my lips slightly purple. Salt speckled my forehead just below my hairline. Bloodshot veins lined my retina. I pulled a paper towel from the metal dispenser, wiped stinging sweat from the edges of my pupils, and looked up again. My eyes were even redder now, and the skin that surrounded them was puffy from the abrasive surface of the paper. I crumpled the towel, tossing it in the wastebasket, and walked back out into the hallway, letting the door swing closed behind me.

There are 26 bones, 33 joints and more than 100 muscles, tendons, and ligaments in the foot. When I began working at the New Balance store in high school, my manager, Daren, taught me about them.

He pushed a skeleton model of the foot toward me.
“Can you name any of the bones?”

I leaned against the counter near the register. I ran my fingers along the tiny pieces that made up the toes and I worked my way up the longer bones, “Metatarsals.”

“Good. Any more?”

I wove my hands through the spaces between the bones, making the foot dance on the table, then set it down and looked back at him.

He picked up the foot, pointed to the bone right above the metatarsals, “Cuboid.”

I nodded.

He moved up the foot. “Navicular, Calcaneum, Talus…”

I glanced up. “It’s incredible that people don’t break bones in their feet all the time.”

He set the foot down and looked at me. I picked it up and pointed to the phalanges, “They’re so little.”

And so I became fascinated with my own feet.

My toes are unusually flexible from barefoot runs with my brother several summers ago. We read about the Tarahumara Indians running hundreds of miles barefoot, drawing strength from the well-developed muscles in their feet. Long before Time magazine and ABC began covering the “barefoot running trend,” my brother and I finished every seven or eight mile run with a mile or two run barefoot in the grass. We felt the wetness of the morning dew and the prickle of the grass on our naked skin. We bounced from toe to heel, aware of how our feet were hitting the ground. When I returned to school in the fall and slipped off my shoes to do strides at the end of practice, however, my cross country coach shook his head, listing things I could step on. “We can’t have any injuries this season.”

In eleven years of running cross country and track, I have never broken a bone in my foot.

I’ve had only one real stress fracture—in my shin in high school. It showed up, barely, as a gray grainy line on a bone scan and kept me on crutches and out of track practice for six weeks.
Instead of running, I swam at the William Costick Center, leaving my crutches stacked at the side of the pool. I treaded water every day for more than an hour, spitting up streams of chlorine and struggling to breathe as around me elderly woman in bathing caps floated on foam noodles.

In middle school, before I began running competitively, my parents used to freeze the backyard for ice skating during the winter. They covered the lawn with a blue tarp and built up plywood boards to contain the water.

I liked to go outside to skate at night, when my homework was finished. I would steady my ankles and knees and begin to circle.

The skates skimmed over the rough patches in the ice. The cold nipped at my face and condensation gathered around the mouth of my neck gaiter. Straightaway. Turn. Straightaway. Turn. After a while my legs knew where to turn without my even looking. As I orbited inside the boards, picking up speed, I thought about school:

About how Trevor Flood got a better grade on a paper than I did even though he wrote it the class period before. About a joke Russell Wentworth made on the bus about how blondes with pig tails were blowjobs with handles. About the way Mr. Sutherland made us put our heads down in class then singled me out in front of everyone for being insincere about the gesture.

I thought about my great uncle dying in his bathtub and not being found for a week. I thought about my grandfather—about cancer, paper-thin skin and hands that seemed like they would break when they touched me.

I thought until all that was left was the ice and the dark and the way my skates moved along the surface. I skated until I was broken, until my legs and my mind couldn’t do anything else. Then I would sprint across the middle of the rink and slide down onto the ice, landing on the side of my legs. I would lie on the ice watching my breath cloud up in the cold air, looking up at the sky until the water soaked through my jeans and onto my skin.
Running is about breaking and rebuilding.

My first marathon training was divided into phases—building for three weeks and cutting back for one, tearing the body up and then letting it rest, recover, reconstruct itself. Within each week, too, my workouts were spaced out:

- Monday: 11 miles with 6 miles at goal marathon pace
- Tuesday: 6 miles, easy pace
- Wednesday: 10 miles with 4 miles at 10,000 meter race pace around a track
- Thursday: 6 miles easy
- Friday: 22 miles with the last 4 miles faster than goal marathon pace
- Saturday: 6 miles easy
- Sunday: Off.

Once, I tried to cram all my hard workouts into the beginning of the week. My legs felt sluggish and heavy. I shuffled along, barely able to pick up my feet. When I got home from the second hard day, I sat with my legs stretched out on the floor and my back propped against the couch for almost an hour. My black-and-white spotted dog roused from the beige cushion where he had been sleeping to lick the salt off my legs. He nudged my shoulder with his nose, trying to coax me into movement.

In college my cross country coach attended to the science of running cycles. I sat cross-legged on a yellow foam wrestling mat and listened to Coach Straubel explain the purpose of each workout. He came to practice dressed in his law professor clothing—khakis, button-up shirts and vests. He passed out articles about training phases and in a soft but confident voice specified what each workout accomplished on a cellular level: blood lactate level, muscle fibers, capillarization.

When my legs ache after a track workout I visualize them tearing and rebuilding. I picture the tiny muscle fibers popping like the looped surface of Velcro. I imagine them reattaching in cobwebs
of connective tissue. When I get more than an hour and a half into a run, I imagine new capillaries lighting their way down my legs, like Christmas bulbs being plugged into a tree, illuminating new passageways for Oxygen.

When I began running, I loved cross country. I liked leaning over the starting line, watching my breath hang in the fall air, with my finger on my watch, waiting for the gun. I liked being one of hundreds of girls stampeding across a field.

In college, we ran workouts on a trail behind the intramural Frisbee field. My legs grew used to the uphills, the downhills, the curves. I memorized the spots where roots made the footing uneven and the places where the grass and dirt were matted down and it was possible to pick up speed. I knew the course the way I know the calluses on my feet or the freckles on my arm.

Once when I was in high school a doe got caught in front of the crowd near the starting line at a race. The gun went off, and we ran down a hill, into the valley where she was grazing. She froze for a moment and then raised her white tail, ready to dart away. Her legs were thin and seemed unsteady as she wavered back in forth in front of the herd of bodies. She ran among us then wriggled away.

My brother, Keith, was chased by wolves while he was running up north. He saw them coming at him from a distance as he ran down Indian Trail, a dirt road that weaves between cornfields. He said at first they were just blurs of black against the white snow. Then they began to congregate and run toward him. He told me he bent down, searching for something to defend himself with, and found a gnarled branch lying on the shoulder of the road, coming out of a ditch. He picked up the stick and held it up, sprinting as fast as he could toward the highway. He didn’t look back and he didn’t slow down and he kept the branch raised above his head, trying to make himself look as big as possible.

Keith isn’t the only person I knew who has been chased by wolves while running there. I’ve been running a road race up north every Fourth of July since I was ten. For the past eleven years, one
other girl has served as my main age group competitor. She has a long sandy brown ponytail that straggles down her back. Her skin is tanned from working outside, and her limbs are hearty and muscular. She runs barefoot, and thick brown calluses cover her feet. She was barefoot, running in a white cotton t-shirt on a hot summer day on the shoulder of Indian Trail, when the wolves approached her.

A wolf, as tall as her waist, came up on her left side, meeting her stride for stride. Unsure of what to do, she kept running, maintaining her pace, trying not to reveal her fear in the weight of her breath or the rhythm of her tread. Several moments later another wolf came up, on her right side. The trio ran down the road, their legs moving cohesively in the same motion—left, right, left, right, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. After about a half mile, she said, the wolves fell off, diverging into the woods, leaving her to finish her run.

My friend Kyle, a forestry major at University of Wisconsin Stevens Point, told me that wolves like to practice their pursuit, honing their hunting technique, like children playing house. “What saved her was that she didn’t look weak, she didn’t react, she kept her stride, and eventually they lost interest.”

I think about her running beside them and I try to imagine matching the strides of the wolves, momentarily becoming part of the pack and part of their play.

For a long time, I didn’t like track as much as cross country. On the track I was uncomfortably aware of my body. I struggled to keep up. I heard my breathing begin to falter and fell out of rhythm. I got claustrophobic in the pack of bodies corralled into the first two lanes. I slowed down, fell back, and then sprinted to keep up, clipping the heels of the girls in front of me.

It took a long time to learn to relax the muscles in my back. It took even longer to learn how to ease my breath into a smooth pattern when it began to falter. I learned how to forget how far I was
going and to focus on reeling in small checkpoints—a line, a cone, a pole. I didn’t allow myself to think about anything beyond that blurred stream of motion. Turn. Straightaway. Turn. Straightaway.

I began to love track when I learned to become almost predatory about staying focused on someone’s shoulder and not letting it go with my eyes or my body, reeling her in like one of my checkpoints. I learned to love the way I could block out everything but the chase, the rhythm of the track, the sound of my feet.

In the hallway, I searched for the information about improved fatigue detection capability. My palms dragged along the brick and then wandered over a bulletin board checkered with Aerospace engineering posters. They looked like slides from a Power Point presentation, blown-up and laminated as wall décor. About six posters in, Improved Fatigue Detection Capability with Vibrothermography was written in big orange Arial font. Societal Need: Metal FatigueLimits the Lives of Many Structural Components—the vibration of these components leads to heat degeneration of the cracked surface.

I imagined a metal skyscraper, with cracked egg shiny skin, ready to collapse when shaken too hard. I wondered how detecting the fatigue using Vibrothermography would help engineers make structures stronger.

When life falls apart I turn to the track. I turn to physicality. I turn to the science of recovery and the reliability of numbers. Weekly mileage, split times, personal records. When I moved to Ames, after my parents and my brother backed their Jeep out of the driveway, I went running. I looked for the cross country course. The next day I found the track. The city was strange, but the fluttering nervousness before I hit the start button on my watch, the forty-five second, two hundred meter check point and the rush of lactic acid felt familiar.
When I saw the *fatigue detection* poster, I was in the final phase of training for my first marathon—one month away from the race. I was training for the first time without a team and without a coach. Physically, I was broken. My legs were heavy. They lacked the sharp bounciness I equated with being race-ready. I remembered the times when I’d been unable to trust my own structural integrity and had to rely on crutches and braces. I thought about the ways I’d broken my body on purpose—with sprint repeats and long runs that segued into long naps, collapsing from the shower into bed to recover and rebuild. I didn’t know if I’d been able to fully detect my own fatigue or if I’d pushed too hard, blocking out the tiredness the way I learned to block out everything else on the track. I was two weeks from my taper when I would begin cutting back, halving my mileage and stopping my speed work. I hoped that my body would repair the damage I’d done.

I turned toward the door, standing for a second in the air-conditioned entryway before stepping back out into the afternoon sun. My stomach sloshed with the water I drank and my legs were heavier from stopping. I walked a few steps forward on the sidewalk and then began to run again.
Detroit, Michigan: I found out about the Birwood Wall from a friend who studied social work in the city: A six-foot concrete barrier built to separate the city’s black and white neighborhoods. She told me that if I wanted to research Detroit, I needed to see Birwood. She didn’t remember the exact location but gave me basic directions: Go down Eight Mile until you see the Kroger. Then turn right. You might have to just start driving around the neighborhoods to find it.

I went to look for the wall for the first time in December of 2009 with my mom. She grew up in Detroit, within three miles of Eight Mile and Wyoming, but had never heard of the Birwood Wall. We took Eight Mile toward Detroit. We passed a hand-painted storefront for a shop called, “Bottoms-Up Liquors” and a boarded-up bowling alley with shattered light-bulbs lining the entryway. We drove through the neighborhoods south of Eight Mile and saw snow-dusted houses on evenly spaced plots of land. We slowed by a park with a chain-linked fence and squinted, scanning the horizon for blocks of concrete. Neither of us saw the Birwood Wall. Neither of us knew what were looking for. She drove. I sat in the passenger’s seat, palming the window as blocks passed. After almost twenty minutes of circling the neighborhoods across from Kroger, we got back on Eight Mile and continued to drive east toward Detroit.

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Fact:

Although people remember Detroit for the 1967 riots, in 1943 Detroit had another one of the worst race riots in 20th century America. The World War II demand for labor forced an integrated workplace and the tension between black and white workers played out on the streets of Detroit. In 1942, prior to this onset of racial violence, a Life Magazine headline read: Detroit is Dynamite, It can either Blow up Hitler or Blow up the US.

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I like facts. I listen to NPR and Howstuffworks.com podcasts the way normal people watch TV. My brother bought me The Upper Peninsula Almanac for my birthday. I buy and read old history books for fun. My shower curtain has a map of the world printed across it. I believe that knowing about something gives you stake in it—provides a grounding place. Facts build bridges. They fill in gaps in experience. Before I tried to find the Birwood Wall again I wanted information.

I read The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit and the geography section of the Detroit Free Press Almanac. I studied the intersection of Eight Mile and Wyoming and investigated housing segregation in Detroit. I learned about families from the south who moved to Detroit to find work and to escape Jim Crowe laws in the south. I read about how this influx of labor permeated the city at the same time the demand for jobs began to decrease. I learned about the segregation and eventual ghettoization of Detroit housing.

Detroit designated two neighborhoods for black southern migrant workers: Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. Slum landlords filled the neighborhood’s wood-framed homes, splitting small homes into three of four different apartments. Nearly a third of Detroit’s residential fires occurred within the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley regions. Property owners packed the neighborhoods to the point that families struggled to find landlords willing to rent to them. In 1950, The Detroit Free Press wrote about the 10,000 homeless families in the city: When places to rent are hard to find, prices go up, and landlords get extra fussy about children. In Black Bottom and Paradise Valley landlords often evicted expectant mothers.

Eight Mile was the escape: the rural border of the city—free from slum landlords. A place where a black family could buy property. Even a house without city services, without electricity, or running water—a shack with a water-pump—meant ownership and independence. A home.
Fact:
In the summer of 1943, violence erupted on Belle Isle. Black Detroiters responded to the bullying by looting white-owned stores. Within several days, more than 10,000 white-Detroiters swept through Paradise Valley, brutalizing the neighborhood. Thirty-four people were killed, 675 suffered serious injuries, 1,893 were arrested. Twenty-five of the thirty-four casualties were black. Headlines described the event as a “race war.”

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Roads have meaning in Detroit. Alter Road runs north and south between Grosse Pointe Park (92% white with median household income of over $80,000) and the city of Detroit (80% black with a median household income of $29,000.) In some places, the city of Grosse Point Park constructed concrete barriers to reduce association with the city of Detroit.

Growing up, I knew Eight Mile marked the border between Detroit and the suburbs. It’s also known as baseline road. When Mayor Coleman Young was elected, he told “all those pushers, rip-off artists, [and] muggers” to leave Detroit—“Hit 8 mile.”

The Eminem movie, 8 Mile, came out while I was in high school—making the road notorious beyond Detroit. Filmmaker Curt Hanson called the film "his valentine to the city.” In a USA Today review of the movie, a 44-year old Detroiter named Lamar Swanson, said he planned to see the film the day it came out, but not because of that silly white guy; I don’t even like that music. I just want to see if someone can make a movie about how life here really is. It hasn’t happened yet.

I never saw it. But I watched boys I went to high school with sing along to the soundtrack: Skinny football players who rode the bench most of the season—suburban boys who wore khaki-cargo pants and took AP Calculus. They lowered their voices and moved their arms up and down as they bounced to the beat at parties. I sat on the arm of Eric Smith’s basement-couch and watched them dance, unable to understand the connection they felt with the film or the songs. It felt disingenuous. No one understood Detroit. No one tried—we just lived near its border.
When one of my friends brought her British fiancé home he wanted his photo taken by the Eight Mile road sign. He bent his legs and crossed his arms at the corner of Eight Mile and Lujon in Northville, MI, almost thirty miles from Detroit’s city limit.

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Fact:
As of the 2000 census, Detroit was the second most segregated city in America, after Milwaukee. Every city listed in the top-ten was in the rust belt.

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What right do any of us have to this history? Is it a kind of cultural colonization for men from London to get their photograph taken by the Eight Mile road sign? For kids from the suburbs to sing along with the Eight Mile soundtrack? For a girl from Farmington to write essays about the racial and economic divide in Detroit? I don’t know. In Metro-Detroit we have roads and walls and city boundaries that divide us—not only geographically, but culturally, socio-economically, racially. But we rarely talk about the separation.

When a friend moved to Detroit he asked someone in his art class about cool places to hang out. The boy hesitated before saying: I only know black places. The bluntness of the boy’s statement stunned my friend. In the suburbs, we use words like “diverse” or “multi-cultural.” We tip-toe around Detroit’s racial rift.

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Fact:
In 1950, Detroit Mayor Albert E. Cobo tore down Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, burying the region beneath several layers of concrete to build Interstate 75. In the same year, Cobo vetoed plans for integrated public housing. Historians link the devastating housing situation Cobo created to the 1967 riots.
It’s not easy to find facts on the Birwood Wall. It’s not part of the public consciousness. Most people who live in the city don’t know about the wall or the history that surrounds it. Thomas Sugrue, author of The Origins the Urban Crisis, was among the first historians to bring the Birwood Wall into the conversation about race in Detroit. In an interview with The Detroit Metro Times, Sugrue says seeing the structure for the first time didn’t surprise him: I got in my car and drove to Eight Mile and found the wall still standing. … I suppose it [is surprising] to many folks shocking because it gives physical form to the racial segregation that’s so pervasive in metropolitan Detroit. It’s the most obvious, most blatant symbol of division.

In the 1920s, one thousand black Detroiters moved to Eight Mile, building temporary structures for their families on the city’s border. By the 1940s, the land at Eight Mile and Wyoming had become a commodity for the growing city. Developers hoped to take advantage of the vacant land around the city’s edges but struggled to get financial backing. The Home Owners Loan Corporation coded the land as “red” making it impossible for builders to get federal loans. The Federal Housing Administration agreed to mortgage the land only if a six foot concrete wall divided black and white neighborhoods. Developers built Birwood Wall and a collection of white suburban neighborhoods on the west side of the divider.

In one of The Detroit Metro Times’ articles about the Birwood Wall, writer Kim Heron interviewed 47-year old Glenn Wilson, who grew up near the structure. Wilson recalls walking along the wall as a child: *It was like a grown-up stage to be able to walk that wall. Anybody couldn’t walk that wall; you had to have some skills.*

The piece featured a photograph of Wilson, standing in knee-deep grass next to his dog, wearing a windbreaker and sweats. I tried to imagine him as a child, balancing on Birwood wall. I pictured a slender boy wearing a baseball cap squinting against the sunlight, chewing the inside of his cheek as he inched forward--feet brushing the concrete as he extended one foot in front of the other.
Did he know he was straddling one of the city’s most blatant symbols of division? What did he see from six feet above the ground, as he tight-rope-walked the border?

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Fact:
Even before the 1967 riots Detroit real estate agents encouraged white flight. Brokers engaged in a process called speculation. The housing industry created false fear about integration in order to buy expensive homes at a lower cost. They then re-inflated the prices and sold the houses to black families.

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The second time I tried to find Birwood Wall, I went by myself. I turned off Eight Mile to loop the neighborhoods where I’d driven with Mom three months before. I retraced our route, circling Bates Middle school and Washburn Street where Mom said Nana had lived. A street-sign read This Neighborhood is being watched. Someone had spray-painted Not in blue letters across the top. When I couldn’t find anything that looked like the photos I’d seen on Birwood, I turned on Wyoming and drove south toward the city. Unfamiliar territory. I passed a red sign for hair braiding and a brick building with The Hood Drycleaners printed across the window. I drove for three blocks until the buildings stopped having signs. Until almost every storefront was boarded-up. Until blank businesses bordered both side of the potholed road.

I turned around in a parking lot with milkweed growing through the seams in the cement. My Honda scraped the pavement as I moved back-over the curb. At a red light, I glanced at the car next to me, which bounced to amped-up stereo-music. It had wooden boards sticking out its open windows. Bullet-holes punctured its side door. If I’d leaned out my window I could have touched the pierces in the car’s white skin.
I kept my radio off. I felt my face tighten as I strained to keep staring straight ahead. But I still felt conspicuous—skinny arms clenching the steering wheel of my orange Honda. Sweat gathered against the back of my t-shirt. I turned left into a neighborhood at the next intersection.

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Fact:
In 1968, one year after the riot, 125 teenagers gathered to protest crime coverage in Detroit. The protestors contended that the paper over-covered black violence in order to create racial fear. They cited the front-page six day long coverage of a black man stabbing a white policeman’s son as evidence. During the same week, a gang of white teenagers killed a black man and raped his wife. The incident received only one mention in The Detroit News.

~

I found the Birwood Wall by accident—by driving down a dead-end road by a playground. I don’t remember the moment I saw the wall. I don’t remember what I thought as I swung my car door shut and began to walk toward it. Did I wonder if it was safe to leave my car parked on the street? Did I worry about being by myself in a vacant park, in a neighborhood I didn’t know? I don’t think I did. I think I decided to not be afraid as I pushed the button on my car-key and moved across the matted-grass toward the six-foot-cement structure.

I walked until I stood in the shadow of wall, hesitated for a moment then pressed my palm against its surface. Skin against concrete. At first, I didn’t even see the Birwood murals. I was wrapped-up in the substance of the wall—somehow shocked that it cast an outline on the grass, stunned that I could feel its coldness on my skin—that I could run my fingers over it. Sixty years of segregation. When I removed my palm from the Birwood Wall, I had to catch my breath. My heart raced. I heaved forward, putting my hands on my knees.

~
I’d seen photographs taken in the 1990s of the graffiti that peppered the Birwood Wall. I’d seen images from Thomas Sugrue’s book of the wall in the 1940s, newly built and stretching across the Eight Mile grassland—telephone wires looping over the concrete. I’d even seen images of trees painted by children in the center of the wall, surrounded by blank stretches of white cement and peeling paint-petals. I wasn’t prepared for the murals.

Someone had painted a block-long history of Detroit on the concrete—a history that included Birwood Wall. In the mural Birwood Wall was broken, with a suburban patio, deck, and grill visible through the crumbling structure. Green letters read “Judge him not until u walk a block in his flip-flops.” Painted footprints led to an image of Coleman Young, a pile of burning bricks, a bus protest, and a dove. Shards of mirror encircled the dove. I dragged my fingers along the wall as I walked, following the red, blue, and green footprints which spiraled the fists and fires of Detroit’s last fifty years. Standing in front of the fragments of broken mirror, I could see my reflection—pale-faced and pony-tailed amongst the chaos.
Fact:
When the first black family moved into Levittown, Pennsylvania, one white man said that, nice family or not, he couldn’t stand to look at them: Every time I see their faces I imagine $2,000 falling off the value of my home. In Oak Park, Illinois, the city decided to combat financial fear of integration by offering free insurance policies. If housing prices fell, the city would pay the difference. Integration happened with no white flight. Housing prices stayed steady. No one collected money from the city. The gamble paid off.

~

“What are you doing?”
A middle-aged black man stood in his driveway staring at me.

“I came to see the wall. I’m writing a book about Detroit and my cousin’s wife said I should come see it.” My voice fumbled as I walked toward his yard. His dogs bound toward the chain-linked fence which bordered his property, wiggling and wagging their tails.

I didn’t feel afraid. I felt embarrassed. Called-out. Caught. What was I doing? I didn’t want to run--I wanted to remedy the situation. So I got as close as I could to his fence, planted my knees on the damp grass, and eased my arm through the links. The metal edge of the fence punctured my wrist, peeling-back skin. Blood gathered along the whitened surface of the scrape.

The dogs squirmed, tails slapping each other. Two blonde boxers. They wormed their bodies around my arm. I wove my fingers behind velvet-soft ears. Fur tufted against the links in the fence.

I looked up at the man, who stood on the opposite side of the yard, watching me with his dogs. He wore navy blue sweatpants, sunglasses, and Detroit Lions baseball cap with a sun faded logo embroidered across the front. His face was round, not frowning, not smiling, I felt him figuring me out.

He gestured toward to the painted portion of the wall behind him, “I think I have the best part of the wall in my backyard.”
I could see an image of four people and a lantern painted on the wall behind his house.

“Do you mind if I come closer to look at it?”

He nodded, pulling his dogs away from the fence by their collars, “Don’t step in dog-shit.”

~

Fact:

“It’s not easy growing away from your roots.”

~

Later, when I told this story to a friend over the phone, she asked me if my mother knew about all this research. I could hear her shaking her head as she envisioned me entering a stranger’s fenced-in yard in Detroit. I imagined her imagining me. She pictured the girl who wanders out in front of traffic—the girl who gets lost because she’s turned East instead of West on the expressway, the girl who runs red lights while fiddling with the radio: a five-foot-one brunette with a bobbing pony-tail, meandering into a stranger’s yard a block from Eight Mile.

Hearing the waver in her voice and the way she drew out the syllables of “moth-er” and “re-search” I wondered what the man I met thought when he saw me standing in the park, bent forward in front of the Birwood Wall. I imagined him looking at me: A white girl wearing blue-jeans, moccasins, and a Stanford Athletics t-shirt. Part of me fears, even now, that he thought the worst of me.

~

Fact:

In 2006, artist Chazz Miller and the Motor City Blight Busters painted the murals on the Birwood Wall. Before the Motor City Blight Busters began painting, they had to repair a portion of the wall that had been destroyed by vandals. More than 100 volunteers gathered in Alfonso Wells Memorial Park to help rebuild and reclaim the Birwood Wall.
I stepped forward, made eye contact, and offered my palm. When he slipped his hand into mine, I gave it one solid shake, “I’m Rachael.”

“I’m Emory.” His voice sounded huskier when I got close.

“I moved here six months ago,” he said. “Sometimes city tours come here—but I don’t think many people know about it. I didn’t know about it before I moved here.”

He told me that he was forty-six, that he’d had lived in Detroit his entire life and raised his son by himself. I listened.

He paused, stopping to study my face. “You know this wall was built to separate the black and white neighborhoods.”

I didn’t say what I knew about the wall’s history. I didn’t offer any of my research. I didn’t tell him that my mother grew up in Detroit—that as a little girl she’d stayed up late watching military tanks crawl down her street during the 1967 riots. I didn’t tell him that my grandfather had moved from the city to the suburbs within two years of the riots because of falling real-estate prices or that in Farmington Papa bought a boxy-beige house with a pool for almost twice as much as the brick two-story historic Tudor he’d left behind in the city. I didn’t tell him that I’d been reading about Detroit’s racial history for months trying to place my family in late sixties early seventies population shift that led to economic decline in Detroit.

Instead, I held eye contact and nodded, arms crossed over my chest.

“I’ve seen pictures of it online.” I told him.

“There are pictures of this on the internet?”

Emory stared straight ahead then gestured toward to the stretch of concrete in front of us: the painting of four figures huddled around a lantern.

“I don’t know exactly what it means,” he said.
I studied the image. On the left side of the lantern, a woman and her son huddled together. The boy clutched the woman’s waist, pressing his cheek against her belly. The woman had her fingers wrapped around the lantern’s handle. She wore a head wrap and kept her face pointed forward, toward the far-side of the lantern’s beam. On the right side of the lantern, two teenage boys stood close together. They had close cropped hair and wore t-shirts. One boy was behind the other. The boy in back had his arm around the stomach of the boy in front. They both looked down, toward blue-blankness barely illuminated by the lantern.

Emory pointed to a portion of the mural just below the woman’s shape, where a white robed figure held a cross. A ghost of a man, barely visible behind the woman’s broad body. “Did you see the KKK?”

“I didn’t.” I squinted toward the shadows, looking for other signs of fear—shadows of what the four figures might be fleeing.

As I moved forward Emory turned toward me, watching my face for understanding. “To me they look like a family—and the light means hope.”

~

Fact:

Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I have a Dream” speech in Detroit two months before he addressed Washington. He marched on Woodward with Union leader Walter Reuther and Reverend C.L Franklin.

~

I turned to Emory, with my hands pressed into the fabric of my pockets, and said that I thought the darkness might symbolize fear.

“I think fear is one of the biggest issues this city faces.”

“What kind of fear?”
His face tightened. I looked for some sign of the answer he wanted to hear. I searched for movement in his eye, a shift in the way he distributed his weight, or a turn in his mouth. I saw nothing.

I hesitated, feeling the weight of each word I chose: “Economic. Social.”

Then I stopped: “Racial.”

The word stayed in the air. The sun beat down on my back. I pressed my finger against my scraped wrist, which was already beginning to bruise. I could hear the lady across the street’s broom scouring the pavement in front of her porch. I could feel sweat gathering around the lose strands of hair that had slipped from my ponytail.

He looked at me, “Are you a racist?”

I answered right away: “No.”

He paused, “Me either.”

Fact:
There is no biological basis for race. It’s a social construct, not rooted in our DNA. According to George M. Fredrickson’s book, *Racism: A Short History*, the word “racism” didn’t come into common usage until the 1930s. It was first used to describe the rationale the Nazi’s used in their persecution of the Jews.

It’s not easy to talk about race without feeling racist. When I called my friend Lee, who went to college in Detroit, to ask him about his how he experienced race in the city, he didn’t say anything at first.

“What do you mean?”

I told him that I hate how no one talks about the segregation that still exists in Detroit—that when Time Magazine covers Detroit, they point to schools like U of D Jesuit High as shining
examples of education in the city without mentioning that the school is over 80% white and costs over $10,000 dollars a year—in a 80% black city with a per capita income of just over $14,000. It’s a cop-out to not talk about race. I said. But how do you talk about race? How do you write about race?

Lee started slowly. He drew his experiences out, one sentence at a time. He told me about his classmate who only knew black places in the city. He said that within the Center for Creative Studies, his art college, the demographic felt similar to Farmington, where we grew-up. But walking downtown at night, he felt conspicuous. An Italian kid with glasses wearing a hooded sweatshirt. There were times when he just wanted to blend in.

In her book *Notes from No Man’s Land* Eula Biss describes the experience of “feeling” her race for the first time when she moved to a primarily black neighborhood in Harlem. She described the sensation of being, “trapped in her identity as a white woman”—an identity had not chosen but “grudgingly defaulted to.” She knew, even as she articulated this feeling, that in most parts of the country, her black neighbors would feel this all the time.

I told Lee about my encounter with Emory.

“‘Are you a racist?’ Why do you think he asked? Hadn’t you been in his yard petting his dog at this point? Did he think you were visiting it as some racist monument, commemorating the ‘good ole days of segregation?’”

I slid down on the floor, curling my knees into my stomach. I brushed loose strands of hair behind my ear. I chose my words carefully.

“Part of me is still afraid of that. But I think he may have been letting me off the hook by asking. He gave me the opportunity to tell him I wasn’t racist—and took the chance to tell me that he wasn’t either. It was a relief to get it out in the open. We could go on and talk about other things.”

~
Fact:

In a survey done by The Detroit News in July of 2007, three out of four white-Metro-Detroiters surveyed that they believed black-Metro-Detroiters have an equal opportunity to find good housing and jobs. However the 2000 census indicated income for Black-Metro-Detroiters was only 56% the income of white-Detroiters.

If we don’t discuss these differences how can we address them?

~

Before I left the Birwood Wall, Emory told me I should photograph it. He told me how to frame the pictures I took in his backyard—instructing me how to center each shot. He wanted me to photograph both the details of the wall and the scope of it. The way the colors shift as the wall moved forward. The way his fence intersected with the wall. The way the decaying houses on the wall’s far side became visible once you stepped back from the concrete. He wanted me to capture it all on my camera.

He asked me to post the photographs on the internet.

“People should know about this.”

Fact:
“Maybe I should tell anyone who asks that I’m writing about Proteus, the mythological creature who changes shape as you hold him, who changes into the shape that most terrifies you, as you ask him your question, as you refuse to let go. The question is, quite often, simply a variation of, How do I get home?” - Nick Flynn
It seems I have the traveling disease
again, an outbreak of that virus
celebrated by the cracked lips
of a thousand blues musicians
-Tony Hoagland, “Perpetual Motion”

1. The Traveling Disease

**Age 23: Michigan’s Upper Peninsula:** In the summer of 2009 I saw an abandoned house on the side of the road where I ran and decided to stop. I stepped as close as I could, cupped my hands against the window, and pressed my face to the glass. The pane felt cool on my skin. Dim-sun lit the front room. The couch lay face-down with strips of fabric dangling from its frame. Clothes from the 1940s covered the floor—as if someone packed a suitcase then changed his mind—tossing aprons, coats, blouses, and belts all over the room. A pair of children’s shoes topped off the pile: Brass-buckled red-patent Mary-Janes.

I stepped back from the house, letting the ferns run against my calves. When I started running again, I struggled to breathe, stopped, and bent over: hands on my knees, head fixed toward the ground. I swam in stories—in scenarios of fleeing, in images of little girls who might have worn the shoes, images of bare feet running through the ferns.

I returned to the house almost every day for the rest of the month. I took no photographs and never went inside. I didn’t want to step on the floor or move any of the clothing that lay scattered across it. In part, I was nervous about structural stability, afraid the weight of my body would break what was left of the floorboards. But it was more than that. It was too intimate—like sifting through someone’s dresser or bathroom cupboard—and I was afraid of shattering the sanctity of what was left behind.
I trace my preoccupation with abandonment to that house and those shoes. The search for stories led me to start looking in windows. Once I started looking, I no longer knew how to look away. The emotional reaction I had to that place started an obsession—a compulsion to try and connect with what came before by looking at what’s left behind. I started stopping at rusty-gas stations, paint-peeled motels, and burnt-out houses that lined my route to work. I saw a summer resort with rusted-television sets on the front-lawn and an unlit sign that read “Rooms Available.” Cobwebs tangled in my hair when I tried to see inside a cabin with knee-high grass growing through the cement stoop. I pressed against the windows of a vacant elementary school and saw an office filled with typewriters, a classroom piled with desks, and a roomful of bags stuffed with rolls of pink insulation. I visited these places by myself. After stopping to see something, I got back in my car in and recorded what I saw in the composition book that sat on my passenger’s seat.

~

The summer I spent wandering abandoned buildings in the Upper Peninsula, I had no permanent residence. I left my house in Iowa within an hour of distributing my students’ final exams—and found two jobs in Michigan: one in each Peninsula. I slept in my parents’ cabin, in the basement of a nineteenth-century coast guard building, at my parents’ house in Metro-Detroit, in a loft above the Shipwreck Museum’s movie theatre, and on the couch of my boss’s brother’s empty apartment. I kept a copy of *Hunts Guide to the Upper Peninsula* in my car and stuffed my glove box with maps. I lived off Cheerios, Dove dark chocolates, and hard-boiled eggs bought from the Shell station in Newberry. When the Belgian-man I met on the beach saw the backseat of my Honda—covered by sweatshirts, books, running shoes, pillows, and blankets—he joked that he planned to tell his friends back home that he met *an American girl who lived out of her car*. I wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or get defensive—whether to take pride in my mobility or mourn the loss of rootedness and the absence of home.

~
Since high school, I’ve been leaving places behind—not vacant places but places full of people. I grew up in Metro Detroit. My mother was one of ten kids and my father was one of four. I have twenty-six cousins. Only one lives more than two hours away from Farmington, Michigan where I grew up. Five went to the same high school—the high school my mother and five of my aunts and uncles graduated from. In a family of fifty I’m only the second to leave the state. I moved to Indiana and then Iowa and haven’t been back to Michigan for more than three months at a time since I was eighteen.

In college I took an environmental writing class.

On the syllabus my professor listed two quotes:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.
~Simone Weil

Why have I always been glad to leave?
~J. B. Jackson

Writer Jim Harrison called Michigan a microcosm of the whole United States, a place containing north and south, urban and rural. In fourth grade, I got a poster from the Michigan DNR with a satellite image of the state and a caption reading: MICHIGAN: Nowhere Else on Earth. It hung framed above my bed for almost ten years. My friend Eric, who lived in Chicago, but vacationed in the Upper Peninsula, saw it hanging in my bedroom and complimented it. But when my local friends saw the same poster and asked about it, I finished the fragment: “No where else on Earth…could be so boring” making them laugh at our stupid state. No mountains. No oceans. No buffalo or grizzly bears. I saw my parents’ suburban home, the shopping centers around our house, green lawns, golf courses, subdivisions—what I perceived as the sterility of metro-Detroit and I wanted out. I imagined
my adult-self lanky and leathered, living in the mountains rock-climbing and running marathons in a city peppered with ski-shops.

~

There’s no photograph of my parents pulling away, leaving me at college. No image of me gripping the side of the car with my fingers, pleading for my family to stay a couple more hours. There’s no picture of my younger brother in the backseat palming goodbye on the window, or of me sitting, puffy-faced on the curb of Union Drive, suddenly alone in a state where I knew no one.

Instead the photo in my parents’ album is of me moving into my dorm room, several hours before they actually left. Eighteen years old: wearing jean shorts and Birkenstock sandals, with my still-wet hair pulled back in braids. I’m holding an armload of folded sweatshirts, bent forward and laughing, face turned from the camera. Newly-taped photographs of Bob Dylan and the Beatles decorate my closet door. Behind me, a metal shelving unit from Sam’s Club holds Tupperware bowls and travel coffee mugs. I look like someone set to begin college—a transient ready to settle in a room full of t-shirts and paperbacks.

A friend recently told me she no longer wants to move somewhere where she knows no one, she’s sick of starting over. For her, the difficulty of creating community and gaining trust in a new place trumps the freedom of knowing no one. In her essay, “Back to Buxton,” Eula Biss describes regularly calling her mother to cry during her first year in New York: No one knows me here. Biss reflects on this experience, Perhaps it is only through leaving home that you can learn who you are. Or at least who the world thinks you are. And the gap between the one and the other is the painful part, the part that you may, if you are me,...keep arguing against for the rest of your life. Now, when I look at the photo of myself moving into my dorm room, I not only see someone excited about beginning new life, but also someone unaware of the difficulty of starting over--someone who still believes that she can buy shelves, comforters, cups, and a shower caddy, move them into a room, and call it home.
I am making use
of the one thing I learned
of all the things my father tried to teach me:
the art of memory.
-Li Young-Lee, “This Room and Everything in It”

2- The Art of Memory

In 2004, Dad started posting daily photographs on the internet. *Photo-a-Day for Rachael at College.* He captioned the first image, a photograph of our front yard, summer-green and speckled in sun, “home sweet home.” Later that week he posted a photo of a foam deer, with an arrow in its eye and a gaping hole in its gut, roped to the bed of a pick-up truck and labeled it, “the strange things you see in Walled Lake.” I spent my mornings scrolling through Dad’s photos over cereal, my coffee cup perched on my windowsill, and my stocking feet on the tile floor of my door room. I got to see the world through Dad’s lens—the home he wanted me to remember: Mom’s Thanksgiving centerpiece, breadloaves from Avalon Bakery in Detroit, the brassy surface of my brother’s saxophone.

Dad saved the first telephone message I left from college. I had no cellular phone so I called my parents’ house multiple times, taking up the entire time the answering machine allotted to describe my day: my roommate, my classes, the waffles I’d eaten at the cafeteria. Mom said Dad kept the message on the machine for months before recording it on the computer. It’s still in my parents’ family room desk, in a plastic CD sleeve on a disc labeled, “Rach First College Call.”

When Keith and I were kids, Dad compiled our baby teeth. He hardly remembered to be the tooth fairy but once Dad collected my brother’s and my teeth he couldn’t bring himself to toss them in the garbage can. I imagine him holding the tiny white flecks in his hand, like beads, wrapping them in a Kleenex, and tucking them in a chest on top his dresser. He let the teeth accumulate, marking our growth and the time that passed since we lost them. When Mom went through Dad’s things a couple years ago, she found teeth wrapped in paper between Dad’s cufflinks and his
grandfather’s pocket watch, reminders of when we were small. Evidence of the time when we had baby teeth and Dad played tooth fairy, leaving quarters on our bedside table beside empty glasses of salt. Evidence of my father as an anthropologist of memory—a chronicler of our habitat and home.

For a while, I worked on a website called “Photo a Day from Rachael at College” to create dialogue with my father—to reciprocate by taking part in visual conversation between places. I kept my camera in my purse and spent my walks to and from class looking for photos. I searched down sunsets, sunbeams, and spring’s first flowers. I photographed the chapel, the library, the Victory Bell in front of the union. But my photos felt flat—they looked like imitations of calendar images or stills from the Valparaiso University website. Looking at my Dad’s photos I noticed particulars of home I’d never seen before: the heat bubbles in Mom’s sauce, the rusted letters on the Quaker cemetery sign, the way our backyard trees shadowed the snow. They spoke to the details, to his vision of home.

~

March 24, 2006, “The Old Days,” Photo by Rich Button

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My dad was born in Milford, thirty minutes further from Detroit than Farmington—in the sticks. In my father’s high school yearbook everyone looks tanned and freckled: white kids with
sandy-colored hair who grew up on farms or around lakes. Dad grew up on Lake Sherwood—in a house with a screened-in porch where Papa smoked cigarettes and Nana drank vodka while they watched Dad, Uncle Steve, Aunt Carol, and Aunt Sherry take turns water skiing. Dad spent his summers working outdoors. He spent his weekends fishing for bluegills on the beach.

My parents met in college, at the same liberal arts school my brother and I later attended. The first time my mom ate with my dad’s family, Nana served pheasant—one Papa had shot. My mom had never eaten pheasant or hunted bird before. She didn’t understand the metallic bits ground into the middle of the meat. She chewed slowly, gathering the shot underneath her tongue, waiting for an opportune time to go to the bathroom and spit.

When I was seven, Nana and Papa moved into a condo, selling off most of their stuff in a garage sale which sprawled from the house to the street. Now, when I think of my grandparents’ house, I think of walking the golf course with Nana or swimming at the complex’s common pool. I only recall a handful of particulars about the house where my Dad grew up: the shell-shaped wind-chime on the back porch, the textured glass tabletop, Papa’s orange ash tray on the coffee table, the aluminum Christmas tree Nana kept in the spare bedroom, the faux marble hot tub in the basement—the weeping willows which draped into the Lake, and the geese that gathered around the dock.

~

In his book Place and Placelessness, E. Relph writes, “To understand something about the social structure of images is an essential prerequisite for understanding identity”—Relph goes on to give the example of a road: A person walking down a street sees it differently than a driver passing through the same road. Memory, emotion, and intention color our perspective of place, so that our image of a given location changes as we change.

Now when I return to my parents’ home, the green lawns of their subdivision surprise me—so different from my apartment in Iowa which overlooks a vacant factory and parked school bus. I’m caught off guard by the bigness of my parents’ home, the whiteness of their walls, the height of their
ceilings, and the organization of their cupboards. It feels like a hotel until I ground myself in the
details: the smell of mom’s detergent in my sheets, the beep of the coffeepot, the smooth texture of
wood beneath my socks.

~

In high school, my English teacher assigned “memory maps.” Draw the house where you
grew up in. Add as many details as possible: Mark spots you associate with specific memories. I
didn’t draw my parents’ house in Farmington. Instead I etched the details of their cabin in the Upper
Peninsula. I marked forts and fishing spots, the rock where I liked to sit and watch the river, and the
sandy trails where my brother and I went running.

For a long time, I didn’t write about family or Farmington: my suburban metro-Detroit home
which I described to friends as “a land of subdivisions, strip malls, and golf courses.” Farmington, I
said could be set down as a suburb in any major Midwestern city: Chicago, Minneapolis, Des
Moiness, or Omaha—nothing about Farmington makes it a uniquely Michigan landscape. If, I wrote
about “place,” I wrote about the Upper Peninsula, a landscape I considered wilder, more authentic. I
tried to cut myself from the story and focus on the notion of place: on the sound of frogs plunking, the
smell of cedar logs, the sepia color of the rock-bottomed river. I separated people from places—
myself from my setting. Like my photos, my writing lacked the context of a home and the specificity
of the story.

~

During my first fall in graduate school, Detroit became a story: The burst of the economic
bubble. The decline of the Big Three. Images of vacant buildings and burnt out houses flooded Time
and Newsweek. I sat at my computer in Iowa and scrolled through photographs of boarded up
windows, graffitied walls, and broken pianos—a post-apocalyptic landscape dusted with asbestos.

In one photograph the back wall of Arnold Nursing Home, where my mother’s great uncle
once lived, was missing. Ceiling tiles dangled above damp carpeting. Green spray-paint read God
has left Detroit. In another photograph, snow drifted through the open door at Michigan Central Station, Detroit’s former rail hub. The photographs looked like movie-stills: stagnant water, shattered glass, and paint-petals peeling from the walls.

That semester Dad’s photos didn’t change. He photographed my cousin Deidre blowing out birthday candles, Mom sleeping next to our dog, the firewood piled on my parents’ porch. Nothing about Dad’s photos showed that Mom had taken a job at a collection agency to help pay for Keith’s college. Nothing about Dad’s photos showed that he worked for months for no salary trying to keep Papa’s business from failing. Nothing in his photos put a visual to the stress I heard when I talked to them—my father’s flattening voice, my mother’s curt responses to questions about money or work. I wanted to put a visual to what they felt—so at night I looked at images of burnt-out buildings and abandoned houses hoping to understand more about the home I left behind.

~

My second semester of graduate school, winter 2009, a friend asked me why I avoided writing about Detroit. I’d written about the Upper Peninsula, Indiana, and England but never about the city or my parents’ house in the suburbs. He said if he was from Detroit, he wouldn’t write about anything else. It felt more like a question than like an accusation.

I didn’t tell him that I never wrote about Detroit because I felt no sense of ownership in the city—that I grew up within twenty-miles of Detroit but always considered myself separate from it. I didn’t tell him that, in college, when a friend from out of state asked me if I hung out in Detroit, I laughed. No. I spent my teenage years driving around the suburbs. I spent weekends in Royal Oak, Ferndale, Birmingham, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Holly, and Milford. I didn’t tell him that at age twenty-two I’d never driven to Detroit without my family.

I didn’t tell him that I didn’t want to write about Detroit because, for me, the downfall of the automotive industry, and the growing poverty in the Detroit Metro-Area, didn’t feel lyrical, they didn’t seem like human interest stories. They were painful truths: a father who lost sleep and weight
while he worked for no salary and worried, a mother who reminded my brother and me that Dad’s business was not doing well when we asked to go out to lunch during the summer, a brother who bore the brunt of knowing Mom was working a job she hated to help pay his tuition. These were things I did not want to write about—I still hate writing about them.
What actually took place is now lost.  
It’s become part of the mythology of a family, 
the stories told by children around the dinner table.  
No, they aren’t dead, they’re just treated that way, 
as objects turned one way and then another 
to catch the light, the light overflowing with smoke.  
-Philip Levine, “Smoke”

3-Smoke

I. The Mythology of Family

Detroit burned the summer before my mother’s eighth birthday. July of 1967. My mother lived in a Catholic neighborhood near the University of Detroit. It was the kind of neighborhood where kids played kick-the-can and talked on a tin-can phone which stretched between bedroom windows. She went to mass every week with her head covered, wore cat-eye glasses with black plastic frames, drank milk delivered by a milkman, and shopped at Northland Mall, the nation’s first shopping center.

July 23 was a Sunday. Ninety-degrees and humid with a dry southwestern wind. When Detroit police raided an afterhour club, spurring a riot which resulted in 7,200 arrests and forty-three deaths, my mother was probably sleeping. When Mom woke Sunday morning, Parkside smelled like smoke. She watched National Guard Tanks roll down the tree-lined streets of her neighborhood. She saw her father patrol the sidewalks with a gun. She listened to the shot-gun sound of cans exploding when the Merchandise Mart caught on fire. From her second-floor bedroom she watched flames billow above her city.

That September, when my mom returned to class, all seventeen kids on Parkside street gathered together to walk to Gesu Catholic school. At the beginning and the end of every day they waited for every kid in the neighborhood before they made the mile trek down Santa Maria Avenue. They moved in a pack of plaid jumpers and saddle shoes, embroidered polo shirts and backpacks.
Three years later my grandparents moved out of Detroit.

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On the first day of an American literature class I took in college we had to share a story about our hometowns. My professor, a man with wire rim glasses and wispy gray hair combed to the side, asked us what made our “places” distinctive. We had to say something, we couldn’t pass. I listened to my classmates talk about famous people that went to their high schools and products invented in their cities. One boy went to the Chicago suburban high school which inspired the movie Mean Girls. One girl came from Nottingham, England. She grew up in the land of Robin Hood legends. I squirmed, unsure of what to say—searching for something significant about Farmington. My hometown didn’t inspire legends or even films. I searched my memories for something else. I imagined the house I was born into and the side-walked downtown I grew up walking to. I thought of Michigan history lessons in fourth grade and elementary school social studies trips around Farmington in third grade.

When my turn came, I paused then started slow: Well, Farmington’s first name was Quakertown.

I talked about how Quakers founded the city of Farmington and described seeing the remains of Underground Railroad stations in my friend’s basements: dirt floored rooms behind boarded walls. Farmington, I said, was created around the idea of tolerance.

My mom’s family moved to Farmington in 1970. In the 1960s and 70s real estate agents screened families moving out of the city. Grosse Pointe, one of the city’s more affluent suburbs, instigated a “point system” which ranked potential buyers by factors such as “occupation,” “accent,” “education”, “dress.” Certain ethnicities came with automatic handicaps—Poles, Jews, Greeks, and Italians had to score significantly higher than Northern Europeans in order to buy into Grosse Pointe neighborhoods. African Americans and Asian Americans weren’t even considered. Farmington had
no such point system, making it possible, socially and economically, for my mother’s Irish-Italian family of twelve to buy a house.

My mom has brown hair and brown eyes. She describes herself as average looking and medium built—but she’s pretty and petite—one hundred and fifteen pounds, clear skinned, athletic, and attractive, even without makeup. At age sixteen, she lost her mother to an aneurism and spent the latter half of high school cooking dinner, doing laundry, and driving her little brothers to football practice. As an adult, my mom works hard, expects a lot, and maintains a gritty optimism about the capabilities of the people who surround her. She likes a category of films she calls “triumph of the human spirit movies” and sees weak, or particularly vulnerable, characters in novels as “unrealistic,” because their behavior seems so different from hers. She’s a product of a childhood more difficult than mine, with a toughness I haven’t been able to inherit or inhabit.

Writer Joan Didion says we tell ourselves stories in order to live. But when I asked my mother to expand upon the stories she told me as a kid—it was as if she was telling them to herself for the first time. She switched between details and anger. From a description of the sound of the Merchandise Mart exploding to her asking, “Why would they burn the Merchandise Mart? What good could that have done?”

Mom mostly recounted details I already remembered her sharing: the tanks, the National Guard, her father on the porch with a gun. When we hung up the phone, I had very few notes on the riots. I was sitting with my legs draped over the arm of the couch when my cell phone rang again. “I just remembered more,” Mom’s voice was low, as if she recalled for the first time the silence of the September that followed: the strangeness of walking to school in crowds uniformed and saddle-shoed in the post-riot chaos, the inability to resume the life she knew.

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8 It’s still one of the Metro-Detroit areas most diverse suburbs. When I was in high school, there were seventy-five different languages and dialects spoken within the Farmington public school system.
II. Back to the Beginning

Detroit’s motto comes from fire, from the first time the city burned, in June of 1805. In 1805 every house in Detroit had a bell and a bucket, a barrel, and a ladder. Men stood in bucket lines to fight fires. When one of the city’s wooden houses ignited, Detroiter passed water from the river to the site of the fire. I imagine sloshing water, soot-stained skin, aching arms, and the smell of smoke: hours of breathy work to stop a fire from spreading. For almost a century the system worked. Detroiter contained the city’s fires.

Until June 11, 1805: When a baker’s apprentice left his post to smoke in a nearby stable and the flame from his pipe ignited the hay. At around 9 am the building burst into flames. There was no wind at first, and at first no one worried about the fire spreading. Detroiter didn’t make a bucket line to get water from the river to the site of the fire. Instead firefighters tried to use the water from a nearby hatter’s vat to feed the fire pump—but the fur and scraps from the vat clogged the pump and within an hour the flames had spread all the way to the city’s border. Fire blazed from wooden building to wooden building. Burning shingles fell from the sky as homes crumpled to the ground.

When it no longer made sense to fight the fire, Detroiter took to the river. They crowded in canoes, wrapped in blankets. I imagine them sweat-dampened, packed skin to skin, in boats almost too full to float. Fire-lit faces strained in silent prayer. It’s at this point that Father Gabriel Richard, a priest who had helped herd Detroiter to safety, whispered something which would eventually become Detroit’s city motto: Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus, Latin for: We hope for better.

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9 Go back to the beginning, you insist. Why is the air filled with smoke? Simple. We had work. Work was something that thrived on fire, that without fire couldn't catch its breath or hang on for life. -Phillip Levin, “Smoke”
things, it will rise from the ashes. His words must have hung in the air, must have stuck with the crowds that surrounded him as they watched their city burn and wondered how to return home.

~

I knew nothing about Detroit’s motto, Detroit’s flag, until my senior year of college, when I started researching the city for a writing project about my grandmother. I grew up distant from the city. My mother watched tanks roll down her streets during the 1967 riots. As a kid, I didn’t spend time in Detroit. We’d go to baseball games or the Detroit Institute of Arts but we didn’t linger in the city. My parents didn’t demonize Detroit the way some other suburban adults did—with warnings of violence and semi-racist assertions—but they encouraged caution. When my friend Lee and I wanted to drive together to our high school prom, which was held in a fancy restaurant on the Detroit River—my parents urged me to take a limo with a group of friends instead. (What if you get lost? Where will you leave your car? What if it gets stolen?) When the cross country coach at Wayne State offered me a full scholarship plus money for an apartment in the city, my parents told me they didn’t want me living in the city, and coaxed me to go to an out-of-state liberal arts school where I could have a more traditional college experience.

My parents weren’t trying to push me away from the city. They were affirming the decisions I had already made. Since 4th grade I’d talked about getting out of Michigan, moving west, going to school out of state. When I pictured myself in my twenties, I imagined living at the foot of mountains, not in the shadow of vacant skyscrapers. I wanted to settle somewhere where people wore strapped sandals and carried Nalgene water bottles—somewhere where people grew vegetables in their yards and walked to work. I decided to move to Indiana after a visit to Valparaiso University during the spring of my senior year. The girl I stayed with had an Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind poster hanging above her beanbag chair. When the cross country team got together to welcome me, we watched Spellbound, a documentary about the National Spelling Bee. My visit to Valparaiso matched my fantasy of college as a place where people watched independent films and talked about
books, a place where I would feel less lonely. Later when my family drove down to Detroit and I watched Dad’s car flash past skyscrapers with punched out windows and billboards for low cost life insurance, I saw no signs of a city rising from the ashes—all I saw was sadness—a place I was glad to have escaped.

II. The stories told by children around the dinner table

Age 8: Farmington, MI, early afternoon: I was sitting on the basement stairs, back pressed against the wall, when Mrs. Beatty, my best friend Eve’s mom, called to tell us that their family’s house had burned down. Mom’s voice lowered. We can take the kids for a couple days. Let us know what you need. She sounded ready to wash sheets, make beds, and prepare for company. I tried to piece together what I had heard of the conversation, the rhythms of questions and apologies: I’m so sorry, The kids can stay for the weekend, Are the dog’s okay? I’m so sorry. I thought of Betsy, Eve’s black lab, the first dog I’d ever know: the dog that licked up tears and slept on the floor by our feet while we played board games at the Beatty’s picnic table.

When Mom got off the phone, she gathered Keith and me in the family room. She could tell from our faces that she should be blunt. The Beatty’s house burned down yesterday. Both dogs died in the fire. Mom knew from Mrs. Beatty that the fire began in the garage, where their dogs, Betsy and Annie were tied up but no one knew what started it. By the time the neighbors called the fire department, only a skeleton of the Beatty house remained. When I needed a better explanation, Mom speculated: Maybe one of the dog’s leashes wrapped around a lamp, shattering a still-lit light bulb on the garage floor. Maybe one of the dogs chewed the chord of the space heater. I imagined scenes the Safety-Town fire safety videos of tipped candles and frayed chords. I pictured dramatizations of kids checking doors then crawling through smoke-filled hallways with towels pressed to their mouths.
But I couldn’t piece together the same type of scene-by-scene explanation for the fire that engulfed my friend’s house.

That weekend Eve slept in a twin bed next to mine. Blond tufts of hair tucked tight under the quilt my mother sewed. Her duffle bag placed on the carpeting beside my closet. When I told her I was sorry about her dogs, her voice got stoic—adult like. It’s really sad. I didn’t know what to say back. I tried to imagine Eve unloading into an empty bedroom at her grandparents’ house while her family waited for the insurance company to reimburse them for the rooms full of toys and clothes they had lost. The next morning, I gave Eve my Littlest Pet Shop Zoo, a plastic sticker-covered briefcase full of big-eyed bobble headed animals, the most expensive toy I’d bought with my own money. I sensed the emptiness of her new life and that emptiness more than the fire itself scared me—made me suddenly aware of how much I had to lose.

Photograph everything. Eve’s father would later tell my family. If something ever happens, you won’t remember what you had. You’ll have no way to prove what you owned. He said we should walk a video camera through every bedroom. That we should take pictures of our closets, our jewelry boxes, our drawers. He said we should take inventory: What do you have? What do you want to remember?

The Beattys told us to not only close our doors, but to cover up any cracks where smoke could seep in. We bought smoke detectors, and carbon monoxide detectors for the rooms where we slept. For months, I stuffed dishrags in the space underneath my bedroom doors before my family left for weekend trips. I watched the carbon monoxide detector beside my bed flash green as I fell asleep.

Shortly after Eve left my house to stay with her grandparents, I started to make a list of objects in my bedroom, a list things I would want to remember that I had if my house burnt, but I hardly finished cataloguing everything in my desk before I got bored and tucked the list away, intending to return to it later.
Loss makes you remember things in a different way. It makes some details more vivid and others more fragmented. We’re left with details we can’t quite put together and memories which crumble when we squeeze them too tight. We’re left with the outlines of things, the spaces they once filled, the emptiness that remains. Smoke and ashes.

After my parents moved from a small home in downtown Farmington to a sprawling house in a subdivision in Farmington Hills I remembered very few details about our first home. I have no memory of the house’s layout and can’t reimagine living in it. Instead I recall: the slant of my bedroom ceiling, the texture of the carpet on the stairs, the way the sun shadowed the wood floor in my playroom. My Papa died when I was thirteen. I remember the texture of his hands (rough from years golfing in the sun on the backside, smooth across the palms), the smell of his velour suits (a mix of cigarette smoke and cologne), and the husky sound of his voice, but can’t recount a single conversation. These holes in my memory scare me, they make me hold tight to the details of the people I know and the places I love. Once, in college, a boy I was dating noticed me studying his hands tracing the freckles on his arm and the scars on his wrist. We lay in his dorm-room bed, caught somewhere between sleep and awake, half covered by a fleece blanket his mother made. What are you doing? he asked. It took me a moment to realize that I was memorizing him, trying to place the details I would want to remember.

Sigmund Freud defined mourning as the loss of a loved one or a concept that has taken the same place as a loved one, such as freedom or fatherland. Freedom or fatherland. Freud didn’t use the word “home.” But in German, Freud’s native language, “Heimat,” the closest equivalent to the English word “home,” translates more closely to “fatherland” than “house.” According to German historian Cecilia Applegate, “Heimat,” connotes the “possibility of community in the face of
fragmentation and alienation,"\textsuperscript{10} so one could argue that Freud defines mourning, as the loss of a loved one or a concept that has taken the same place as a loved one, such as \textit{home}.

The closest English dictionary definition to my concept of home comes half a page down in the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} under the category of "games": \textit{The place in which one is free from attack; the point which one tries to reach; the goal}. But we have no word for separation from home. No term to refer to the absence of \textit{heimat}. No ritual to mourn its loss.

\textbf{III. Objects turned one way and then the other}

My bedroom at my parents’ house remained largely unchanged throughout my time in college. My bookshelves, bed, and desk stayed in the same place. When I returned home from school, I could reenter the life I’d left—I slept in the same bed, had the same household responsibilities, and ran the same route: down 11 mile toward Heritage Park where I looped wooded trails with my brother. From the time I was sixteen, until I started graduate school, I worked the same summer job at a running shoe store. I ate dinner with my family at the same time, sitting in the same chair I always had. Leaving became easy because I knew how to come back, how to slip back into the family I’d left behind.

It wasn’t until my first year of graduate school that things started to feel different. It wasn’t a fiery change—like the 1805 fire in Detroit, the Riots that pounded through the city during my mother’s childhood, or the house fire that consumed Eve’s childhood home. It was a slow burn. More smoke than flames.

In the fall of 2008, I moved six hundred miles from home, to Iowa for graduate school. In the spring of 2009, my mom took a job at a collection agency to help pay for my brother’s college. My dad, who sells gages to the auto-industry, worked fifty to sixty hours a week for no salary, trying to

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{10} 19, \textit{A nation of provincials: the German idea of Heimat}}
keep his father’s business afloat. I didn’t notice big shifts. They had already paid off their house. They didn’t struggle to pay bills or put food on the table. Instead, they stopped eating out. They no longer went to movies. They didn’t buy each other Christmas presents. They noticed if I sent them my car insurance check late.

They didn’t seem desperate. They seemed tired. At home, I watched their deflated bodies collapse onto the couch every night. At school, I listened to their voices fall flat on the phone. I no longer knew how I fit in my parents’ house. I floated between Michigan and Iowa, aware of my parents’ problems but unable to fix them and too stubborn to try. Acknowledging my role in my parents’ struggle meant recognizing both their vulnerability and my responsibility to them.

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The word nostalgia comes from νόστος, nóstos, “returning home” and ἄλγος, álgos, “pain” or “ache.” Nostalgia: The ache to return home: A term coined in 1697 by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss physician, to describe a set of symptoms which included insomnia, palpitations, anorexia, stupor, and persistent thinking of home. The word “homesick,” defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, as “feeling one has when missing home” fails to acknowledge the same level of anguish that seventeenth and eighteenth physicians prescribed to nostalgia. Hofer and his predecessors believed severe cases of nostalgia could result in death if the patient could not return home.

During my first February of graduate school, I got so sick I saw things that weren’t there. I woke in the middle of the night, with the shapes of my dreams still burnt in the darkness of my bedroom: withered hands and blood spattered walls. I don’t know where these images came from or why the violence of my dreams seemed to seep into my waking life. When I ran my hands along my stomach, my body felt bruised. My lips cracked from dryness. I lost my appetite. For several days, I moved only between my room and the bathroom. My face looked unfamiliar: pale, blue-lipped, red-eyed. I felt like a stranger in my own body, as out of place as I’ve been.

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Age: 24; Valparaiso, Indiana: I was visiting my brother the day my college cross country coach had a seizure. We had been stretching on the Astroturf surface inside the Valparaiso high school track, preparing for a workout. My brother and his teammates clustered, jokes bouncing within their circle of short-shorts and scrawny legs. Coach Straubel and I sat silent and separate. I leaned forward, curling my fingers around the front flaps of my running shoes. He stretched several feet in front of me, legs bent back at the knee, back and arms flat on the ground. Coach wore slit-running shorts, and I looked away from him when he lowered himself onto the ground, not wanting to see the white skin of his thighs. I kept my gaze on my sneakers until I heard Coach making a snoring noise, a sound I assumed responded to the boys’ banter: A professorial joke about the triteness of their conversation. I heard someone laugh. It took me a minute to look up and see his tongue lolling in his mouth and his head pulsing against the ground—and even then I didn’t know what to do. I stared saying nothing. I watched his body reel. He looked like a fish, flopping against the Astrotruf. When one of the boys shouted, springing from his seated position to Coach’s side, I jolted to my feet.

I ran toward the high school, fast enough so that my legs burnt with lactic acid, fast enough to feel the wind pressing against my skin. I threw open metal double doors and screamed for help. But the halls were empty. The janitor had just finished mopping. I could see my reflection in the still-wet floor. I ran into the girls’ locker room, where a girl in a gray sweatshirt stood washing her hands. *I need to find your track coach.*

I don’t remember how I found the high school coach or what words I fumbled out to get him to come back to the field with me, but by the time I got there, Coach was sitting up with the baseball team’s athletic trainer by his side. The rest of the team stood in a circle, five or ten feet away from him. When I asked if Coach was okay, someone said he’d stopped breathing. He’d needed mouth to mouth. They’d called an ambulance. *Do you think we should still do our workout?* someone asked.

Coach didn’t want the ambulance we requested. He didn’t want sirens, white walls, or medical tests, he wanted to me to drive him home. He wanted to sit on his couch and have a cup of
coffee. He wanted to take off his shoes, change his clothes, and call his wife. I understood craving familiarity—two years before, when the school trainer diagnosed me with a stress fracture, I drove over a hundred miles in a blizzard to spend my first weekend on crutches at my parents’ house. I packed a backpack and a cup of coffee and I spent seven hours driving at 30 miles per hour, windshield wipers at full speed as I inched my way toward home.

In the car, I tried for small talk. *It’s scary,* I said, *to realize your own vulnerability.* I told him about a time I fainted on a run my senior year of college. I came to on the side of the freeway, unsure of where I was, with gravel ground into my palms and the skin on my knee torn away to the tendon. *They told me I shouldn’t go running by myself anymore—because they didn’t know what caused me to collapse—but without any reason or diagnosis I felt helpless, unsure of what I should be trying to fix.* He nodded and looked out the window, silent for a long time before saying, *Yes.*

I hitchhiked back to campus that day. I told Coach Straubel that I didn’t need his car that I could run back to my brother’s house, but when I resumed jogging, my stomach quaked. It took a couple minutes of standing by myself on the highway, watching cars flash by before I got the courage to step out in the center of the road and wave both hands in the air, flagging down a shaggy haired high school kid in a black pick-up. When my brother asked later, *Was that safe?* I told him that I only knew that I needed to get home.

**IV. Light overflowing with smoke.**

The summer before my last year of graduate school, I saw a wood carving in the window of a burnt out house in Hamtramck: Letters curving in perfect cursive: *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus.* I parked my Honda. A group of children who sat on steps next door followed me with their heads and eyes as I mounted flaking stairs littered with pop bottles and pink puffs of insulation. Charred gutters stretched in front of the open front door. I didn’t go inside. Instead, I walked to the front window and ran my fingers along the surface of carved wood cut so clean that the curves in the
letters didn’t splinter my fingers. Whoever installed the carving had attached the clean sheets of plywood over the charred black siding of the house with evenly spaced screws. Pencil lines still marked the cuts in the wood.

I stepped back from the window, pulled out my camera, photographed the window, and walked back to my car. It wasn’t until later after I posted the photo on the internet that I recognized what the window said: *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus*. The city’s motto. We hope for better things, it will rise from the ashes.

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If all art responds to its environment, the postmodern movement of the late twentieth century responded to loss—not the loss of a person or a place but the loss of a story. The loss of *heimat*. We no longer knew our home or our heroes so our narratives became fragmented. Our architecture became decorative. Our art became experimental.

In high school, I thought of applying to art school. I won an award for graphic design and spent my nights in front of the computer, layering images on Photoshop. But when I began to put together a portfolio for college my art teacher, a spiky haired woman from Scotland, told me I needed to make
something less perfect. I needed to let myself go. Layers. She said. Collage. She suggested. You need to start playing with mixed media.

Later my art teacher said she suggested a change in medium because her favorite of my paintings, a blind contour drawing of a cello painted in bright water colors, broached the freedom of mixed media. The fluidity of the image allowed it to do something new: something fresher and more original than the more representational watercolors my classmates produced. I wanted to push the boundaries of my graphic work in a similar way. I loved the idea of further fragmentation—of more image and more layers.

My art teacher guided me through the process. We started with my photographs printed off in black and white on the school printer. She helped me smooth the images onto a canvas, so that my pictures covered the entire surface. Then she handed me a brush. Now paint.

I hesitated. I hated the idea of covering my images--I didn’t want to risk obscuring any one of the fragments to create something more cohesive. It took me the rest of the class period to commit, to dip my brush in a swirl of watered down blue-and-white acrylic paint, and swipe the brush across the canvas, washing my photographs in colors.

The next day, I got to class early. I took up an entire table, laying out my canvas, acrylic paint, water, glue, brushes, and acetone. I used big brushstrokes. I got paint underneath my fingernails and flakes of glue in my hair. I went on instincts letting one glob of paint dictate where the next glob went. I watched my collage go from a collection of photographs to something new: a fragmentation of image through color. That day my work changed. It became more about the process of learning to let go and seeing which narratives arose from the chaos.

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Four months after I photographed the window in Hamtramck, I saw a burnt out house on the side of the road in the Upper Peninsula and stopped. I stepped as close as I could to the front window, close enough to see a frayed jacket draped over one of the dining room chairs, close enough to hear the sound
of snow melting through the cracks. Chards of glass laced the opening so I couldn’t run my fingers along the frame without snagging my gloves on the jagged surface.

I paused at the doorstep. Light blue paint flaked from the edges of the wood. A six pack of Vernors empty near the door. When I bent down to pick up one of the bottles, it fell to pieces in my fingers. Glass skittered across the ground, peppering my running shoes with flecks of green. I left the house without trying the door, leaving a trail of shoe prints behind me in the snow.

The next day, I came prepared. I wore boots instead of running shoes. I brought mittens and carried a camera. I walked straight for the back of the house—where the burnt beams of the garage stood on a carpet of damp insulation. Snow drifted through the open walls. The ceiling looked like campfire wood, black and shiny, textured by fire. I crouched down on the floor, letting the snow dampen my jeans. Next to me lay a bound pile of envelopes and letters. I fingered stack of papers—credit card bills, heating bills, electric bills—embossed letterheads, arranged by date, still clean and white—charred only along the edges. More organized than my own mail, which I usually stuff in the cabinet beneath my desk. The rest of the space looked like a less orderly version of my grandfather’s garage—An open metal toolbox, a saw, a canvas bag piled high with golf balls—only the snow and the rust made the garage look foreign, like something from long ago, wilting under its own weight.

This time when I approached the door, I didn’t stop. I twisted the doorknob and stepped inside. Bits of glass covered the ashen floor. Pieces of insulation fluttered above my head, like prayer flags hanging
from the burnt ceiling. A pile of CDs labeled with scraps of lined paper lay scattered across the floor: M.A.S.H season 4, volume 2, season 4, volume 3, season 4, volume 5. I stepped over snow boots, loose pages from books, a portable hard drive, an embossed copy of Agamemnon. I ran my hand along the ash crusted stove in the center of the room as I stepped toward the living room, testing the ground for weaknesses before I put my full body weight on the debris-covered floor. The open front door slammed, snapping against the wind.

I tried to picture someone sitting on the couch with a mug of coffee. I imagined wet boots puddling on the wood floor and stocking feet propped on the coffee table. I pictured hard-cover books bent at the spine, strewn across the couch. I imagined a man, stubbled and gray haired, living among the books, pacing between the computer and the couch, passing his nights behind the big glass window which had been blown to bits in the fire. He was a reader, I thought.

The strange thing about ruins is the way they resemble our lives. I could imagine what the house looked like before the fire—with lights on and ceiling and floor intact. I pictured myself living someplace similar, denned up in the woods in a house full of books. I tried to imagine my own life, covered in soot and snow. Abandoned, foreclosed on, as fragile as the bottle which had fallen apart in my fingers, blown apart and unable to rise from the ashes. I pressed my camera to my face, and photographed the grandfather clock in the corner—hour hand frozen at 6:00.

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A mosaic is a conversation between what is broken. 
A mosaic is a conversation that takes place on surfaces. 
A mosaic is a conversation with light, with color, with form. 
A mosaic is a conversation with time. 
*Terry Tempest Williams, Finding Beauty in a Broken World*

**First Memory:**

Age: Unknown, Location: Unknown: We were at a funeral. I don’t remember whose. I stood in a sea of legs, nylons, high heels, and ironed black pants, in the parking lot of a church. The sun beat the asphalt. Someone passed out white balloons. A gray-haired man asked me if I wanted one. I nodded. Dad knelt to tie the string of a balloon around my wrist. It struck me as strange, seeing grown-ups wearing black clothes with balloons bobbing above their heads. I watched as everyone released their balloon on cue. A cloud of white plastic bubbles floated into sky. My own balloon, which bobbed just above my head, looked left behind. I knew if I let it go, it would be gone, but I scratched at the string anyway. My fingernails left lines on my sun-pinked wrist. I squeezed my hand through the loop, wiggled away from my balloon, and watched as it chased the others, getting smaller and smaller in the sky. As it passed beyond my view, my throat swelled with loss.

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What are your last memories?
-John Linstrom

4-Loss

Age: 24, Location: Ames, IA/Farmington, MI: In January of 2010, during my second year of graduate school, my parents took our dog to the vet for blood work. Joey had been sluggish, uninterested in food, unwilling to climb onto the leather couch in the den where he used to spend his days. He was fifteen—too old for any elaborate treatment. Mom and Dad didn’t want to hear what was wrong with him if they couldn’t fix it. When they finally decided to go, it’s because they were worried he was hurting.

I tried to imagine the scene: My parents in a beige office, running their fingers over Joey’s back between injections. Joey tensing his paws, nails splayed out on the table’s paper cover. Tufts of black-and-white fur flying through the air. The hair on the back of his neck bristling as he panted, making the air hot with the stale smell of his breath.

The vet, a middle-aged man with gray hair and glasses, diagnosed Joey with anemia, pointing out the pale color in his gums. He’d probably been sick for a while, probably with cancer—a tumor that would eventually bleed out. He probably wouldn’t live more than a couple weeks. He wasn’t in pain, but one day, sometime soon, Joey’s tumor would burst, probably in his sleep, and my parents would wake-up to find him dead in his kennel.

I was at a coffee shop in central Iowa when I found out. Mom told me over the phone. Doggy hospice, she called it. We just want to make him comfortable. They’d been making Joey “people food”—serving him chicken and rice on ceramic plates on the kitchen floor. My mother didn’t want to make food “for the dog” so she just ate less. One night she and Dad split a steak and she gave half of her half to Joey. It’s like being on a forced diet. Mom said sometimes when she and Dad helped Joey into his kennel at night they cried. They worried that he would be dead when they
woke-up in the morning. I pictured them moving up the stairs, arms around each other’s waists—a crumpled silhouette in the dimly lit hallway.

We got Joey when I was nine, from a man named Walt who worked with my Aunt Lisa. We’d planned to get a dog for months. Dad had marked pages of Your Purebread Puppy: A Buyers Guide with sticky notes, highlighting breeds that might fit our family. We’d visited breeders, men with big yards who showed us dogs that didn’t shed, dogs that could hunt birds, dogs that were good with children. These dogs leapt onto Mom with open mouths and dirty paws, while Keith and I sat on the floor, trying to coax them toward us.

Joey didn’t jump on Mom when he saw her. He didn’t jump on anyone. He cowered behind Walt’s orange living-room chair while my family stood on the front mat of Walt’s trailer. Dad looked at that three-month-old black-and-white puppy shaking in the corner and saw a non-hunting-shedding-skittish mutt. Never get the shyest puppy in the litter. Mom wrapped her fingers around his shoulder, I think he needs us.

Joey sat across our laps on the car ride home, wrapped him in a towel, shivering.

That night, Dad took a picture of Joey and me. Our first photo together. In it, I’m wearing a nightgown, sitting cross legged on the kitchen floor. My hair hangs still-shower-wet around my shoulders, bangs brushed to the side of my face. Joey lies on my lap-- paws resting in the folds of flannel fabric, head nestled into the crook of my arm. One of my hands hovers over his back, fingers outstretched just above his fur, the other curls around his belly, helping him balance.

Even then, I knew that Joey would die—and I calculated how old I thought I would be when it happened. Dogs live ten to twenty years. I tried to picture myself at nineteen. At twenty-nine. It seemed unimaginably old—impossibly far in the future.
Age 23, August 2009: Joey’s back legs collapsed under him. I heard his paws skitter and turned from the computer. He clacked against the kitchen floor. When Joey pushed himself upright he kept his head down and his tail between his legs—he looked disappointed in his body. I moved from my desk and knelt down in front of him. My nose touched his muzzle in the spot where white fur gave way to pink skin. Joey had a distinctive face: white with black spots: one black side of his face, one white one, one black ear, one white one, one black set of eyelashes, one set white. When he was a puppy, his nose had a pink spot in the middle but mostly faded with age.

I pressed my palms against his shoulders, touching my forehead to his, *It’s okay, you’re okay.* Joey grunted and dropped down next to me, rolling over so I could rub his belly. He bristled my cheek with the pad of his paw. I ran my fingers through his belly fur until his tail began to wag, thumping against the floorboards.

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Something about dog-death horrifies me—it makes me react in a way that I usually don’t respond to loss. When family members have died it’s been complicated—difficult to come to terms with. I get numb. It’s been different with dogs. My friend Eve’s family lost their home, their family photos, and all their children’s’ toys and books in the house-fire—but the loss of their dog Betsy was the loss we all felt most. The loss we were able to experience immediately. When my mom called about Joey’s vet-visit this January, I had to leave the coffee shop and drive home. Fingers tense, body heaving against the steering wheel—I felt like someone in a movie, letting out long gasping sobs.

In the summer of 2009, our up-north neighbor Bill’s dog Hannah died. Bill worked on an assembly line in Bay City before he retired. He hunts, he fishes, and he shoots beavers in his backyard when they dam up the river behind his house. When Hannah was alive, Bill called her “the bitch,” and joked about how his wife Sandy spoiled her. But when we buried Hannah, Sandy had to hold Bill up, folding her arms around his shaking shoulders. His glasses fogged from crying.
Whenever I’m about to leave home I take inventory. I make lists on sticky notes that I leave on my dresser and my mirror. *Cell phone. Laptop. Running shoes.* I spend the last half hour I’m at my parents’ house rummaging through drawers and crawling under beds—scrounging for anything I’ve forgotten. I live eleven hours away and don’t want to leave something essential behind. But I always do. This past trip home I forgot a load of my laundry in the dryer, leaving behind my favorite t-shirt, the dry-fit turtleneck I wear to go running in the winter, a jacket, and my pajama pants.

Then there’s another list. One I don’t write down. Of things I’m planning on leaving behind—but am afraid won’t be there when I get back. I look for potential loss every time I leave Michigan. When I left for Iowa this year I photographed the vacant train station in downtown Detroit that might be torn down before my return. I made a mixed CD for my best friend because I knew I wouldn’t see her again before she moved to Paraguay for the Peace Corps. I held on extra-long when I hugged my grandparents goodbye.

The first time I left for college, I worried Joey would forget me. When I called home and Mom and Dad put the dog on the receiver, I would ask if he responded to my voice. I wasn’t confident of my permanent place in Joey’s memory until I saw the way he whined and wagged his tail clattering in circles on the hallway floor when I returned home for summer.

This winter, when I went back to graduate school, I worried about the things I might not remember after Joey was gone: The way he wrestled books and magazines away from me with his nose when I’ve neglected him too long. The way he licked the sweat from my calves when I come back from a run during the summer. The snort/grunt noise he made when I pet the place between his ribcage and his stomach.
We take goodbyes seriously in my family. Once, when I was a sophomore in high school, I forgot to tell my mom that I loved her before I left for school. I was less than three miles away when she called me on my cell phone, “What if I died today?” This was the worldview I grew up with. My grandma Nancy died when my mom was sixteen. Brain aneurysm. She collapsed on the bathroom floor while getting ready for church. She was still wearing a towel. Mom remembers running after the paramedics to cover my grandmother’s bare chest with a sheet. Nancy died with no closure. No hand holding around a hospital bed. No goodbyes.

In college I had a boyfriend who said my family had an unhealthy relationship with death. His mom didn’t hold her death over him when he forgot to kiss her goodbye. His parents didn’t sit him and his siblings down to go over the details of their wills before they went on plane trips together. But in a large family you learn to prepare for loss. You learn that deaths, marriages, and births come in waves. You brace yourself for this saturation of emotion. We had three weddings in two years. My cousins Clare, Tripp, Nick, Chase, Maddy, and Tess were born within five years. My great grandma, my Papa, and my Uncle Gene died within six months. I wore the same dress to all three funerals.

Of all the deaths that happened that year I remember Papa’s death most. Papa, my father’s father, died of esophageal cancer. For six months, every time I saw him, he dropped weight. He dropped down to ninety-pounds, a shriveled version of his former self. His weathered hands got translucent, like tissue paper--I could see every vein. He seemed to be slipping out of his skin. The last time I saw him, he looked like an empty sack--lying in bed with feeding tubes woven around his arms and a half eaten cup of applesauce on the table beside him. After that visit he told Nana he no longer wanted to eat.

There are fast deaths and slow deaths. Papa’s death dragged. Every time I saw him, more of him was gone.

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Dogs don’t perceive time the same way people do. According to animal cognition researcher William Roberts, dogs can’t sift through past and the future in an episodic way. They’re “stuck” in the present. They can learn, remember commands, retain information, but they can’t recall specific scenes. Joey doesn’t remember jumping up to sniff the crusts of my peanut butter sandwich on the beach or the way I made him sleep at the foot of my bed the night my college-boyfriend broke up with me. To Joey, I wasn’t a series of scenes but a string of sensory details—he knew my smell, my voice, my touch. I don’t know if anyone else knows the specifics of me in this way. It’s both strange and comforting to me to know that my dog buries his face in the inside of my shoes when he misses me.

Joey’s senses dulled as he aged. He struggled to hear. He used to greet each guest to the house by howling by the front mat when they rang the doorbell or knocked. As Joey aged, someone could be in the house for five to ten minutes before Joey came sprinting from the kitchen, hackles raised as he slid onto the front mat barking. Sometimes he didn’t even run, he just barked from one room over, when he caught a glimpse of a guest from the hallway. Full or partial deafness is common in older dogs. The pathways from the nerve cells to the hearing apparatuses are among the first to deteriorate with age.

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This January, my boyfriend’s father called to tell him that his grandmother was dying—that she might not make it through the weekend. If we wanted to visit, we had to do so now. I boiled eggs, printed maps, and made coffee for the drive. John went home to pack a duffel bag. Within an hour, we were enroute to Illinois.

We fought on the way to the hospital. John played Beethoven and Bach in the car, the music his grandmother loved, the music she spent her life advocating for during her tenure directing the Elgin Symphony Orchestra. Music I said that I appreciated but couldn’t inhabit, in the same way I struggled to inhabit the works of Thoreau and Whitman, two of John’s favorite writers.
John sighed. No one knows how to be patient these days. You have to work to love Bach. He talked about how people like his grandmother knew how to work at loving music—he said that not everything should be simple and accessible. Music means more when it's challenging.

I let go of his hand and pressed my body against the car door. I watched the cars flash by on either side of us, their headlights bright against the dark. We sat in silence, until we reached a rest stop. John stopped the car. When we both got out, I turned to face him. I feel like you were just attacking me.

His face wilted, I don’t know what came over me.

I shouldn’t have said what I said about your grandmother’s music. It was a shitty thing to do. I pulled him as close as I could.

I stayed pressed against him in the rest stop parking lot, breathing chest-to-chest, until both our heart rates slowed. When we got back on the road, neither of us said anything about the tension we both felt, and the fear it fueled—for him, the terror of losing his grandmother, for me, the possibility of creating a rift with him.

We got to the hospital after midnight and met John’s parents in the doorway of his grandmother’s room. John’s mom’s voice sounded raspy from sleeplessness and her face looked stretched when she smiled. His father looked at us through glasses which slid down on his nose, as if studying to see if we were ready, before he put a hand on John’s shoulder, leading him into the room. When we got to John’s grandmother’s hospital bed, his parents surrounded her body, holding both her skinny torso between them. This is John and his friend Rachael. They came all the way from Iowa to see you. Her voice scratched the air, John. He bent by her bedside. From my spot in the corner, I could see her torso shaking beneath the blue hospital blanket. When she called me over, she clasped my hands in hers. Her skin had the same paper-thin feel that my Papa’s had. I bent toward her face. Oh she’s beautiful, she said, it’s so nice to meet you.
John’s grandma didn’t die that weekend. But we heard her say that she wanted to. We watched her body reel in pain. We maneuvered our way through the web of cords which tied her to tanks, making it impossible for her to move without pulling needled tubes from her skin. We saw her face change, tightening into a waxed position of pain then loosening into a morphine-induced bagginess. I watched John’s family feed her ice cubes and I watched her body calm to classical music John played on a set of headphones he propped on her pillow. John and his parents kept their hands on her, reassuring her of their presence by keeping their weight around her body. I kept my palm pressed to John’s shoulder as I watched him prepare his grandmother for death.

~

In the essay, “Back to Buxton” Eula Biss writes about the process of leaving home. She writes, Not long after I began college, [it dawned] on me that, having left my family I would never again feel as essential, as integral, as I’d once felt amongst them. Biss’s essay deals with the fragmenting of community, the inability to return—the mortality of home. A sense of home is, it seems, worth more than any other comfort. And one of the questions I want to answer now, for myself, is what makes a place feel like home.

When John’s grandmother started to get sick, he texted me a photo of the cookies she’d made at Christmas. He said he knew that they would be her last holiday batch. The last time I left home, I knew Joey wouldn’t be there when I returned. I wondered what else would be different.

~

When Joey began falling, my dad started writing about him. He called me on my cell phone, I wrote an essay today. He raised his voice when he said “essay” as if to imply that I’m not the only writer in the family. Dad opened his piece in scene, describing the way Joey reacted to him when he returned home from work: He smiles. Well it's not really a smile--more of a grin. He is happy to see me. Usually a sneeze accompanies the grin, perhaps caused by his whiskers taking a rather funny
shape during the smile...Joey [is] the best dog in the world. I can say this with complete confidence because that is what he believes...because I tell him so.

Dad went onto reflect on the role of dogs in our lives. Dogs occupy a unique spot in space and time. He said our parents are the witnesses to our cuts and bruises, our first steps and first days. The loss of a parent is a split from the past, an un-repairable fracture in our personal history. Whereas the loss of a child, heaven forbid, would mean the loss of a part of our future. Our hopes for a better world and someone to witness the brave new era would be crushed leaving us to live only in the moment. Where does this leave dogs? Dogs don’t recall specific moments—and most of us outlive our pets. Dogs are the present—the gratification we receive from them is not for promises of the future or pining for the past.

Since I left for college, Dad’s posted over a hundred photographs of Joey online. Pictures of Joey sleeping on the couch next to my mom, of Joey digging for Snausages in his Easter basket, Joey in the laundry room burrowing through dirty socks. Joey is the most prominent subject of Dad’s photo-a-day project. He captioned his images Joey Tuesday, Joey Sunday, Joey weekend, Joey Portrait. After we left for college, my parents spent most of their time with Joey. Joey ran errands with Mom. He went to work with Dad. Joey sat beside them when they ate dinner, waiting for Mom to finish so he could put his head on her lap while she drank her coffee. He fell asleep between them on the couch at night, splayed out on his back with his belly in the air.

~

February 13, 2010, 4:15, Engadine, MI: Mom called from the cabin. When I asked her how she’s doing, she said, okay.

Okay?

She didn’t say anything for a few seconds.

It’s been a difficult day.

We were easing into it—but I knew what was coming.
Did Joey die?

Her voice broke

Yes.

My parents took Joey up north with them for the weekend. Mom had Friday and Monday off and they wanted to spend Valentines Day at the cabin. On Friday, they took Joey out and he spent almost twenty minutes walking home from the neighbor’s house. Friday night, Mom woke up in the middle of the night and smelled shit. Joey stood with his face pressed in the corner of the bedroom. He wouldn’t make eye contact or wag his tail. Mom ran her fingers over him, trying to reassure him. She cleaned up his soiled bed and attempted to calm him down. He didn’t respond to her or to Dad. The next morning, Joey struggled to stand. They couldn’t get him to go outside and pee.

Mom contacted the vet in Newberry. What do you do with the bodies of dogs you put down?

Honestly, this time of year, we have to put their bodies in the dumpster.

When Mom called me later she said, We couldn’t do that to him.

Mom and Dad lifted Joey on the couch. He didn’t turn his head and still wouldn’t look at them. My parents wrapped him in blankets then went outside to dig a hole in the yard. They stood in the snow with their backs to the Millecoquins River. They ran a warm-water hose over the ice and used pick-axes to chip away the frozen ground. They sobbed and dug and sweat—breaking the dirt together. It took over two hours. Later, when they took Joey to the vet, they split duties. Mom stayed with Joey. Dad was supposed to go to check them in at the desk. But the first time Dad strayed from Mom and Joey he crumpled. He couldn’t make it to the door alone. His body was heaving so hard he couldn’t stand. When Mom saw him, she wrapped her arms around him.

I’ve never cried like that. He said, I didn’t know I could.

I didn’t know you could either.

The vet said that Joey’s belly was swollen with blood—she told them that they were doing the right thing. The injection would be fast and painless, like falling asleep. Mom and Dad told Joey
that he was a good dog. They kissed the fur around his face. My parents were petting Joey when the vet put him down. He didn’t struggle. He hardly moved.

Mom and Dad brought Joey home from Newberry, wrapped in a blanket. They carried him from the backseat of the car to the backyard and positioned him in the hole they’d dug so that his head faced the screened porch of the cabin. They were grateful to be able to bury him here, where we spent our summers. Grateful that they were able to get through the ground, that they didn’t have to leave him in a dumpster in Newberry, grateful that they didn’t have to drive his body home to Farmington, packed in the back of the car with their luggage. When they lowered him in the ground Mom noticed six trumpeter swans on the river.

~

After we visited his grandmother in the hospital, John returned home to find his backyard strewn with the body of a rabbit. Soft gray fur stuck in tufts on the crunchy snow. We’d watched this rabbit all winter. In the mornings, John saw it rooting around the compost pile for food. Whenever I left his house at night, the rabbit dodged under the porch, darting away from our shadows in the snow. When John came home to a blood-stained backyard, he shrank at the site of its peeled body: “I leave for two days and this is what happens.”

John wrote two poems that week. He wrote the first one, about the rabbit, Monday afternoon after we got back from Illinois. He wrote the next one, Wednesday, the morning after his grandmother died. In his second poem he asked a series of questions: What does it mean to play with Tinker Toys, or to make a favorite carrot soup? What does it mean to let go of the hand that grips you, to let the others give their goodbyes, to let yourself leave the glowing room...be back for work, the next day, in another state, and know it? Tuesday, after John heard the news about his

11 Line from one of John’s poems
grandmother’s death, he spent the night next to me, kissing my lips and face and neck and arms, running his fingers over my skin. *Is this okay?* He kept asking. *Is this weird?*

I want to look for beauty in the loss: the saplings growing in abandoned buildings in Detroit, the grass sprouting up between sidewalk cracks, the texture of rust, the artwork of ruin, the comfort of routine, the quiet intimacy my parents developed as they struggled their way through Michigan’s economic decline, the swans that swam the day they buried Joey—but after Joey died, Dad stopped his photo-a-day website and when I think of home, I fear that every time I go back something else will be gone. I worry someday, I will come back to find not only my dog but my two remaining grandparents dead. I worry about my parents aging, about my brother not being able to find a job, about the financial pressures we all face. I worry because the older I get, the more uprooted I feel.

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_February 2010, on route back home_: The day after my dog died, my parents called from the car. My Dad wondered if he would forget what it felt like to pet Joey—*I hope I remember how his fur feels.* He knew when got back to Farmington he would have to do something with Joey’s stuff: two kennels, a wooden water bowl with Joey’s name carved across the front, the cover Mom made for the backseat of Dad’s car, the leash on the back door, the blanket on the family room couch, the basket full of toys in the back-hall closet. He would vacuum up the dog hair. He would put the last photo of Joey online.
Pilgrimage is a journey undertaken in the light of a story.
-Paul Elie, The Life You Save May be Your Own

5-How to Get Home

1.

Age 23, December 2009, Detroit, MI: We pulled off the expressway, onto the kind of street I’d seen in photo essays about urban decay: a road lined by burnt out and abandoned residential properties. I sat in the bucket seat of my aunt’s mini-van, with my winter jacket draped over my knees, my coffee-cup in hand, watching as we passed kicked-in front doors, sidewalks littered with bottles and chip-bags, houses with broken windows and burnt out roofs. My cousin Emma sat beside me, wearing her high school varsity jacket and her hair in a pony-tail. My aunt slowed the car and we tucked our purses under the seat, stepping into the December cold. Emma rushed to meet a circle of her friends, other pom-pom girls who were also in the city for the service project. My aunt talked with the other mothers. I stood near the car, hands in our pockets, waiting for instructions. I waited for a truck to deliver the expired food we would spend the morning unloading into boxes. We would make parcels of bruised apples, stale pastries, crushed wonder bread, and meat that leaked red juice—free food for over two hundred families to pick up.

A muscular set of arms grabbed me by my shoulders, causing me to stumble back into the curb. A white SUV bounced over the pitted-road. It swept by without slowing. I turned to face the owner of the arms, the man who’d pulled me from the road. His round face showed no sign of humor: lips tight, brows furrowed. When he spoke, he used tone of voice adults use to talk to children: Stay out of the road. In this neighborhood, someone will run over you without even stopping.
In high school we talked about the city and made it seem like a separate world. In tenth grade, several boys on my cross country team rode their bikes from Farmington to Detroit, in the dark on a school night. They described the absurdity of it: Three skinny white boys on bicycles, cycling down Eight Mile, pedaling by bars and strip clubs, traveling east toward Detroit. *You could have gotten shot* someone said when they finished their story.

In high school, we imagined Detroit as the place where everyone had it out for us. We knew Detroit had the highest murder rates in the country, 8% higher than Baltimore, the nation's second most murderous city.⁴² For the most part, we stayed away. As a teenager, I only went to the city with my parents, usually for visits to the Detroit Art Museum. We took the expressway into the city, exited in midtown, parked in the structure beneath the museums. I saw the downtown skyline and the big marble buildings in midtown, but never explored residential Detroit. I loved the Detroit Institute of Arts: the fiery Diego Rivera murals of Detroit factories, the armor that lined the wood-floored corridors between exhibits, the porcelain cups in the café, but the city around the art center blurred together, a gray landscape riddled with statistics and news story, a place that seemed more rumor than reality.

My first trips to the city were with my parents’ Catholic church. Mom and I got up early to gather with a group of ladies in the basement of *Our Lady of Sorrows*. We carpooled to the city in a caravan of mini-vans. As a kid, big buildings seemed like something out of a movie—both the brassy suburban office buildings that lined the freeway on the way to the city and skyscrapers of Detroit. The smoke wafting from the sewers felt supernatural. I counted graffiti turtles, tracing their big heads

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⁴² “America's Most Murderous Cities”, Daniel M Ewalt, 1997
and bold lines on the window when we stopped. I asked my mother what they meant: *Were they a gang symbol?*¹³ She said *maybe* and continued her conversation with the woman in the passenger’s seat. Gangs also seemed like something foreign, the stuff of big cities and action adventure movies.

In Detroit, we served at St. Patrick’s Senior Center, a soup kitchen, a building I loved because of the auditorium, which had wooden floors and a stage I could climb on. I imagined myself performing shows for the old people, in that high ceiling musty smelling room. I pictured the metal chairs from the basement of St. Pat’s arranged in a semi-circle around the stage as I danced or sang. At St. Pat’s, Mom peeled potatoes while I rolled silverware in white napkins. I set the tables, talked to the nuns, and stayed out of the way. I ate mashed potatoes, fruit cup, and yellow cake with white-haired women who called me helpful.

4.

My junior year of college, on a drive back from the Detroit Institute of Arts, Mom told us she wanted to show us her old neighborhood. I knew Mom had lived in a Catholic neighborhood, in a brick house with a circular pool in back, but I couldn’t visualize it, so I always filled in with my stereotypes of the city instead. I pictured Mom sitting on the stoop of a skyscraper, downtown by the river. I imagined her playing in front of one the run-down homes above the highway into Detroit.

We drove down a road lined by Liquor Lotto stores and businesses selling low-cost insurance. I ran my finger against the glass, over the graffiti-covered convenience stores, barred-up small windows, and adult film shops. One house had plastic furniture sitting on the sidewalk and waist high grass growing in the yard, another had a wall painted neon-pink.

¹³ Much later, I would find out that they turtles were the work of a Hamtramck native named Ronald, who covered the city in turtles because, “the turtle is an icon,” without any political intent.
We turned another corner, and the landscape changed completely. The box-shaped houses gave way big brick Tudors with winding brick walkways. They looked like small castles, lined by trees that arched all the way over the street. Mom motioned to Dad to drive slower.

She turned to my brother and me, pointing a strip of unused land between two of the driveways, “That’s the lot the neighborhood Dads would freeze as an ice rink.”

She stared for a moment, “It used to seem bigger.”

Mom showed us the home where her cousins lived and the houses of all her friends. She pointed out the house they believed belonged to a witch, because the woman who lived there yelled when they ran through her flower beds. Then she pointed to a red brick house with diamond shaped windows, brass lanterns, and a turret in front, “That was our house.”

I couldn’t imagine visiting my grandparents in that big brick Detroit house. I tried to picture my cousins and me creeping down a marble staircase as kids on Christmas Eve, or performing Christmas pageants in a picture-windowed living room. My grandparents’ house in Farmington had dark seventies cabinetry, beige walls and orange shag carpet. Corkboards lined the wall between the kitchen and the living room. We played behind the bar in the basement and crammed onto the mustard couch in the living room at holidays.

“I loved that house,” Mom’s got voice got soft.
Age: 24. Location: Detroit, MI- During the summer of 2010, I spent my Wednesday mornings in the muggy basement of St. Peter’s soup kitchen in Detroit, passing out peanut butter sandwiches wrapped in paper towels. I parked in a gravel lot and slipped past a line of people waiting for food. I locked my car keys in the kitchen closet and covered my hair with a net. For four hours every Wednesday, I smelled like peanut butter, sweat, and rubber gloves. For four hours every Wednesday, I made small talk with people who got their meals from the basement of a church—mostly men—men who pushed grocery carts full of empty plastic bags, men on their way to construction jobs who carried brown bags and collected food for lunch, men wearing “Census” baseball caps, men who sat studying library books while they drank black coffee, and men who covered their ears and shook, shouting at things that were not there.

One day, while distributing donuts to the guests still lingering at the tables, a long-haired man pointed at me. *I know you. I told you not to go into that building with that guy.* He started shouting. *Why didn’t you listen?* I walked away, leaving him to yell at me from his plastic card table.

Another day, a woman tugged on the hem of my t-shirt and told me she’d been sleeping since Monday. Her fingers shook. I asked her if she’d been eating. She said she had. *But I’ve been drinking a lot too.* She had skinny-legs and gray-hair. She moved in tentative, bird-like steps. I asked her to hydrate and packed her three Styrofoam bowls filled with water, which she pushed back at me. Before I left that day, I felt her hand on my shoulder. When I turned, she pulled me to her, wrapping her skinny arms around my back. *Thanks. Sister.* She pressed her face so close to mine that I could smell her hair.

Two weeks later I saw her standing topless in the bathroom at St. Peters, washing vomit from her body using paper towels. When her eyes met mine I realized she didn’t remember me.

From the parking lot at St. Peters, you can see the field where the Detroit Tigers used to play. I went my first baseball game at Tigers Stadium. My brother and I got hot dogs and cokes and spent
the entire game with our baseball mitts in the air, hoping to catch a fly ball. Between innings Nana bought me a stuffed tiger, made to hang off a rearview mirror, which I kept on my pillow for months. The tiger wore white pants and a navy Detroit jersey and seeing it reminded me of the specifics of the day: Bright lights beaming against the field. The ping of the bat hitting ball. The oily smell of hot dogs.

Now, waist-high weeds grow in the empty lot once occupied by the stadium.

6.

In Detroit I met a writer who documents the city’s abandoned buildings while volunteering for Blight Busters in Detroit on Neighborhood Day. We worked together dismantling a demolished house, lifting beams and cement blocks from a mound of wreckage that filled the structure’s former foundation. We stuffed plastic trash cans full of plywood, insulation, wires, and glass. I wore plastic safety goggles, trail-running shoes, and shorts. He wore jeans. He commented on my bare legs, pointing a patch of dry blood where a nail had punctured my shin.

I said my legs get scraped up, even on the days when I’m not tearing down houses.

“Even on the days you’re not tearing down houses...” He laughed, lifting a plastic container of rubble toward the Blight Buster dump-truck.

As the day went on, dirt and soot stuck to the sweat that gathered around the rim of my goggles. I found pink puffs of insulation tangled in my hair and tiny shards of glass stuck in my belly button. Stray wires cut clean lines down my calves and asbestos made my mouth water. When you’re taking down the pieces of a house, it feels hard to believe anyone ever lived there—that the fragments of wood, glass, and wire ever came from a solid structure. The only time I associated the ruin with a home was when the writer unearthed the handle of a ceramic coffee. He looked up, and said, “Someone used to eat breakfast here.”
Age: 24, Summer 2010: I wanted to see the house where my grandfather grew up—the first house where my family lived in Detroit. He gave me the address over the phone and I piled my car with street maps and kept my atlas closed. I’d gotten comfortable driving in the city, but I navigated everywhere with maps. I liked piecing together directions and street names, connecting the places I knew.

Papa’s childhood home wasn’t far from the house where my mom grew up thirty years later—near the University of Detroit—not far off the highway—but the neighborhood felt different. Children played kick ball in the center a narrow street, lined on both sides with parked cars. People sat on stoops. I got out of my car with my camera and the address in hand and walked up to the address which corresponded to the number Papa scrawled: 15883, a house with a hexagonal roof and flaking yellow trim. Wind chimes and baskets of flowers dangled from the roof. A woman wearing red slippers sat on the porch with a yellow television table in front of her, reading the newspaper.

She sat back in her seat. Her slippers only skimmed the surface of the porch as she swung her legs. She had gray hair but her posture made her seem girlish. When I reached the end of the sidewalk, she looked up.

I told her my grandfather grew up in her house.
“Is that so?”

“Yes—do you mind if I take a photo of it?”

She pursed her face, “Just the outside?”

“Yes.”

“Well I guess that would be fine.”

I backed away from the house, framing the shot around hexagonal shape of the roof. The woman on the porch continued to swing her feet and read her paper. In my picture, she’s mostly obscured by pine trees: a set of red slippers and a yellow table, between branches.

8.

I haven’t lived in a house for seven years. In college I lived in dorms. I shared a bathroom with 20 other girls. I wore flip-flops in the shower and curled my hair in front of strangers when I got ready in the morning. When I wanted to eat, I walked across campus, selected food to put on a plastic tray and paid for my meal with a plastic card. For my first two years of graduate school, I lived in a duplex. When my housemate and I moved in, we furnished our living room with two director’s chairs, a Japanese lantern, and a folding television table. We had no television or internet. Before we started teaching or taking classes we’d eat our dinners sitting cross legged on the carpeting, while watching Little Mermaid, one of two DVDs we had in our house on her laptop. We eventually pieced together furnishings from Craigslist and garage sales. We used her college futon and rescued a set of bookshelves from the dumpster, to create a comfortable, if temporary, place to live—but neither or us had any intention of staying.

Five or six years ago, my parents bought a lot in a developing subdivision. They planned on using it to build a home to retire in. Mom bought books about designing “Not so Big” houses and watched home design programs on HGTV. Dad imagined a wooded backyard. Now nothing is
developing and they can no longer afford to build there. The lot sits empty with a “for sale” sign on
the lawn that neighborhood regulations still require my parents to mow.

At age twenty-five, it’s hard to imagine ever owning a house—investing enough in a place to
commit to mortgage payments, appliance purchasing, and lawn mowing. I’ve been poor and transient
for so long it seems impossible to put down permanent roots.

9.

The day I went to look for Papa’s house in Detroit, I met a man who had lived in the same
neighborhood for over fifty years. He approached me while I photographed Papa’s house. I heard his
voice, before I saw his face.

“You said your grandfather lived in this neighborhood?”

I put down camera and turned to face a man with long gray dreadlocks.

“Yes.”

He told me he’d lived in the neighborhood all his life. He asked me if my grandfather
hunted. When I told him no, he asked when my grandfather lived on Tuller Street.

“I’m not sure, probably the forties.”

“Oh, I moved here in fifty six,” he paused, “Want to see my sunflowers?”

“Yes.”

I followed him across the street to a bed where knee high grass grew beside cabbages. A
scarecrow wearing a blue checked shirt stood in the middle, surrounded by a patch of sunflowers,
which bent in all directions, bright and yellow among the grass.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“They’re like you,” he said, “New and fresh.”
He bent down and pulled one of the sunflowers out of the ground by the roots, cradling the tendrils of dirt in his palm. “I’m going to put this in water, so you can take it home with you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“No it’s okay. It’ll only take a minute.”

He walked across the street, carrying the sunflower with both hands. I stood on the sidewalk between his house and my great grandparents’ old home. Another gray haired man waved at me from his stoop, “He’s not giving you any trouble is he?”

“No,” I said, “He’s fine.”

When he got back, the flower was swaddled in wet paper towels. He placed it in my palm, “Here,” he said, “Now you can take it home with you.”

I walked back to my car, with my camera in one hand, and the flower pressed in the other. I laid its long stem across the passenger’s seat, propping the wrapped roots on the car’s consol.

10.

One of my professors likes to tell me that I’m writing a complicated love letter to Michigan. One of my friends suggested I actually write this letter. (*Dear Michigan, It’s been a complex twenty-five years, but I’ve finally decided to claim you as home.*)

There’s no word in the French language for “home.” In Mandarin (“Jia”) and Cantonese (“Gaa”)—“home” and “family” are synonyms. In Spanish, the word for home, “hogar,” translates closely to our English word for “hearth.” The Spanish phrase for being far from home: “hallarse ausente” literally translates to “seeking and finding distance.”

11.

Age: 24, August 2010: A week after volunteering for Blight Busters I met the writer in the city for a tour of Detroit. He talked to a security guard in a navy jacket who agreed to get us on the roof of the
Guardian Building in Detroit for twenty-bucks. One of the city’s most beautiful buildings: a “Cathedral of Finance” built just before the Great Depression. We met the security guard at the back entrance of the Guardian Building after he got off work. We played serious as we moved through carpeted office-hallways, passing from one elevator to another, until we reach a locked hallway. We ascended the stairs in a huffy silence, gripping the rails as we rose.

He braced the door as I stepped out into the sun. Stray strands from my ponytail blew across my forehead as I moved toward the building’s edge. I leaned forward and looked out at the Detroit River, the Penobscot Building, the Renaissance Center, the Book Building, Woodward, the People Mover. I pressed my elbows against the structure and rested my head in my hands. From above the city, everything in the city looked alive, a sprawl of industry pressed against the river. We didn’t notice broken windows, condemnation signs, or boarded entrances. When I photographed the city from nearly five hundred feet above the ground my camera lens didn’t capture the decay. Detroit looked like the city I wanted it to be—a garden of towers scraping the sky.