

CLARK, GRACE, M.F.A. *Everybody's Nicer When They're Sad* (2021)

Directed by Dane Winkler. 176 pp.

My creative practice is about developing a sensitivity and curiosity towards myself and my world as much as it is about the formal qualities of creating objects. For the longest time, I considered myself a taker more than a maker—constantly absorbing my surroundings and capturing them in photographs to contemplate, question, and appreciate. Through events in recent years, including my participation in graduate school at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, I have come to learn that making art does not simply mean making *things*. It means making time, making care, making space, making relationships, and making my life into whatever form these lessons shape. The exhibition *Keep In Touch*, acts as an evidentiary collection of ephemera that is both mentally and physically collected as I stumble along the path through this emotional education. *Everybody's Nicer When They're Sad*, mines these transformative moments through the empathizing tool of narrative. Rather than didactically telling a viewer where the sources of my creative practice comes from, this text aims to show the story of the complex, ever-expanding, interwoven web of instances and influences that craft a human life. This document also acts as a way to personally process my happiness, hurt, and healing to better keep in touch with how I live, while hoping to create space for others to consider the same.

EVERYBODY'S NICER WHEN THEY'RE SAD

by

Grace Clark

CREATIVE THESIS

Submitted to

the Faculty of The Graduate School at

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts Greensboro

2021

Approved by

Dane Winkler

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Grace Clark has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Committee Members

April 24, 2021

Date of Acceptance by Committee

April 4, 2021

of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I feel unmeasurable gratitude...

To my parents for the emotional, physical, and financial support to help me live with little fear of failure.

To my sister for having the courage to say “I love you.”

To my graduate cohort, for commiserating with me through a wildly tumultuous educational experience and shaping the community we knew we needed.

To my graduate committee for having the voices that I wanted in my head.

To the graduate faculty whose voices I couldn’t take in, but in that distinction influenced me just as well.

To Sebastian Lindquist for the gift of time, a spare set of hands for lifting, and the knowledge of joinery.

To the Stewart Family for expanding my understanding of family.

To Ashley Strazzinski, for always having an open ear and making art fun again.

To Rob Ribes for consistently saying “I’m proud of you.”

To Andrea Zittel, Paula Wilson, Joan Malkerson, Naomi Schlieshman, Richard Criddle, and Brad Dilger for taking a chance on me and offering me entry points and exit doors from the art experiences I needed most.

To Megan Duda and Mary Lum for the mentorship and friendship.

To the UNCG staff, the paint counter employees at Home Depot, the Hardwood Store of North Carolina employees, the mail delivery workers, and whoever stocks the organic celery at Harris Teeter for the labor that often goes unseen.

To Sam Ekren, Ryan Ball, Lin Enger and everyone that read the embarrassing 2016 blog and told me I could write.

To authors such as memoirists Ariel Levy and Stephanie Danler, James Baldwin, and nature/philosophy writers Akiko Busch and Jenny Odell, who have greatly shaped my thoughts on intimacy, the fragility of life, and the inevitability of death. In addition, they expanded my understanding of what it means to appreciate the quiet, the slow, the invisible, and the need to extend ourselves by turning inward in a society that praises production, speed, output, and exposure.

To artists such as Andrea Zittel who encouraged me to question how to live through the creation of sculptural utilitarian structures that call upon ritual as well as physical and mental compartmentalization. Sophie Calle who provided examples of how to bear all in many of her diaristic, text-and-image-based works about intimacy or social practice projects culminating in confessions. Photographer Rebecca Norris-Webb who reminded me of the power of documenting a journey that starts with one intention and ends as an unexpected and intuitively introspective homage to heartbreak. Itaru Sasaki who exemplified the generosity one can provide by making physical space for the self and for others to sit with such pain.

To artists and architects James Turrell, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Prickly Mountain Gang who proved that keeping nature in mind when creating—whether referencing color, shape, or light—can simultaneously result in both melancholy and joy, while encouraging an experience of the most visceral form.

To everyone mentioned in the following text, and everyone on my mind along the way. There's never enough space or time to illustrate the ways you've shaped me.

PREFACE

My creative practice is about developing a sensitivity and curiosity towards myself and my world as much as it is about the formal qualities of creating objects. For the longest time, I considered myself a taker more than a maker—constantly absorbing my surroundings and capturing them in photographs to contemplate, question, and appreciate. Through events in recent years, including my participation in graduate school at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, I have come to learn that making art does not simply mean making *things*. It means making time, making care, making space, making relationships, and making my life into whatever form these lessons shape. The exhibition *Keep In Touch*, acts as an evidentiary collection of ephemera that is both mentally and physically collected as I stumble along the path through this emotional education.

Emotional intelligence describes a person's capacity to understand and use emotions to empathize with others, navigate conflict and challenges, and connect with ourselves and our surroundings. Though there are many ways to approach these subjects, engagements with the natural landscape act as an access point for my personal learning and reflection. I have found that the land not only makes our phenomenal physical existence possible, but it also hosts the complex system of intergenerational roots that ground me. It carries the heavy contradictions of past happiness and hurt, yet somehow still offers immense opportunity to expand, move, heal, and grow, while learning how to live, and how to let go. I often revisit the geographic formations that have become iconic in my life. Embodying the spaces that I've occupied previously, touching the cold stone surfaces, smelling the sweet pines, tasting the salty waters, these landmarks act as touchstones to help me see and feel where I've come from, and where I may go. By exploring the natural world and the reflections it conjures, I become more familiar with navigating my own emotional landscape.

Keep In Touch, looks to historic structures of teaching a social/emotional education, including religion, to physically and conceptually frame my creative practice. By viewing art and life as one in the same, my process of making becomes a spiritual practice as I create photographic and sculptural relics of rituals, iconize formative figureheads from my journey, and develop systems of organization that create a sense of comfort, humility, healing, and hope. "The

earth is my church,” is a phrase that is carried throughout the exhibition, as I process and honor remnants of the transformative moments in my life, many of which are in deep relation to my surroundings. The experience of making allows me to use my body to collect and create, my mind to draw ties between materials, influences, and intentions, and provides my spirit the gift of choosing how each decision makes me.

The supplementary text, *Everybody's Nicer When They're Sad*, mines these transformative moments through the empathizing tool of narrative. Rather than didactically telling a viewer where the sources of these works are coming from, this text aims to show the story of the complex, ever-expanding, interwoven web of instances and influences that craft a human life. Like the creation of the exhibited objects, this document also acts as a way to personally process my happiness, hurt, and healing to better keep in touch with how I live, while hoping to create space for others to consider the same.

The following text is based on memory. Not only is memory faulty and fleeting, but it admittedly shares only one ever-changing perspective of events and feelings. Many names have been changed in acknowledgment of these distortions as well as a sensitivity to privacy. Though I have dug at myself to try to recreate the most honest reality that I know, I acknowledge there are assumptions, blurring of events, inevitably scrambled timelines, and an immense amount of moments between moments that though felt and acknowledged in the process, have been left unmentioned in order to create narratives more concise than life. However, despite everything unsaid, unremembered, or unacknowledged, this distillation of reality and simplification of the inter-woven, relational complexities of such life is the one I've chosen to believe for the time being, and the one that most impactfully shapes me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.....vi
PART I..... 1
PART II.....55
PART III..... 117

PART I

WHAT I WANTED

“1 in 5!” my professor stated in our senior photo class. “That’s about how many of you will still be working in the arts 5 years down the road. Raise your hand if you think that one of those few is you.” My arm rose confidently while I looked around at most of my peers sheepishly raising their hands, keeping their elbows close to their chest as if they only believed it with one fifth of their body.

I had been studying photography since I left my parents house at 16 to attend Minnesota’s public arts high school near Minneapolis, about a 3.5 hour drive from their home between the plains and lakes portions of the state. Though I was one of the more square of the students at this very progressive school (I didn’t smoke weed—only went along for the rides), when I attended Utah State University my freshman year I realized how hard it was to feel like a (still very privileged) minority in a very religiously focused, conservative landscape. In addition to the typical freshman friend-making questions like, “Where are you from?” and “What’s your major?” there was, “What ward (LDS church) are you a part of?” While huffing up Green Canyon for my 1 credit hiking course, there was also an, “Oh, but you believe in God, right?” Each time reassuring me that it was essential I wore my see through shirt, letting my shoulders and bra show for all to see. I made it a ritual to drink a caffeinated chai tea at the local coffee shop on Sundays right up until I moved back to Minnesota where I had nothing to prove anymore.

But moving back to Minnesota felt like failure, though I knew I had my priorities straight. Free tuition through the university my dad taught at would allow me to use my limited finances in other ways such as equipment, travel, and unpaid internships. I also wanted to be challenged by a “fine art” program to an extent that my wedding photographer classmates at USU weren’t giving me. But I missed the mountains. I’d lived the majority of my life in Western Minnesota, in or near a small town named Moorhead which sat across the Red River from Fargo, North Dakota. It was true that winters felt pretty much how they look in the movie, flat, windy, and frigid, but beyond the winters, Fargo/Moorhead was comfortable, easy. You could see the same people at the bar for tacos and bingo on Wednesday. The refugee community had built a

wonderful set of ethnic markets to make the place feel a touch more worldly and diverse. The arts community was surprisingly supported.

But even with my family and friends just down the road, this place didn't feel like home. I was living in the house that my parents had renovated for my grandma 13 years earlier. It would be the first home of her own. She had shared homes around the globe with my grandfather as they moved from army base to army base, and she inherited what looked like a dilapidated shoebox with bars on the windows in Tampa from her father, but this place—from the rubber ducky patterned shower curtain to the seafoam faux finish across the living room walls—would be entirely hers. But just after it was finished and she had set up her bird bath and planted a vegetable garden, she received a stage 4 cancer diagnosis. Having to move out before she really moved in, she headed south to receive chemo treatments in Florida. I did remove the baby blue duck shower curtain, but I couldn't repaint the faux finish she labored over. Maybe it didn't feel like mine, or maybe it felt like if I covered it, she would never come home.

I would take drives when the familiarity of the small school in a small town would begin to cave in on me. Watching the ebb and flow of the farmland's horizon, uninterrupted by trees, waving against the shifting sky, the rise and fall pulled at my chest as though forcing me to breathe. Many would believe Western Minnesota to be nothing like the Rockies, but on a quiet winter day, it feels like big sky country.

While completing my undergraduate degree, I worked jobs in the university gallery, I created a position for myself as the university's art collection archivist, and I was a photo lab assistant. But my main income came from working as a barista at a coffee shop in downtown Fargo. From hours of clarifying between a Starbucks caramel macchiato and a traditional macchiato and making sure that the homeless man pretending not to sleep in the corner's dentures didn't fall onto the floor again, I was able to save my tip money to very slowly build a teardrop camper. This was (barely) before the #vanlife era and may have been a result of endlessly dreaming up tree house designs with my dad but never actualizing any sort of plan, and/or the rise of Pinterest making DIY look doable. I had never taken a sculpture class before. The fact that I could use a drill and hammer, a couple power tools, and could definitely patch holes was largely due to sitting in a dry bathtub reading Nancy Drew and listening to Rob Mayer's "No Such Thing" hit the radio while watching through studded walls as my parents

renovated Grandma's house. I had only really built a birdhouse at one of Home Depot's kid's workshops.

As a photographer, I'd always been more of a finder than a maker, spontaneously identifying existing interests in my surroundings rather than envisioning and making them up for the camera. I could maybe learn how to construct a camper from the daydreams in my head, but I knew I couldn't fake an understanding of physics and enlisted help from my sculptor and motorcycle enthusiast friend Jesse.

I figured that this little camper home would act as a catalyst for the perfect creative lifestyle. My photographic work thrived when traveling but traveling was difficult when having to pay rent and be home for work. Instead, I would sell overpriced slices of pizza at music festivals to make a little cash to supplement my savings. My former photo professor had connected me with the job and though it didn't sound like the most ideal situation, I trusted her completely. In between shows I'd have nearly endless free time to travel independently, taking multiple weeks to slowly make my way to the next event, visiting friends and camping near national parks and on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. All I wanted was to travel, to see new places, to meet new people, to discover and grow in ways that had felt so stifled by ease and familiarity for so long.

After two years of on and off efforts, scrounging as much free material as possible, and profusely thanking Jesse's parents for letting us work in their heated garage for weeks one spring, the camper was complete. I had built a structure that I knew literally inside and out better than any place I'd lived before. I had made a home. And after a summer living out of a suitcase for an internship in Rochester, NY and reading "The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up" on the beach of Lake Michigan, I was ready to be rid of most of my things.

I put the bobblehead moose on the dashboard for company, kissed my boyfriend goodbye, wished I could cry a little more, and headed west to Idaho. A whirlwind of feelings manifested in only a numb sensation as I moved along interstate 94 going 75. This was it. I was finally reaching my goal of traveling indefinitely but with that came leaving my family, closest friends, and most senses of security behind.

Up until this point, I had felt multiple months of constant stresses rushing over me to pack up my house, finish the camper, spend time with friends, take care of family, and end a

relationship. Too busy to possibly feel. So when the time came to be on the road, with hardly any responsibilities to take care of, no urgent projects in the forefront of my brain, it was impossible for me to slow down. I complained to my mom a few days earlier about not knowing where I would sleep, what I would be doing in 3 months, if I could handle myself financially, or if my savings would last. I didn't want to end up right back where I started. But she so kindly reminded me, as I reminded myself many times since, that this was what I wanted.

After listening to the updates on the Jamar Clark case conclusion on Minnesota Public Radio until the voices got fuzzy amidst the North Dakota flatlands, I couldn't help but think over my plan. *Am I being too naively ambitious? Seeking something that was right in front of me?* I tried to remind myself I'd be naive if I *weren't* questioning. The sun heated my left side, bringing a sense of comfort, but also boiling the sweat in my armpit. I stopped in Jamestown, ND a couple hours into the trip to put on the deodorant and sit on the McDonald's toilet to download "The Essential Dixie Chicks."

There was an abandoned school and church located in Crystal Springs, ND. Just remnants of a deserted little farm community with a conveniently placed off-ramp next to it. Despite driving on this road many times before, I had never stopped. But this time, I recognized that I needed to slow down a bit. Maybe taking a few photos and exploring a new place would get me out of myself and into a healthier flow, less frantic. After wandering around for a few minutes, peeking through windows and ducking under fallen doorways while carefully watching my footing, I realized there weren't many photos to be had. But I did take the time that I needed to be present. To really look rather than live within the hustle of my own head, I was reminded once again that not only is this what I wanted, but this is what I *needed*. Back in the car I prepared myself for the last five hours of the ride. I settled into my seat, down pillow under my butt and root beer at my side, as I fumbled through my phone to find "Wide Open Spaces." Natalie always knew how necessary and how hard it was to leave home. As I passed the world's largest buffalo and cow, as though the music and I were on repeat, I bawled my way out west.

I'd cried this east-west stretch of 94 many times throughout my life. My mom's family was from Idaho Falls, Idaho. I was born in Idaho and for a year and a half was raised on a potato farm. We then moved to the Florida Keys where my dad built a photo program at the Florida Keys Community College in Key West, and my mom taught elementary school a few islands up.

Meanwhile, I would sit in the sandy backyard of Tiny Tots daycare collecting black beetles in my tiny palms. It was three months before the daycare asked my mom if I were a mute. “She doesn’t talk.”

In the summers, we’d travel to Idaho to visit family and find refuge from the heat in the mountains. The smell of sage in the air and the juniper that surrounded my grandparents’ brick home was truly the most familiar thing I’d known. I learned sarcasm at a young age through my papa.

“Come here, Ugly” he would sit me on his lap and ask for a kiss on his painfully stubby cheek in exchange for spending the next few hours flooding the yard to make a mud spa for my cousin and I to play in. I’d make my way through the two-acre farmyard filled with old cars, gas pumps, machinery, and scrap metal to check on my secret stash of animal bones hidden in the old pig pen. I’d play in the little playhouse that once belonged to my mother, spin on the merry-go-round until I felt sick, and with my cousin, pick apples off the ground of the orchard and chuck them over the barn to see who could throw the farthest. I carefully stocked gum chunks in one cheek as I swallowed the liquid through the other, until all that was left of my bubblegum ice cream was a half-frozen wad of flavorless tooth-tearing paste and an uneaten cake cone. Idaho was my childhood.

When the summer came to an end, I’d rest my head on my best friend in the back seat of our rust colored pickup truck, a vizsla named Weston. Eyes fixated on the mountains in the distance growing smaller and smaller, I’d play “The Essential John Denver” cd with “Take Me Home Country Roads” on repeat and silently cry as the truck carried us back east, further and further from the one place that felt most like home.

The sun seemed to set really quickly towards the horizon and my gas gauge was dropping at a similarly alarming speed as I headed excitedly toward that home as an adult with my camper in tow. With an unknown amount of miles left between me and my first stop, Miles City, Montana, I leaned forward in my seat, chest over the steering wheel, nose towards the windshield as though I could help propel my car just enough to get us where we needed to go.

Before I’d left Minnesota, my friend John swung by to say goodbye. I’d had a consistent crush on John since the 6th grade when I moved to a little lake town with a graduating class of 35.

I sometimes believe that in a parallel universe we had hung out enough that he became a little less conservative, and I a little less wanderlust enough to become his wife and live in that little lake town for the rest of my life. But I was shy through middle and early high school and he was quiet too. We didn't grow close until later in life. I'd be home from boarding school and we'd go for walks or ice skate together, or in college we'd swap letters written from his time at boot camp where he'd befriended black and gay men for the first time. I'd scribe "Dear John" notes from my call center desk in Utah that were intended for anything but a tragic goodbye. We'd swap memories, (his was always more vivid than mine) about running through the woods together as kids playing predator and prey as though those were our most lively days.

Though we grew incredibly close, eventually living 45 minutes away from each other again when I moved back from college, and I had drunkenly professed in text that I wished we'd kissed, we'd always stayed friends. Sweeping my lack of better judgement under a rug, our meetings centered around infrequent, but somewhat magical events like the concerts of one of our favorite folk bands or a hike as the tamaracks shifted seasons. Our relationship existed in a fascinatingly incredible slow burning, sort of sacred space that I was not especially used to.

"Do you have a knife?" he asked as he scoped out my camper for the first time.

"No, but I have pepper spray from my mom and a stun gun from my dad."

"You should take a knife. I always keep a knife in my glove box. I mean for protection maybe, but what if you hit a deer and it doesn't die right away?" His face winced a little as he gently explained.

My eyes widened and my brow narrowed. Before he could say more he fumbled through the glove box of his truck and handed me a knife, perfectly shaped for my hand, a plastic sheath, and a ball chain to carry it around my neck.

"Take this one. I have others."

As I crawled into the camper bed in Miles City, the street lamps shining through my curtains hardly allowing for night, I laid awake remembering that I had forgotten to return my Redbox movies and didn't know where they were amongst my moving mess. Hearing revving, eyes still closed, I checked again for the knife under my pillow. The cars of the Walmart parking lot sung in an idling hum along with the tune of my new mantra. "This is what I wanted."

HE'S IN THE STARS NOW

Idaho hadn't felt like a bubblegum ice cream, mud bath, bone hunting, fort building childhood existence in thirteen years or so. This wasn't just because all of the cousins had grown up and spread out, but also because of the events that took place in the winter of my 11th birthday when my parents, 3-month-old baby sister and I packed up to brave the white-out winter roads of I94 to spend Christmas at my grandparents'. Papa had been on dialysis for many months and most of his vital organs were beginning to fail him. We all believed it could be a short time before he would pass away, but we were going to have a Christmas celebration just like any other. The twelve grandkids, our parents, Gram, and Papa gathered around his single hospital bed in his room to help him open gifts. Another nativity set, this one brought back from Australia. Some popsicles. A pocket watch from Scotland to add to his collection. I sat against the wall swallowing the knot in my throat. What *things* could you possibly give a dying man? Especially one that has everything?

My Papa was a collector. Like the taxidermy animals at his cabin, he would scour sales for a good deal, a useful object, or five boxes of mystery tchotchkes. It started when he broke his back and couldn't farm in the way he used to. On road trips to visit us in Florida or Idaho, or on his way to a pain clinic in Portland to kick his addiction, he'd insist my Gram stop at every pawn shop he'd spot. He frequented one in downtown Idaho Falls and hung out with his friend and owner of the shop, Jim, until my Gram came to pick him up. Whenever Jim turned down a purchase, my grandpa would swoop in and buy the thing. Whether it was because he truly wanted everything he bought or he felt he needed to help someone out with a few bucks I'm not too sure, but eventually he filled every space he could. Gram didn't let it consume the house though. Beyond boxes of rings in a file cabinet and the iron banks and statues that she put on the windowsills, any hint at hoarding was confined to the backyard or the barns. He wasn't a collector to be a possessor however. You could ask him for anything and not only would he be happy to gift it to you, but he would know exactly where it was in his curated collection.

After opening presents, we gathered in the formal dining room for Christmas dinner. Ham, scalloped potatoes, green beans, yams, and kids wine all illuminated by the natural light coming through the two picture windows in the front of the ranch style house. This is the room where I would gaze into the crystal ball that sat on the tea cart. It had an image of my Gram and

Papa adhered to the base of it as though their love, and therefore my existence, was destiny. On the carpeted floor I'd pull out my Gram's brass costume jewelry box and lay out each item admiringly.

At these family dinners, the table tripled in size and my cousins John or Justin and I traditionally shared the organ's bench seat at the end of it. Formal portraits of my Gram's dead and distant relatives (including a girl that had died at my age) glared at us for picking around the scalloped potatoes to score some extra cheese. My sister, likely smelling the feast, started crying to be fed. As my mom carried her to the guest room to nurse, past my Papa resting in his bed, she heard another cry coming from down the hall. "Waaaah Waaaaah!" Papa, though drugged up on morphine and half asleep, would be sure to give his new granddaughter her fair share of teasing, even in his last hours.

I always slept in the sewing room down the hall from my grandparent's room but I couldn't sleep there Christmas night. A ceramic night light rendition of Jesus kneeling at a rock and staring at the sky faintly lit the room as I heard wails from down the hall. This time they weren't fake cries. I knew the family was surrounding Papa's bedside, reciting Our Fathers and Hail Marys as though the chants could summon some great spirits. I stared at the wallpaper border that surrounded my bedroom, an endless circle of ducks trying to take flight but never able to move. I forced myself to try to count them until I couldn't anymore. I grabbed my bedding and barely-there down pillow and ran through the hall, past all the other bedrooms, to the other side of the house, and into the basement. I threw myself onto the musty couch next to the pool table and pulled the blankets over my ears. But no amount of cover could help me unhear. The muffled cries only layered on top of those that rang through my mind as well as the ones that were now coming from my own chest.

I woke up at my aunt's house down the road. In the middle of the night my dad had decided to bring me somewhere quiet. Whatever our parents schemed worked because all the worries that were consuming me the night before, felt distant when my cousin John and I saw the giant snow pile my uncle had plowed together waiting for us outside. We bundled tightly and dug forts and tunnels into the "mountain" until mid-afternoon when my dad returned. He slowly emerged from the minivan, and shook his head while biting his lip.

“When you look at the stars and you see the brightest one, that’s him looking down. He’s in the stars now,” my aunt reassured me as I cried heaving sobs on her lap after kissing his cold, stubbly cheek goodbye.

We weren’t far from Idaho Falls, headed home after the funeral services, when a storm hit. My dad decided it would be best to spend one more night. It was an unprecedented winter storm, unlike anything I’d ever experienced before or since. Thunder and lightning lit up the snow-covered scene. The power went out and Mom, Dad, Gram, my sister and I all gathered next to the lava rock-faced fireplace on the living room floor as the sky grew dark. We told stories – some about Papa, and I fell asleep thinking that this had to be a sign from above, something to remind me where I belonged.

HELL'S HALF ACRE

Idaho Falls was a pretty ugly town. It boasted plenty of bars, a science museum, a prominent LDS temple, and a decent farmers market. But it had an unclear identity as its culture was based around the general population being a lot of white male engineers and laborers that work at the Idaho National Laboratory (INL) site just outside of town. However, the area surrounding Idaho Falls was incredible.

The first year and a half of my life was spent at the “West Place” living in a dank wood paneled trailer on my grandparents’ potato farm. My dad turned the well house into a personal darkroom that in the dry heat of a southeastern Idaho summer smelled of ripe developer and mouse piss. But our trailer looked out over rolling hills, quintessential big white farm houses, and paralleled the Hell’s Half-Acre lava fields—the easternmost of the young basaltic lava fields of the Snake River Plain. Long past the lava fields was Craters of the Moon National Monument and the Sawtooth Mountains. To the north, next to St. Anthony, (the tiny farm town where my Gram’s family had raised chickens) were the sand dunes. Past the dunes, not far from Yellowstone, was Island Park.

My parents took me camping more in the first 5 years of my life than I’d probably done in the 15 years after. This was greatly attributed to the wonderful western beauty of an underrated Idaho, and the resourcefulness of two broke young teachers trying to entertain themselves in the summers while toting around a new child. The Fishhook Creek trail in the Sawtooths was ingrained in my memory, not only through the eyes of my one-year-old self, but through the photo album images of my parents holding me in front of the creek that opened into a meadow at the base of the most terrifyingly comforting mountains imaginable. My family visited over and over again as we all grew older and I knew someday I’d be there without them, spreading ashes instead.

My grandparents had a cabin in Island Park, near Henry’s Fork, a “world famous” fishing run, and not far from Yellowstone’s west entrance. The cabin was filled head to toe with taxidermy. Mountain goats to jackalopes adorned the wood paneled walls. This is where I felt like a child. Where my cousin and I would run loose. Where he would dare me to touch the tongue of the boar that hung next to my bunk before falling asleep after a long day of fishing at the pond down the road and building forts in the forest service land adjacent to the house. Where

I fell out of said bunk onto the rust orange shag rug floor, unharmed, but crying and waiting for someone to come save me. When nobody came, I walked through the hall past the bearskin to the living room to see my dad sitting by the dim antler lamp lights talking with my uncle over a cup of coca-cola.

“Did you not hear me?!”

“I did.” He smiled half sarcastically and half endearingly. This was where I also learned to grow up.

I rolled up to my Gram’s house with my nearly complete camper in the early evening of the day after I had left home. My uncle and aunt had offered to help me install a solar panel so that I’d be sure to have my cell phone and computer charged to keep contact and get work done. My plan was to spend about a week in Idaho Falls. When my uncle and I weren’t working on the camper, I’d venture off into the surrounding landscape.

I spent a day at the lava by the West Place. Photographing the rocks as they radiated the heat of the spring day’s sun. When looking at them from afar, you could see the flow that once existed as a molasses-like magma. But upon closer inspection, the fluidity was brutally sharp. Shuffling around being sure not to break an ankle or fall and catch myself, slicing my palms on the unstable rock, I crab walked a rip into the ass of my pants.

The next day I took my gram to the sand dunes. We drove by her old home and she talked of how hard times were after losing their farm. When we arrived at the dunes, her little poodle Cindy (short for Cinnamon, who followed her previous poodle, Spice), yanked on the leash with a weight that couldn’t possibly topple even my Gram’s wobbly knees. But even if her legs did give out the insulated beds of sand would catch her fall.

How wild it was that two drastically different landscapes could be within a 30 minute drive of each other. That two contradictions, of physical forgiveness and ferocity could occupy adjacent spaces. But despite their very clear visual differences, the more I’d visit, the more I became familiar with the deep fissures and ever changing forms that created a shared capacity for inhabitability and erasure.

My uncle, my mom’s brother in law, was one of the engineers that worked at the INL. An electrical engineer, he was very good at many things, very generous to offer assistance, and

would tell you everything he knew along the way—whether or not related to the task. As he helped me wire a solar panel and battery to my camper, I couldn't help but think about the fissures in this side of my family.

Years earlier, my parents had bought a shared computer that eventually became mine when I went to high school. In that MacBook, sitting on my dorm room bed my first year away, I found a letter in word doc form, written to my aunt from my mom. The letter revealed just enough detail to understand the abuse that had taken place in their household as children - physical, verbal, sexual. Seemingly a letter seeking validation, confirmation, recognition, but didn't say much more. From this, I found myself asking questions, though I knew from exploring the rock that surrounded my family's land, if explored hastily, I would likely be burnt or broken.

My uncle wasn't as cautious of a treader. He could tell a story on someone's behalf as though he were front row and center. Maybe the conversation started with a casual inquiry, one on one with someone not directly involved in a family's trauma (he had married in) as I tried to know more about the events in the letter. Maybe it came from current events related to my cousin (not his child) being imprisoned for child pornography and admitting he was sexually abused as a kid. I can't recall where it started but with red wine sloshing in hand he wove together a picture of the domestic abuse that took place in my grandparents' household. He spoke of my Gram's mood swings so extreme that plates were smashed over heads until, as he described, a hysterectomy solved the hysteria.

"You Newman women have to be careful of your emotions. Watch out for your hormones," he summarized. Blood flushed my face to match the stains on his teeth.

PROMISED LAND

“The earth is my church,” is what my dad would say to me when asked about religion. My mom was raised and educated Catholic. Despite his mom being a lapsed Catholic, my father was never baptised yet he knew probably as much about the bible as my mom ever did. His more nature-focused stance made sense to me though, even when young. I could see how a Bierstadt could feel even more grand than the most magnificent rendition of Notre Dame. How John Muir and Ansel Adams could equate to prophets, spreading the good word of conservation and perpetuating manifest destiny.

That pull west was surely alluring to my dad, a young boy from a struggling military family whose own father was either absent due to military duty or struggling to keep a day job. Who would get dropped off down the street from the house with the bars on the windows that he lived in with his mother, siblings, and grandfather. Who had severe pneumonia 13 times by the age of 18 from the cigarettes smoked in their crowded home. Who would sit on the floor of that house looking at magazines filled with photographs of destinations that seemed of a power so high they could transport him to another life.

That pull eventually brought him to Utah State University to study to become a park ranger. Maybe it was the lack of desire to spend a career telling strangers to put their fires out, maybe it was a need to live the more monastic life of a slow worship, or maybe he saw that in art you could study anything, but photography eventually won him over from outdoor recreation management. Carrying his 4x5 camera over his shoulder, he worked toward becoming a first generation college graduate, and photographed the land with an eye that showed his true belief in the power it held to transform.

Zion was the name of the citadel in the center of Jerusalem at its highest point and in biblical terms was considered the “Promised Land.” Much like Jerusalem, Zion National Park was a place I’d heard of through stories and tales and seen via creative renditions. When I arrived at the park, my first destination after Idaho, the crowded tram took my altitude sick body to the base of a canyon surrounded by water. Like an oasis in the middle of a dusty wasteland, waterfalls and river beds lined the sides of the rocks that towered around me.

Despite my lopsided, hazy-feeling brain, I packed raisins and a package of tuna and went for a walk towards Angel's Landing. Angel's Landing was a "strenuous" hike feared by many. Not for the purely exhaustive amount of energy required, but because of the mental strain it offered its visitors. With sheer cliffs and warning signs of previous deaths, hikers walked along a ridge 1,400 feet above the canyon floor with nothing more than a shallow pace worth of rock at each side of their feet. They hung onto rope chains that dozens of other hikers were hanging onto as well as they inched their way up the crest of the canyon, hoping that nobody would yank it and cause a sudden disruption of balance.

If nature were my religion, this would be the Vatican. A trip that took some work and views that were absolutely awe inspiring, truly breathtaking. There was also an appropriate sense of peace easily interrupted by multiple couples asking me to take their picture, and, of course, a gift shop at the end.

The Mojave National Preserve offered me an extreme opposite to Zion. Turning off of I15, not far from Vegas, I came upon a "Road Flooded" sign. My GPS hadn't worked for a while and I knew if I were to diverge from the path it had set when it was previously connected to the internet I may lose my way completely. I wondered how likely it was that a road could even be flooded out there. Looking around at the most barren landscape I'd ever seen, combined with the fact that any illusion of safety the internet provided me had disappeared, I started to feel serious "The Hills Have Eyes" vibes. But I continued on the road, never running into a drop of water and fully expecting a disfigured radioactive superhuman to emerge in the middle of the road. However, after settling in with no concerns, the drive into the preserve became like a ceremonious procession. The world's second largest and most dense Joshua tree forest greeted me. Spiky arms of thousands of trees in the Clima Dome waved hello. I passed remnants of former ranches and railroad lines. And the road undulated like a little roller coaster, lifting me up and dropping me as distant mountains lined my side, directing me forward. I approached the sand dunes from a 4 mile, completely washboarded road. Besides a few trees at the base of the dunes, I was out there alone.

I had allocated four days to spend in this landscape. What I didn't realize when planning this though, was that I wasn't sure I would have enough gas to both explore the surrounding land and get out of the preserve and to the next station. So after finally settling in on a flat plot of

earth, pulling out a table and chair, and boiling a package of ramen noodles, I settled into my new home for some time.

If there were any point that I felt like I was living a monastic existence, it was those few days in the desert. But instead of draping drab fabric over my body, and silently reciting prayers in a dark, dank room, I was prancing around the sand dunes, singing to myself, naked with a can of peaches in hand. Time passed slowly in the Mojave. I had slowed down before, but I'm not sure I had ever been *this* slow. Throughout the day I went through what felt like weeks worth of emotions, with multiple bouts of sobbing and laughing, and dreaming and doubting. I thirsted and hungered, and came to understand how for Stanley Yelnats the juice of those peaches could be such a salvation on the horizon. It was in this place, at this pace that I also began to think about the ants that crawled at my bare feet and the massive forms of the miniscule grains of sand that surrounded me. Each existing in entirely different ways, but each made of curves and atoms so similar to mine, that a couple molecular rearrangements could have changed our fate. I wasn't that far off from the ant or the dune, and I was no more or less significant either. Learning that I was no more important, entitled, or essential provided a humility that was so incredibly freeing. To strip down the world, to leave the obligations of duties of work and money in a distant place, even if for only a few very present days, allowed me to *be* in a way I had never been. But this freedom came with great contradiction. Because although I could see the entire natural world around me as equal in value and interdependently connected I also saw that my impact was disproportionately far greater. I bore the burden of this power and now that I felt aware, I had a responsibility to do something about it. I'm not sure if it was the washboarded road that rattled a screw loose, the heat of the day rising and encouraging me to strip down in every way, or the lack of stimulus charging my brain, but I lost my mind in the desert in the very best way.

DESERT PEOPLE

While some had saved funds from summer jobs just to buy tickets, and others had borrowed their parents' credit cards to rent out the Palm Springs mid-century vacation rental that was featured on Taylor Swift's Instagram, I was gathered together with a group of misfits from around the country with the goal of making a lot of cash under the table and eating as much free artisan ice cream and poke bowls as possible. It was here, on the grounds of Coachella where most young adults hid their conquests from their parents, that I felt mine admire me for the first time.

"If you work for Spicy Pie, you've got problems," the manager yelled over the gas powered rumble of the company's golf cart, bandana covering half her face to protect from the dust and cut off shirt and shorts with a barbed wire tattoo circling her thigh. She introduced me to the multiple pizza booths that I may be working at, as well as the rest of the crew. A photographer from Vermont, a group of girls from Puerto Rico, a sex worker from Oakland and his punk butch friends, a man wearing a hip pack and belt that looked like a Burning Man survivalist, a handful of jam banders that microdosed constantly and attempted to sell enamel pins from the campground, and some local desk-jobbers that came to mix it up once a year and maybe catch some music.

"I don't know what I'm doing." I told my mom over the phone as I sat in the camper before my second shift, doors open hoping for a breeze free of dust. I felt so fresh and clean compared to everyone else. My tattoos were too mechanical, I still didn't smoke much weed, and I was awfully quiet. "Maybe I'll apply for that internship at the Idaho National Laboratory. It would be a drag but I could save up some money to travel. I don't know how much I'll even get from this job and I don't know if they'll need me at other shows or not. I don't want to run out and end up right back where I started. I'm not sure I belong here. But I don't know where else to go," I explained, choking back tears.

"We listened to your podcast. We've read what you've been writing. You should keep going," her response felt freeing.

On my way through North Dakota, a friend of a friend requested to interview me for her podcast. In it she asked me what I was doing and why I was traveling. Somehow hearing my desires and needs and fears articulated through the car radio on their 45 minute commute to work

helped my parents hear my words like they never had before. Or maybe it was that they could show their friends at work images of where I'd been to which coworkers would respond "Did her boyfriend go with her? She's alone?! I had always wished I could do something like that!" Whatever it was, I could hear pride and trust in the few words that my mom shared with me on the phone that day. And an understanding that she didn't want me to look back wishing.

With that, I eventually worked 5, 4-5 day weekends in California, at Bonnaroo in Tennessee, and lastly at Electric Forest in Michigan.. I made enough money to sustain traveling (supplemented by some minimal savings) for six months. The one-weekend-on/one-month-off structure of working really complimented my all-or-nothing lifestyle. I could break myself for a handful of days, recover, and not think about it again for weeks as I explored the things that felt true to my goals. Compared to the marketing job I had worked before traveling, always on call, this felt like a dream.

I found myself not just getting comfortable with not wearing a bra, drinking donated beer directly out of 5 gallon buckets, getting slapped by pepperonis during food fights, going to bed sore from the 12-18 hour shifts covered in grease and dirt, taking baby wipe baths, and even growing really fond of trap music, but *loving* it.

I would learn that everyone that worked for Spicy Pie did have problems and many, like myself, felt like they had nowhere to be. But unlike most of the population, they were not afraid to admit that they're searching, seeking, and learning. Through the immense differences between everyone and their stories was an oddball thread that connected us all, creating some familial sort of understanding and acceptance. We were a group of warm hearted people, each on our own paths, but honoring each other with sweat stained hugs.

When I met new people while traveling, and they asked where I lived, I'd say "here?" no matter my location. I didn't mean to be snarky or confusing, it just felt true. Maybe if you didn't belong anywhere at all, you belonged everywhere at the same time?

WAKING UP IN WONDER VALLEY

I met Victor through Spicy Pie. A long-time manager and main man in charge of operations for the company, he had worked under my professor when she was running the show years before and he had helped her build her house in Fargo. By proxy, we were immediately family and he took me under his wing, getting me on the crew at the VIP booth. During slow moments he taught me to haggle trades for the best acai bowls and negotiate with customers well enough to land us a \$156 tip. At 6'3" with a strong build, tanned skin, bleached blonde hair, and Octopus tattoo on his calf, Victor was a Puerto Rican teddy bear. Despite our obvious physical differences, we found ourselves to be oddly in sync. Every little like and dislike we learned we shared Victor would say "You think that too?!" with an innocence that made my eyes roll and heart melt simultaneously. He had a rare balance to him, sort of like a child before their 10th birthday, he was rambunctious, curious, and naive, but had an intuitive wisdom, responsibility, and reliability that aged him far beyond his years. We grew close faster than I had with anyone and everyone saw it.

Victor had a girlfriend in Puerto Rico that would sometimes work the festivals with us. She seemed to be my opposite—loud, drunk, and insanely sexy. They were in an open relationship. The kind where she wanted to know everything he was doing, and he wanted to know nothing about who she was or wasn't sleeping with. Despite having the room to grow, he and I kept our relationship purely platonic. But even so, the dynamic would change when she came to town. Likely fueled by inevitable gossip that mistook Victor's insatiable need for affection and my curiosity and care, there was an energy to her looks that made me aware of a silent fight happening between us—one that I didn't want or anticipate. I hoped I could trust that Victor could decide what he did or didn't need and where he could draw the line.

When Victor and I were alone, we'd talk and explore. We'd camp among the boulders of Joshua Tree, where he ate a cactus flower and I'd spend half an hour with both hands in his mouth fishing a spine out from under his tongue. He played music by the campfire and taught me how to slice a mango. I was constantly learning from and feeling cared for by Victor, like the big brother I had wished the real, older, half-brother that I never talked to was. After the last shows of a festival, we would sit under the dusty stars drinking beers he'd hidden in the walk-in cooler, dreaming of what we would do in the future. Victor had studied deep sea diving before Spicy

Pie. He found excitement in the endurance required by the pressure of a body of water on his own body and the way he could constantly discover the unfamiliar. But now he wanted to have a farm.

“I haven’t told anyone this.” He described a place where he could teach workshops on how to live sustainably by building earth ships and things of the sort. He shared his plan just under his breath as though it were either too precious or too unbelievable to let anyone else hear. But I believed in him and felt honored that he allowed me to hold his dreams. He felt comforted as I let him crawl inside my camper and hold me until we fell asleep.

I had an affinity for compartmentalizing, organizing, and categorizing (archiving) as well as eagerly attempting to get an understanding of people’s needs, desires, and motivations—the underlying currents that drive the human condition. The majority of my photographic travels that summer were focused on documenting people in state and national parks. Not unlike Ansel Adams’s image of Yosemite, contemporary landscape photographs had encouraged travel to these places, instilling mass desire to be a part of their magical manifestations. However the images most often seen within these spaces were not simply promising peace and awe inspiring views, they’re also offering viewers the opportunity to live out their best life with brand new puff blankets, yoga pants, smart watches, mountain bikes, and Mercedes Sprinter vans. When photographing, I would intentionally choose the most populated area in the parks (very different from the approach I take when trying to enjoy public lands myself) and watch people. I was drawn to their ironies. I’d imagine their stories, contemplate what brought them there.

It was harder to find solitude in the parks anymore. Each roadside destination was packed with people who’d spent most of their time with their backs turned to the land, arms outstretched, entranced by the view of their screen as they took and then retook their selfies. Arguably a place once so easy to wonderfully lose oneself (both figuratively and literally), public lands had become popular puppets of promotion. Though there seemed to be a genuine underlying desire for the connection, rejuvenation, grounding, and a slower pace that many likely needed in our oversaturated society, the surface of these spaces’ possibilities was simply scratched as people satisfied desires to change up their scenery. Rather than truly see and lose oneself in the humbling landscape, our culture placed more value on being seen. As I documented their

experiences, I wondered what they're seeking. I questioned what a genuine connection to nature looked like and who had access to these possibilities?

There was a feeling I'd get once in a while. A fleeting, but absolute best feeling. Maybe a few seconds or a few fortunate minutes, it felt like a high. Not a rush, but a flow. Like soaring. And nothing mattered, not even my self. I first heard the term "self actualization" while listening to a TED Radio Hour podcast titled "Maslow's Human Needs," as I worked on cataloging the Colorama project at the George Eastman Museum one summer. I fended off the mind-numbing sensation of computer work with hundreds of hours of podcasts. I would vomit my newfound facts about the current trends of nihilism or the Vanuatu tribes that practiced a worship around an American military-style aesthetic to my coworkers each lunch.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was a scaffold for humanity's well being. A fairly common sense set of guidelines (or some would argue all-too-obvious set of suggestions) where Maslow laid out the human needs beginning with the most foundational at the bottom of a pyramid. Physiological needs occupied the base. Food, shelter, water—the basics you need to simply survive. If you didn't have those needs at the base of the pyramid or hierarchy met, it was bound to be hard to achieve those more towards the top. The next tier was safety. Whether safety of a roof over one's head, a trust in one's body, or the ability to have dark skin and walk anywhere without unjust consequence, it was absolutely necessary for people to feel as though they're not at risk in order to get a chance to thrive. After those first two categories were fulfilled, we could begin to consider how we belonged. Love, companionship, and community were the next level of the pyramid. We would all do better when feeling a part of a community. Whether relationships were romantic or platonic, an individual was introverted or extroverted, humans were social creatures that typically flourished most when they felt like they belonged to part of a bigger pack. Not only could you belong though. It was also important to feel respected and needed, which was the next tier on the pyramid. One needed to understand and appreciate themselves, which would in turn let others show their respect as well. Maslow separated esteem into "higher" and "lower" saying that higher the (those who have more self-respect compared to those who sought respect from others) took precedence. Although Maslow put these in a pyramid format, it seems to me that they are more like a web. Although each tier was separated and required a balance, they were incredibly interrelated. Although some struggled attaining one

need without the others, some would find a wild will within them even when the most essential elements of surviving were lacking.

What was most surprising to me was "self actualization." The lower tiers of the pyramid described how to live, but self actualization, the crown of the pyramid, explained *why*. It was described as the motive for realizing one's potential. Expressing creativity, a quest for spiritual enlightenment, pursuit of knowledge, and desire to give to society were examples of what it looked like to exist in a self actualized state, but to fully grasp an understanding it had to be felt. This podcast described a pianist playing. He had practiced and practiced so much that he was at a point when he could just play without thinking. He could trust his body, his muscle memory, everything he'd trained for, and the notes would flow out of him as though they were a part of him. His concentration wouldn't be strained, but simply a stream instead. He would be in this zone to the extent that he'd lose touch with his body and mind. His identity would disappear from his consciousness and he'd become this flowing act, or a "peak experience," as Maslow would say. It sounded a bit like heaven. All those worries disappearing, losing yourself and becoming this art, this flow of energy. But it wouldn't last. It never would. Never could. Maslow said something along the lines of, "Man can't be perfect but for five minutes." You must give up the notion of a permanent heaven, because after five minutes, you have to come back to earth again. Maslow believed that we must focus on ourselves, our bodies, and all these practical aspects of life just so that we could get to this peak experience that is entirely focused on losing sight of all that we've been seeking.

This was why I made art. But it is also why I hiked mountains or dug at deep discussions with a friend. Something about the flow of the act was numbing yet blissful in just the right way. I didn't worry about myself in this space or whether or not my writing was worth writing, if I had groceries to make dinner, or if I broke up with the wrong boy. *None* of it mattered, and it felt so good to not matter sometimes. Like the desert ant at my feet and the Joshua trees older than me, the humble quality felt freeing. "Freedom is between the ears," said Edward Abbey.

But this was why art could be *so* damn hard. Because there were no answers in art. No clear steps to help you rise on some sort of art version of Maslow's pyramid. No certainty to take you to a higher place full of confidence, community, and food in the fridge. And the art that felt

the absolute best to make, often required living in heaven. What a contradiction, to commit to living a life around a type of work that could be so personally intertwined and reliant on your health, your security, and emotional well-being to be successful, yet doesn't often reward its host with the financial or logistical benefits of well-being that so many other career paths would offer.

This was why I was living on the road. Why living in a camper, sleeping in a deafening desert alone, complementing my ramen noodles with discounted fruit, avoiding cities and shopping malls for fear of impulse buying, and sweating over pizza dough with strangers to make money to drive my car to my next destination was worth it. Because by simplifying my needs, I could make them more easily satisfied. And by satisfying them, I could forget about them enough to have space to contemplate this self-actualization, to create new work, and maybe live in heaven for just a few minutes.

Photographing in Wonder Valley was a peak experience. I drove through this area on my way to Indio to work Coachella and was drawn to the abandoned pastel pink shacks. Confused and intrigued, I went back a couple weeks later with Victor. He chatted up a guy at a gas station in Twenty-Nine Palms and found out it was an area that was land-granted to people decades ago. The grantees, given 5 acre parcels of land through the Small Tract Act of 1938, were responsible for “improving” the land with residences, businesses, or recreation. Despite every effort, most inhabitants found the properties to be unforgiving and couldn't build up their lives or a community, leaving Wonder Valley in a desolate state.

The wind was blowing like a heartbroken wail as we pulled over onto the gravel driveway of one of the multiple tracts of land that surrounded us. My lungs were already full of dust from a week of pizza vending at Coachella. I'd just showered so the sand was sticking in my hair rather than flowing through it, and my stomach was so full from massaman curry that I splurged on five minutes earlier. Though it didn't feel like as much of a splurge as I had just received my first weekend's payment. The stack of cash sat kindly in my glovebox. Groggy and exhausted from 18 hour shifts of standing on cement, my legs were tired and my mind was foggy, but Wonder Valley woke me up.

The sharp damp breeze raced under my feet, the camera in my hand, Victor at my side, I started sprinting from house to house with an underestimated energy, a mix of excitement and

some sort of solemn but refreshing spirit in the air. Victor sprinted after me. I don't know if it was the comfort of my camper, the poke bowls and jasmine ice cream I traded for at Coachella that filled me with a sustenance that had been lacking for some time, the community within the job I was working, the love I had in the back of my mind, or simply the wind, the friendship, or maybe the money. Likely it was all of those things building me up to it, but *this was a moment*. A peak experience. As the sun set it dusted the sky with a pastel pink and purple to match the dilapidated structures we explored, creating visually the glow that Victor and I were feeling internally as he ran fingers of one hand over the crumbling plaster while the other kept the hat from blowing off of his head, and my hair rushed around my mine, making images impossible to take, but embodying everything I was feeling perfectly.

Heaven was nothing, but everything. The shape it took was this contagious flow of running and looking and smiling and shooting. And when coming out of that Wonder Valley 5 minute experience, sun set, hair settled, back in the quiet of the car, nothing existed but the place and person that accompanied me in heaven.

THE ULTIMATE EXTREME

Multiple times in my adult life, my mom told me a story about a day in preschool that I'm not sure happened. One afternoon she picked me up from daycare and I ran to her from the exterior side of the house crying uncontrollably but unable to explain my feelings. It was at this same house that I remember loving the mac and cheese but despising a specific boy in a way I had never disliked someone before. Years later, I could still feel the anger that my 6-year-old self held, but without memory of the events that surround it, it was impossible to dissect. I couldn't be sure if it was a projection of my mother's own childhood fears onto mine or if something hurt me there, but the trauma—real or imagined—left me disoriented for some time.

I felt a similarly disorienting feeling after a Halloween party my freshman year in Utah. A hot tub, a water bottle quarter full of vodka, and a needy baseball player pushed me over an edge that the stuffed bra of my Hooters costume hadn't asked for. I would sometimes get this tingly pain running from my throat to my pinky finger whenever I felt in a position of physical obligation. Like when a boy in high school that I liked only as a friend asked if he could kiss me. That painful tinge in my pinky had happened again, but much more extreme. But besides that sensation, I told myself nothing *really* happened, I had no reason to be so upset. I wasn't raped. But my skin hadn't stopped crawling since he had grabbed my small frame with his calloused hands and I felt an anger boil up that had been 13 years in the making.

Henry had lived under me my freshman year of college. The first time we hung out he had walked below me as I was sitting on the dorm roof, gazing at the sun setting behind the Wellsvilles on the night of Halloween, a day before the party. Never resisting a ledge, he crawled through the window to join me. Over the next couple months, we would find ourselves overlooking expanses that traveled as far as our conversations could go deep. When he couldn't sleep, I'd offer him tea and we would lay in bed listening to *Explosions in the Sky* until we drifted into dreams.

Over a few months of getting to know each other, I learned about his insecurities; his passion for the beat poets; his need to anxiously drum his fingers on every stable surface; his

desire to write (and his belief that he was great but too nervous to let the world judge for themselves); his need for the rush of getting as close to the cliff's edge as possible; and the suicide attempt where he metaphorically jumped off of one.

Although Henry and I grew closer, I found myself trusting no one, including myself. Triggered by the smallest perceived incident of lack of respect after making out with him for the first time in a tent in his dorm room, I decided to distance myself and put anything that was growing between us to a halt. I dated an older, divorced musician (it wasn't uncommon to find 24 year old divorcees in Utah). That guy cheated on me, begged for me back, I kept sleeping with him though I'd emotionally disconnected, and he kept buying me wine. When we broke up, I half-jokingly sent him a meme that said, "Let's take a break until I've slept with as many people as you have." I later learned it wasn't a lack of respect I cared about, but the lack of control I had.

"I was sexually assaulted." was the language I landed on that felt true when I told Henry. I was sitting on the floor of his dorm, knees up to my chest, palms on my forehead. He was the first person I had shared any of my thoughts with about the night that had been lingering in the background of nearly our entire friendship. And although I'm not sure he really took it in or could comprehend the magnitude of something that didn't happen to the fullest extreme, I felt relief in vomiting my feelings. I felt validated by my own ability to make it heard, to make it real, to explain my thoughts and the mistakes I made that followed. I felt saved by my confession.

My relationship with Henry over the next few years was full of extremes. I'd visit him in Utah after moving away and take 2 AM hikes into the canyon, tipsily walking on a cliff's edge unable to see anything but the back of his ankles in the spotlight of my headlamp to lay on an outcropping of sandstone blanketed in stars. I learned to trust him, while also looking back at the hike in daylight saying, "That's Dangerous! What were we thinking?!" He considered us a movie-style romance, embracing the drama of falling in and out of touch as though it were essential to get anywhere great. When I was traveling with my camper, he encouraged me to end my travels in Cleveland—to move in with him. He offered me low rent, a studio space in his attic, and free flirty compliments. I planned to meet him when we were both in Utah that summer before even considering Cleveland. To feel out how we were in real space and time

after many years, but I found myself falling into his daydreams regularly. Who wouldn't want the tragic love of a Notebook-like ending?

In the years since college he had grown into an adventure seeking, Bukowski-quoting, yet fearless and seemingly sensitive man who skydived regularly. He confided in me about the flings he had here and there, but the lack of depth they shared. He continued to put on a fearless posture, posting images of himself on the edge of the steepest cliff or climbing the tallest peaks. *See, I'm not scared*, he said without having to speak.

I had grown into a relationship artist. With the fear of living with the regret of becoming an impermeable, emotional brick wall built with mortar made of hurt, I instead wore my heart on my sleeve and showed it off for the world to see. It was easier to find comfort in what I thought was the opposite extreme than something in-between. I practiced my ability to be open, to confess more often, and make myself vulnerable. I found I had a knack for encouraging it from others too and falling in love with everyone for it. I would still get twinges of pain from my throat to my pinky when I was touched in a way that felt a little off for some reason, but I had learned to talk through them. I fed off of learning from these relationships and growing from the lessons I could keep long after they ended. My friend Abby half-joked that I was "the heartbreaker," warming people up, to find that we weren't compatible only to part ways with them after gutting them open. I was still working on letting go of control.

It was at a Village Inn a morning after camping in the Utah canyon that Henry and I decided to go skydiving. We had a few short days together in the middle of my travels and I was along for the roller coaster ride that entailed having him in my life. "I understand it might not be totally responsible. Especially financially," he said as we finished our hashbrowns and eggs. I giggled a little.

"Please Henry, nothing I do with you seems to be."

24 hours later I was falling through a cloud holding Henry's hands thousands of feet above the earth. The whole thing was entirely surreal. Maybe I had been taking too many probiotic supplements, but I was entirely chill, almost wishing I had had an adrenaline rush as I sat at the door about to fall. But the mental strain it took to comprehend falling out of a moving structure 12,000 feet above ground, mixed with the physical distress of breathing when air was

being forced into every orifice, and the emotional transformation of doing something I never thought I would, was all too stimulating to comprehend any part fully. I couldn't quite understand the smile on my face when I was done, but it was a feeling I couldn't shake.

Though I got a taste of what made Henry feel most alive, I learned over those few days that our ideas of risk and extremes weren't totally in sync. Sitting on a hotel balcony in the warm summer heat, I brought up his proposal about Cleveland. He suddenly acted like he knew nothing. That he wasn't sure of what he wanted. That his leading texts were only part of the screenplay and he was only acting a role, never assumed to foreshadow a happy ending. At this moment, my butt sore on the concrete ground, knees up to my chest, palms on my forehead, the sun raking through the metal bars on the rail as it set beyond the expanse outside our room, I knew that this was our climax. If I were a viewer of this scene, I'd have been scowling at my character for putting up with so much flip flop, and half-asleep ready for the movie to end so I could finally get to bed.

Though I didn't want to qualify one's risk-taking or life-affirming strategies over another, I believed intimacy to be the ultimate extreme sport. Through many of the extreme sports, you'd build companionship; you'd go through excruciating shit together; you'd survive (as long as you used proper risk management); you'd happily commiserate; you'd build your body and mind stronger than ever. You could get some bruises or breaks along the way, but ultimately, with water and rest, those would heal.

In intimacy, much like being tethered to a stranger at 12,000 ft in the sky, you could do your part, practice together, communicate, and trust in another. But what made it the most extreme was that if you didn't make it through together (and the odds of relationships lasting isn't in anyone's favor honestly), dying of heartbreak was too uncommon an occurrence to create its own escape. Instead you'd have to live with it. But the emotional bruises, the shattered heart, the deteriorated self worth somehow don't heal like the automatic cellular rejuvenation of the physical body. And they don't make Outside Magazine headlines along the way. But with compassion, forgiveness, and an immense amount of patience for the self and for others—a lot of active work—these too could heal. And with extra strength and effort, there could be an opportunity to find so much community, commiseration, and wisdom in the wounds.

I knew (and fell entirely in love with) Henry's capacity to occasionally be vulnerable, open, and warm and help me find that in myself during some of the hardest times. But I also knew that as long as he held onto his fear of committing to the courage required to to be a part of something so vulnerable and uncertain, he would be held back from jumping off that ledge with me by at least a few feet.

I had never trusted my balance enough to stand on the edge of a physical cliff like Henry, but I'd eventually learn that I could deep dive into my heart a million times over. If it didn't work out, if I lost control, if my chute wouldn't deploy or I had a crash landing, I found lessons in my mistakes, and carried them into the next jump. I hoped that someday I would pull the right moves in the air and land in the comfort of the earth just right. But no matter what, I knew I would survive.

BOY'S CLUB

I felt amazingly good considering driving the 18 hours straight from Kansas City to Pensacola. I had been making my way from the western states, fueled by TED Radio Hour episodes and a single Red Bull (despite the fact that I typically didn't drink caffeine). When I arrived at the house on the bay and laid in Mark's guest bed, my body swayed with a 75 mph speed that was no longer consistent with the world around me. I awoke after maybe 4 hours of sleep. I felt filled with energy, but my body protested. Consisting of that sour stomach, hazy headed, heavy limbed feeling that comes with not enough sleep or a few too many beers, I pulled myself out of bed and into the living room where Mark was sitting on a lazy boy, leaned towards the carpet putting shoes onto his feet. He immediately guided me outside to show me where the paddleboard was and what food I should eat.

Mark was one of the men in a core group of my dad's photography professor friends. I grew up skipping school for a week or so each year to travel to one of their homes scattered throughout the United States, to ingest too much beef jerky and sweet tea, canoe in the sunken rivers, and drive around the southern countryside or roam the cities seeking out oddities to photograph in the cultural landscape. We'd sit around the table and they'd quiz my 9-year-old self on which print was digital and which was traditional, or I'd crawl into a hole in the door of an abandoned building to find a way for the rest of them to get in. Mark would sit on lookout squirming in the car too nervous to join. They were like family to me. Uncles that I saw more often than any blood, and mentors that shaped me in ways I was sure I hadn't yet grasped. My photographic path naturally stemmed from them, and I'd be giving myself a lot of credit if I could say I was a culmination of bits and pieces of each one of them. Maybe I had Roland's eye for color and abstraction, Mark's curiosity towards people at events and gatherings, Todd's tendencies towards mixed media, my dad's breakdown of the landscape. I definitely inherited their shared desire to abandon classes for a week to travel and roam with no destination known. I learned to love the process of photographing and had built an understanding of what a creative lifestyle could look like through their company. Professionals, quite serious about their work, they also knew how to have fun. If you needed a group of middle-aged men to sing Gilligan's Island's theme song to the tune of Amazing Grace or vice versa, you could call on them. Not

only did they teach me how to see, but those men also taught me what friendship could be. And they were men. Stinky, loud, lighthearted, and endearing, was my standard for “friend.”

Female friendships were harder for me. My mom was more of a homebody. She loved her family, her work, her peers, her dogs, and her garden and could be quite content at that. I was always quiet and reserved growing up, and until I was eleven I didn't have siblings in my house to bounce off of. My mom was so incredibly loving, but we weren't the most physically affectionate family. She had grown up in a home that was far less warm than anything she provided me. But while my girlfriends were cuddled up together on the couch at slumber parties, I held my shoulders tightly against my neck, forgetting to relax. I didn't know how to be in these scenes. My sister grew up a decade later with parents that were older and wiser and had subconsciously worked through or gotten better at hiding some of their personal traumas and stresses. My sister was cuddly. She would snuggle up or fall into my lap on the couch. But even as an adult, I'd awkwardly scratch her back or rub her head, unsure of my role. Nothing came naturally. *Is this what a sister should be?* Instead, I began to associate the close bonds of my father's friends—coming together from all parts of the country, enjoying themselves, feeling lighthearted and fun—to come from these masculine dynamics, which in some ways made me “one of the boys” quite early on. They didn't cuddle or touch, but laughed and teased.

In my young adulthood I could count my girl friends on about 4 fingers, while my guy friends took a few hands to hold. I enjoyed listening to “adults” sitting around talking about art and life more than I enjoyed many of the youthful happenings of my peers. I would still choose to hang out with that group of old men over many of my friends. So despite my better judgments, maybe I had just become my dad.

At the bay house in Pensacola, Mark and his family made me right at home. Despite knowing me since a very young age, I really admired Mark's willingness to treat me like an adult. As we paddled through the bay or drove around town to find his favorite food truck, we talked about art and careers and mental states associated with each, bouncing off of each other's insight as though I was one of the professionals now. A refreshing boost in confidence, he believed in where I was headed. “You're way better than all of us were. You've gotta keep doing it.” During a time when everything seemed quite unclear and the road was not at all straight, the

reassurance from someone that had always been a guiding force seemed to help me more clearly see.

After staying with Mark a couple nights, I made my way towards DeLand, Florida. A bit out of my way, I felt that visiting these friends was worth the detour. If that group of guys that I mentioned before were like family, Bob and Anne were the aunt and uncle I would call first if I needed some help. An Uncle Buck of sorts, Bob would have my back against any trouble. And as a big, mafia looking Jersey boy who liked his Jack and Coke, he looked like he could cause some of it himself. As a young child, too shy to speak, I would hide between my dad's legs hoping I wouldn't have to talk to anyone, Bob included. Bob continued to tease me for this and how long it took for me to open up to him. But what I'm not sure he knew was that although I didn't speak, I was far from disinterested. I was hiding, but I was always watching and listening.

I pulled into Bob and Anne's suburban home with Anne standing on the sidewalk energetically waving me into their driveway. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I finished my third helping of some sort of hodge podge crock pot dish they seemed almost embarrassed to feed me. But something simple, warm, and homemade was just what I'd needed. I had planned for Bob and I to take a little day trip to Gainesville the next day. We would photograph along the way and I had set up a meeting with the graduate student coordinator of the art department. I was really hoping that maybe putting Bob in this father-like role could help him see how much he meant to me.

My meeting went well and we scouted out the campus, adding a spot to my list of potential places to be in a couple years. The director, though seemingly genuinely impressed, especially by my travels, delivered a scripted line that my willingness to take risks and initiative "would definitely make you stand out positively!" But the most positive part of the trip was photographing along the way. Throughout my life, photographing was never only about taking pictures. It was about bonding with someone through an understanding of what they're shooting and how their worldview sees it to be. It was exchanging conversations about the projects real or only imagined that were stirring around. It was like Wonder Valley and the feeding off of a curiosity towards the self, others, and all of our surroundings.

I had been making art while traveling, but wasn't terribly excited about any particular project or future endeavor. After over a month on the road I was feeling a little sedentary

artistically and the lack of production only piled the guilt on top of that. Though living an entirely different scenario, Bob was feeling similarly. Through asking him about his projects, pulling off on the side of the road to take a photo occasionally, and exchanging back and forth, we sparked a little excitement in each other about the future. We talked about mobility and how there had to be a more efficient way of living and making that was mobile, but more supportive than a camper. Nothing outrageous, but even the simplest conversation and the smallest potential plans could plant a seed.

THE SUNSHINE ESTATE

Sam, a friend from high school, and I kept running into each other. I thought relationships were best this way. We weren't tracking each other or forcing the circumstances to meet each other, but somehow the universe repeatedly plopped us in the same places over the course of my summer traveling. Twice in LA, once in Minnesota, and next I was driving to Sam's parents' house on the eastern coast of Florida after staying with my aunt and her family in Siesta Key. As I drove directly across the middle of the skinny land mass that made up the state, I was reminded of the extremely polarized place Florida occupied in my mind. The coasts were overpopulated, houses piled on houses and endless traffic backed up between shopping malls and tourist spots. But the middle of the state was filled with off-season orange groves and not a single person or car crossing in front of me.

As I pulled into Vero Beach, the resort condo lifestyle reemerged. A bit surprised that his parents would have moved from a magical cabin in the north woods of Nevis, MN to live in a box by the beach, I was soon rest assured that that wasn't the case at all. My GPS instructed me to turn down a gravel road off of the main highway. Crawling under a canopy of sea oaks, I was transported to old Florida. The smell of the earth wafting through my open window became solid and sweet. The bugs were abundant, and the trees were telling tales of a former coastline.

I rolled up to a quaint yellow beach cottage with blue shutters, and a lovely woman sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch. Sam soon greeted me with a warm hug and brought me inside. He was always good at making people feel comfortable, noticed, and listened to and as soon as I met his parents, I knew why. His dad stood up from the couch and gave me a hug. Not just a good-to-meet-you light hug, but a welcome-to-my-home-it's-now-your-home kind of hug and offered me the contents of his fridge. Sam's mom motioned me to the guest cottage which also acted as her office just across a large screened in patio. The smell of lavender oils and salty air filled the sweet space and I rested my bag packed for a couple nights' stay on a beachy wicker chair.

Over salami and cheese and sparkling waters, the family, including Sam's 12-year-old niece, gathered together around the table for a mid afternoon snack. We delved into conversations of dreams, doshas, Chinese medicine, and campers as I got to know them.

“Red is a healing color,” Sam’s mom told me. “Surround yourself with it.” Within just an hour, I felt like they knew more about my inner workings than many of my fairly close friends ever would, but they gave just as much as they took.

Sam’s mom, (who his niece called Granny Sunshine) was a hypnotherapist and past life regression expert. A gentle, psychic soul, she was goofy, but with a mysterious rough edge that I couldn’t quite figure out but felt akin to. Sam’s dad was a classic native northern woodsman. He hunted, woodworked, and liked to fish. I could see the pride in his eyes as he showed me his handmade tool bench that efficiently folded into itself to conveniently make space for a vehicle in the garage.

When looking at them as two individuals, they seemed they would live worlds apart.. He didn’t partake in much of any of her mystical interests and refused to visit his past life, but he did use essential oils to heal some wounds. He preferred the woodlands, but understood that she sacrificed her love of the ocean to be with him in the trees for so many years, so they moved to Florida for her. In a situation that could have easily been a little bitter or complacent, he seemed genuinely pleased that she could be pleased. She encouraged his hunting trips up north, and although much of the house was beachy in theme, they had a Scandanavian styled guest bedroom with a large log post bed and Norwegian art covering the walls and bedspread.

Almost every meal eaten at Sam’s household was accompanied by a game of Parcheesi. Like some people leave a Monopoly game-in-progress at their table, this family left the Parcheesi board out at all times—holidays, average days, or even on trips. Sam dug an old board out of the cupboard, worn down so you could hardly see the graphics. It fell to pieces when he tried to hold it up.

I used the master bathroom one evening while Sam’s niece facetimed on the main toilet. Next to the roll of toilet paper was the remnant of a former roll. On the cardboard core was a little note saying, “I love you,” written in ballpoint pen. I imagined one of them left it for the other in the morning, neither of them wanting to throw it away. So there it sat, greeting them each time they sat on the pot. And now they were sharing their love in the littlest of places, even with me.

Most of my time at Vero was spent on the beach. Sam and I body surfed the current, playing and laughing as we let our limbs get tousled by the waves, throwing us unapologetically

to the sandy floor. The first night at the beach, Sam's niece refused to go in the water. Pacing on the sand or nose buried in a book. With no desire to swim, have her photo taken, or talk to us much, she seemed to have a stubborn spirit like my sister's of nearly the same age, "too cool" for such childish things. Gradually, as we played in the water day after day, she joined more and more and was eventually laughing and playing.

She asked, "Can you marry the sea?"

I had been swallowed up by the water so long, that when I went to bed that night, the waves swayed my legs as though this love was in bed with me. Behind my eyelids I still saw the clear blue sky of a backfloat as I rocked to sleep.

As a young child, one of my main goals in life was to find a place where I could lay on my back and only see the sky—no obstructions in my periphery. I wanted nothing but planar color. It wasn't something I sought out specifically, but I'd test on every hill top and mountain peak.

Before leaving Sam's house, I laid on the guest bed as his mom hypnotized me from the wicker chair.

"Do you want general guidance or do you want to explore something specifically? Something in a past life? Something from blocked memory?" she asked as she prepared me for a past-life regression session.

Though I wanted to be, I wasn't sure I was a believer in the process. But I was sure that, despite the immense amount of comfort they'd provided me over my stay, I couldn't tell her what I really wanted. As I settled into the bed, I tried with everything I had to give it a chance and quiet the monkey brain that constantly questioned if I was doing it right. I struggled to focus on the true question at hand. *Had I been assaulted before? Sexually? Had I maybe blocked something out from that day in preschool? Or was it in my genes?*

I didn't get answers, but I saw colors. Endless planes of shifting orange, then purple, then green, then blue, as though, with my eyes closed, I had made the dreams of my younger self come true.

FROM RICHES TO RAGS

Henry's twin brother, Jack, and I tagged along to an Explosions in the Sky concert when I was visiting in Utah earlier that summer. On the way, Jack mentioned needing a summer job before moving to China.

"I know of a summer gig," I offered.

Jack didn't remember this, but we had met over a slice of pizza. During my freshman year of college, when Henry and my relationship was on the mend we once went to midnight pizza at the cafeteria. Dipping our slices in ranch, I watched the young man that Henry had talked about so often in an endearing, but tough brotherly love way. He didn't have his life together; was failing his classes; drinking too much; too sad; too messy, but now that I met him, he seemed really sweet to me. He was all of the things Henry tried so incredibly hard not to be, but Jack had a freedom in which he envied.

It was this warmth and willingness to seek that encouraged me to offer him to join me in this sacred space of pizza slinging. It may have also been a desire to make Henry envy our flexibility while he was stuck working his new desk job that he slyly financially flaunted in our faces. I took a chance offering to share my camper with Jack for a few weeks on the festival circuit. I didn't think he would join, but I thought it could be good for him. Spicy Pie was after all a place for people with problems.

Not but a month later, I picked Jack up at the airport in Nashville. On our way to the grounds of Bonnaroo the next day, we stopped at a National Historic battleground to kill time. We took vows together as junior rangers, waded in the rivers, splashing under the oak trees, soaking up bits of sun that filtered through, only to solemnly walk back to the car after reading the informational sign and realizing that minutes weren't the only things that were killed on those shores.

Water was cleansing though, even if rushing through the most soiled of earth. That blood saturated river was replaced by that which carried the sweat off our faces, that which refreshed our souls, and that which anointed our friendship with the joy of youth and the wisdom of history.

Getting to know Jack while on my travels allowed each of us a blank slate. A space where we could reinvent ourselves and, even if just for a summer, be whoever or whatever we

desired. Somehow the people we chose, the personalities that came out on the road, fell so seamlessly into sync. We had nothing to lose with each other, except maybe a couple of awkward weeks, and by sharing a desire for vulnerability, honesty, and a need to unlearn our past habits, we had nothing but intimacy and sincerity to reap.

My relationship with Jack was always hard for me to describe. I could talk about how he was the king of the dad joke.

“Hi, welcome to Chili’s!” He would wave his hand high above his head with a somehow innocently smug grin on his face while I rolled my eyes, knowing that he would repeat his joke until someone laughed a little. I could talk about him complimenting my outfits in not just a “hey you look good” sort of way that felt like a come-on, but instead a “shit! your outfits really compliment your personality and it's really lovely.” His little comments about my yellow and white striped dress made me feel incredibly special on so many days. I could include how we got infectiously close. When describing how my armpits smelled like Tikka Masala every time I ate Indian food, he hardly hesitated to take a whiff. How we found some sort of contentment in the simplicity and in the most stressful situations, he could blast 90’s tunes and somehow do it in a way that was so genuine. How we began to tell each other about *everything*—even the hardest of things—because we had slept next to each other covered in sweat and pizza sauce with super stinky feet, gone through grouchy times, loving times, and so many things in between. We had seen parts of each other that were *really* dirty so there was little chance our internal dirt could scare each other away.

There were endless details that could describe how much I enjoyed his presence. His quirky silly attitude, and his sincere soul. How much trust and faith I had in him ran deep in my gut. But no gestures or clever stories could illustrate our friendship. Much like the Taoist belief that only the unnameable is entirely real, our relationship was based on such strong currents, deep beneath the waves we so commonly tread upon. Forces so strong, but impossible to see.

“It was by accident” he would later tell me. And with this, I couldn’t be more pleased.

Two young guys walked up to the pizza booth that Jack and I worked at with their hats hanging low over their heads. Obnoxiously asking for a slice of “pizza” to which Jack impatiently asked, “What kind?” Grins soon replaced the space that was first occupied by brims. One of the two was Jack’s friend from Utah, Clarke. The other, Clarke’s friend from high school, Bennett. Bennett immediately caught my eye. Wearing a sporty polo shirt and baseball cap with a

dark mustache, he looked like a young, nerdy golfer. His face was vibrant but had endlessly deep, weighted brown eyes.

I've always trusted my gut when it came to wanting to know someone. Some could argue it could be purely sexual attraction, but it sat in my chest somewhere between my heart and stomach. The feeling didn't happen often, so when it did, I made an eager (but subtle) go for it. My efforts paid off and at the end of our shift, the four of us were being showered in confetti and fog, packed so tightly in the crowd that I could feel Bennett's heart beat against my back, working against Tame Impala's bass.

The next night, Jack and I were ready to party. Done with our last regular 15 hour shift for the weekend, we traded pizza with the beer booth and ran out into the darkness with an apple juice jug of whiskey smash in hand. Our energy didn't go far though, as we met Clarke and Bennett at the medical tent within earshot of Dead & Company. Bennett looked wrecked, pale, and hunched over next to a very stern and bored looking medical provider. After Clarke filled us in on how many tabs of acid they'd taken that day, I set the whiskey smash on the ground, which is where it would remain for the rest of the night. Jack took Clarke to listen to some music. There was no sense in spiraling his trip into a puke party with Bennett. I was tired anyways and really not digging the idea of fighting a crowd to see Dead and Company (although my 7 year old self was still such a fan of John Mayer). I felt like out of all of us, despite the little amount of time I had known Bennett, I may be the best fit to accompany him.

Eventually we were carted over to the main medical tent. This tent consisted of dozens of cots along the edge of a giant shedlike space, plywood floors, and laminated cartoon characters holding numbers like the kind you'd see in a kindergarten classroom over each cot. It wasn't terribly busy, but the patients that were there somehow made the space feel like a warzone. An amputee (his arm amputated prior to his stay at the Bonnaroo med center) was walking around with his shirt off. Men and women had their limbs strapped to their cots to keep them from clawing their faces or the faces of the passive and unemotional doctors that were treating them off. Others were wrapped up like a hot dog you'd buy at a Cubs' game in a shiny noisy blanket. I wasn't sure how this place was supposed to help someone who was tripping their mind out. I smiled nervously at Bennett, rubbing his back as he sat down on a cot between two hot dogs. He raised his head from dry heaving in his blue travel puke bag, and smiled back.

For two IVs, plenty of screeches from a guy named Michael across the room, a couple more puke bags, some back scratches, a phone's death, more than enough apologies from Bennett, requests that I check in on Clarke and Jack, and the rise of some maternal instincts in me, we sat at that cot until Bennett felt well enough to move on.

We listened to Tame Impala again as we sat in Bennet's Range Rover at the campsite when I dropped him off after our stay at the med tent. He filled me in on his dad's role as the Economic Community and Development commissioner for the State of Tennessee. We bonded over our affection for Wrigley Field and he told me of the private jet his family took to Cubs games. His deep, tired eyes gazed at me admirably as I told him of my travels, how my coworker taught me how to pole dance on the fence poles during festival teardown, my dreams of running a retro camp store and being a full time artist. He told me he wished he could do what I was doing. "Why not do it?" I asked. Sputtering about the future gym business his parents gave him to establish and run, he spoke of obligations. They were the kind of duties you put on yourself because you think the other person wants you to, despite his parents encouraging him to do whatever he could dream. We saw entirely different worlds in one another.

Bennett invited Jack and I to join him after we finished at Bonnaroo. Passing through the gated community, my 2003 Chevy Tracker switchbacked our way up the steep Smoky Mountains to Bennett's 5 story cabin overlooking the park. Standing against the railing of the cabin's porch, the blue haze the Smokys were known for clouded the expansive view. Holding onto our cups of orange juice, he joked about being raised in this space, making sarcastic comments that alluded to a depression that made any vision of his future as hazy as the view before us. It was clear he wanted someone to talk to, and maybe sensing the broken in us, he felt comfortable enough to share. His eyes looked blankly ahead at the rising and falling mountains, but as we shared similarly heavy ideas, I could see his body shift telling us he knew what we were feeling.

We explored the park together, dodged a black bear on the trail, played darts, explored the wine cellar filled with varieties from his parents' vineyard in Argentina, golfed at the cabin community's little course, and sat by the fire sharing our Myers Briggs letters and reflecting on the recent Orlando attacks. Much like the relationship I was building with Jack, the sincerity between our shared interests and life as a whole, despite how different they may look, created an understanding of each other that was better felt than described.

After two full days at the cabin, we continued on to his parent's house. Swinging by his apartment to grab a few things, he showed us the local university's art gallery, and took us to an afternoon at the speakeasy. My car followed behind him as the interstate took us away from downtown to a suburban community nestled in the trees along the Tennessee River. As we pulled into the driveway, Jack and my mouths dropped further than that mansion was large. The cupboards were inlaid with the family crest. Beautiful musical instruments lined the walls of the great hall. The billiard room was covered in football memorabilia and autographed images of the family with Peyton Manning or one of those brothers I didn't keep track of. This home seemed like the quintessential product of southern money. And despite all this, and how incredibly far removed of an experience it is from my box behind a car, it felt like a *home*. And not just any home, but somehow *my home*. I was always really good at making myself feel comfortable nearly anywhere. Rustic or wealthy, country or city, it wouldn't take long for me to adapt and make my life fit right in, even if, just for a moment, I was only playing house.

We spent our first night soaking in the hot tub and then retiring to the home theater to sink into the couches to watch Bo Burnham's Netflix show. A heavy hearted comedian with a humor that makes you want to laugh and cry with deep existential pain, Bennett adored his humor likely because it was much like his own.

I woke in the morning after our first night to sit on the east side of the house, floating in the infinity pool overlooking the river, I energized myself laying in the morning sun. When done, I hung my bathing suit to dry on the hand of the marble female figure that guarded the gardens that led down to the boathouse. Dressed in a floor length, white, crocheted summer dress my grandma had bought me, I flowed through the kitchen, preparing breakfast hash for the boys with ingredients from their fridge and supplemented by a pepper from the Coleman cooler out in my car. As I searched for a serving plate, I found a red plate with white text on its face that exclaimed "You are special today!" This was the same plate that my mom would put in front of me on my birthday or even when I had failed to make it on the volleyball team. Though his cupboards were inlaid and ours were recycled from the neighbor's remodel and nearly falling off the walls, details like this had to be what shaped our sense of home.

Jack and I stayed here with Bennett for a couple nights before heading out of town. Destined for Cleveland to visit Henry, we packed up, said goodbye to the women guarding the

garden, hugged our friend and smiled and waved as we slid down the steep driveway. We didn't make it but 10 minutes down the road before Jack asked me to pull over to listen to Jim Carrey's commencement address on Youtube. He knew we could use a sentimental tear over some deep life things as we transitioned away from the friend we had grown so fond of and into new things. We happened to pull over right by an abandoned house that I wanted to explore after listening to the video. We each got a fill of just what we needed. As we returned to the car and hit the road for real, Jack cranked the tunes and got our gps guiding us to Cleveland. With an eight hour drive ahead of us, we were ready to reach the city, relax with Henry, and bar hop for the playoffs.

Dusk was eventually upon us and Jack set along with the sun. As he slept, I cranked up the music to sing extra loudly to. I had gotten much less self conscious about singing (Jack told me I have a nice voice so that helps) but there was always something nice about being "alone" and singing extra loudly with no volitions holding me back until my throat ached.

Suddenly a noise loud enough to overpower my voice and the radio filled the car. The floor thudded and a smell of burnt grease overpowered the space. I pulled off at the nearest exit so graciously seeing a Love's truck stop to the side.

"Jack.... Something's wrong. I think something's wrong." Startled like a child being woken during a tornado and told to run to the basement, Jack sat up orienting all of his senses to our new condition. Pulled over in the Love's parking lot, a geyser of greasy black fluids was dripping onto my tire and down to the asphalt. With little reason to even question the idea of having to take it to the shop, we pulled up next to a FedEx semi and set up camp for the night. It was a Friday evening, and without speaking of it, we were both aware that our exit from this place may be in distant sight.

"You know Grace, this is probably reality's way of putting us back in our place," Jack half-jokingly glanced my way as I settled into the camper and under the blankets Googling "axle problems." Pained but feeling the truth, I smiled back with dreary eyes.

For four days, we had pages of books, Arby's Jr. Roast Beef sandwiches, stale mini powdered donuts, \$11 showers we refused to afford, John Denver melodies sung out the open doors of the camper while the engine fumes of neighboring trucks roasted our brains, and each other to keep us sane for our stay at the Love's truck stop. I would wake in the morning, peek out my window to be sure no truckers were creeping around. Hobble to the toilet through the aisles

of potato chips, gaudy purses, and cheaply made electronics half-smiling at the register worker saying, *yes... we are still here.*

“It’s funny how comfortable you can become in a place in such a short time,” Jack voiced what I had already been thinking. At the start of our Love’s stay, we were each so hesitant about our safety and the situation as a whole. After days at this truck stop, it started to feel like ours—though we had stayed there for a longer continuous amount of time than we had stayed at any one place before. I had found this to be true about most situations. Maybe adaptability could be quite easy, whether I was at a campsite alone in the desert, a disorienting festival of thousands, a mansion in the Smokys, or a truck stop in Tennessee. I could even find myself sitting in a booth at Arby’s drinking a vanilla milkshake watching the playoffs game with my new best friend, (one that could have been watched drinking beers in its hometown with an old friend) but being totally content, and maybe even glad.

On our final day at Love’s, after stressing about money to fix the car, and how likely it was to break down again, questioning all of my future plans, I came to a realization as I returned back to the highway. So many times I had thought back to our dramatically different surroundings at the mansion house in Knoxville, thinking *man, it would be nice to be Bennett and just be able to pay to fix this without worry, get us out of here in a rush, to pull out a credit card and let someone take it and all of my problems away.* But the only problem money could solve was a broken car.

One of the reasons that I took this trip (a reason I didn’t realize until I was on it) was to discover the risks that I needed to take. I had always known that “good things are often the hardest” (or however the quote that adorns the daily desk calendar goes), but this contrasting experience only showed that to be so true. When I left home, with little money or security, I decided to take a risk, knowing that hard things could come. But by laying more money on the table, my gamble was also bigger, and the rewards had the potential to be greater. I couldn’t ignore that I had the privilege of being able to do this knowing that I had just enough of a safety net from my family that, worst case scenario, as long as I was able to continue living and breathing my parents would find a way to bring me home and take care of me until I got back on my feet. At times I’d feel spoiled for having this opportunity and this little bit of surety, when so many had never left their own town and had no one to call on. I wasn’t sure I was deserving. But was it better to let this opportunity go unknown?

If I were the one that owned the castle in Knoxville, I'm not sure any gamble as simple as a road trip could be such a rewarding game. It seemed it would be hard to be as transformatively uncomfortable in a situation you could easily escape. I was exhausted and likely too moody many times, absent of the carefree attitude that could come with the magic wand of an instantaneous money fix, but I had developed the confidence and pride of knowing that I was flexing my risk muscle pretty hard, and that it was only growing stronger. Whether at a boujie house or stranded at a truck stop, I could make it work and I would honestly enjoy traveling on the bumpy road and calling each place home.

I eventually extended an invite to Bennett to travel with me when I circled west again. I had trusted my gut with Jack once before, and was willing to take a chance at trusting it again. He sputtered once more about the gym and obligations, pushing off a decision until it was too late. I imagined it would be hard to choose a dream for yourself when there are seemingly endless possibilities.

LINGERING LOVE

During the summer between my junior and senior years of high school, my boyfriend from boarding school, Drew, stayed with my family for a few days. He was an artsy kid that didn't like to take showers at other people's houses and tromped around in the snow in his canvas shoes, leaving them smelling rotten even in the dry months and stinking up my dad's car during the 3.5 hour ride from Minneapolis—a fact my father wouldn't let him live down even a decade later. One night, as I slept in my room, the rest of my family long in bed, my door cracked open shining just a sliver of the kitchen light. Drew walked in and as he got closer I heard this pounding sound. It was bodily but didn't make much sense and his front side was silhouetted, shadowing his face. Was he touching himself? I grew annoyed at what I thought might be a sort of aggressive come on. But as he grew closer, and I could hear cries, I realized his heart was beating furiously.

“I went on your Facebook. I saw your messages. You don't love me.” My face grew hot, my throat swelled and my tongue tied.

“Have you ever been in love?” I asked Drew one of the first times we hung out, walking to the school's Literary Loft to watch *A Clockwork Orange*, only for me to fall asleep on a bean bag. I asked hoping he would ask me in return. Because that summer, for the first time, I had felt a whirlwind romance. I kissed a boy for the second time, which led to making out, and many sweet glances and hand holds around the rural high schooler's bonfires. This romance was with Ti, a Brazilian exchange student who was due to leave just as quickly as he came into my life. We messaged each other, both dreaming about future days, but communications inevitably grew weak over the coming months. I was still proud however. I had reached a milestone in my life and I had waited quite some time to get it right. I hadn't given into the silly flings my peers had in middle school where they'd kiss on the Valentines Day dance floor and hold hands on the bus but never actually learn about one another. I wanted something real and something deep. With Ti, not only did I have these feelings, and not only were they mutual, but I had lived through a tragic romance, just like in the movies. I was an experienced woman and I wanted the world to see.

I had been incredibly depressed the spring I had dated Drew. The cold darkness of the winter would always bring me down, but mixed with the absence of a car, living in a drab dorm

room with a rambunctious roommate, rarely able to leave the suburban campus, I felt stuck and unable to find my own space. Drew and I had gotten together earlier that winter, before the days grew dark. He had given me a tape player for my birthday when I didn't even know he knew I existed. Following the tape player, he wrote me the sweetest love notes, and gifted me pressed flowers, a locket filled with images of us, and many more mix tapes. We shared picnics in abandoned grain silos together and hit up every thrift store between Perpich and his mom's house where we listened to her Beatles albums while we alternated between making out and painting. At school we laid under the pool table in the dorm's rec room, piled up with blankets and other friends, my head rested on Drew's chest. I distinctly remembered drifting off thinking, *to be this drowsily comfortable with someone must mean I'm truly happy*. However as the winter continued into spring, though I knew the relationship wasn't at fault, I grew numb and the need to keep up with young love started to feel smothering.

Along with the budding tulips of that spring, a message from Ti popped up in my Facebook inbox. He spoke of missing the states and all of his friends, missing the campfires and concerts and host family he stayed with. He missed my company and, for the first time, told me that he loved me.

"I love and miss you too" I said somewhere in the lengthy response I shared. "You never know what life can bring." I didn't want to let him down, and I did truly feel so much love and longing for him, and though I didn't get much else right at that young age, I knew that the future was an unpredictable thing.

When Drew saw these messages, I knew what it looked like. That I wished Ti were here and I were with him instead of Drew. That I had feelings for Ti which must have meant I couldn't possibly care for Drew in the way I had expressed to him. But I didn't have the language to tell Drew otherwise; to tell him that my relationship with him was a new level of intimacy that I had never shared with anyone before; that even if Ti were here, my affections didn't mean I wanted anything to change; that I felt a sense of obligation to not break Ti's heart by saying something to shut him down; that some parts of Drew and my relationship weren't great at the moment, but that didn't mean I wanted other things; and that I did feel love for and longing, because once you let someone in, even if circumstances change, some of that love will *never* go away.

But in my room on that summer evening, I heard a heart break in front of me and the only words I could say were filled with guilt and shame.

Earlier in the summer I had swung through Minneapolis, after working a festival in Michigan, as I headed west once more. I was waiting for my friend to get off work and found myself in the neighborhood of Drew's mom's house needing to kill time. Passing by the bar that his mom would work at, I decided to pull off and step inside. I sometimes liked to revisit things of my past, even if just to see how far we'd all come.

There she was, 4pm serving the regulars bud lights, her face with added wrinkles, and voice deeper and scratchier than before from the smoke she'd inhaled for years on end. She looked at me, as if she had seen me every day for the past 6 years. She asked if I wanted a glass of water or a soda and continued working, tending to the 4 other people at the bar. I'm not sure if I wanted her to embrace me like she always used to—her smile to light up like it did when she presented a bowl of sliced strawberries and whipped cream, because she knew it was my favorite. But with the store bought brownies she told me to help myself to and the exhausted lifelessness of her eyes, I suddenly felt as though I shouldn't be there. That this wasn't right.

Drew later asked me to meet him for breakfast. He had initiated it many times before but it had never worked out. I showed up at the cafe alone and after waiting 20 minutes and ordering myself a stuffed croissant, it seemed history would repeat itself, like the end of our relationship when we would half-heartedly make attempts to care for each other, and I was left with an empty promise and no surprise. Shortly after, I ran into the woman that was the dorm "mom" when he and I lived together in high school. And though I had never grown close to her like many had in our two years there, I opened up to her about the disappointment when she asked if I still talked to him. "You know that's not because of you, right?" I wondered why allowing myself to hear those words had taken so much time.

WHERE I'M BOUND

Traveling ended shortly after I learned I was pregnant. I was back at my Gram's house in Idaho after circling the country and adding 20,000+ miles to my car. My parents had overlapped my stay by about a week and left to return to Minnesota the morning of the day that I knew something was wrong. I began to feel deep sharp pains in my lower abdomen. On birth control since 14 for severe menstrual cramps, this wasn't a type that I was at all familiar with. I called to my Gram from the floor of the bathroom, sweat dripping down my face, I burned and chilled at the same time, ready to explode my guts, kneeling before the porcelain god. Her expression didn't change as she stood in the doorway towering over my pale face.

"Can you please get me some feminine products? I'm not feeling well and can't go get them myself."

"Okay," she returned plainly.

Any time a grandkid would get as much as a sliver Gram would be there with a scalpel ready to exercise her nursing skills. I knew she had been fading in these recent years, but her lack of interest in my clammy death on the bathroom floor concerned me. As the pain increased and I worried about organs bursting inside me I called my aunt to see if she could take me to the doctor. Concerned about paying out of state emergency room fees, I asked her to take me to the walk-in.

"First thing's first, let's do a pregnancy test." The chances I was pregnant were nearly non-existent. But only nearly, and if Mary could supposedly do it, maybe I could too. "So the pregnancy test came back positive. We are going to have you go to the emergency room to get an ultrasound and check to make sure there are no complications. We won't charge you for this visit though!" If there were any foreign object in my body, it now felt like it was entirely in my throat.

Afraid to tell my aunt what had happened, as though talking about something could make it any more or less real, I kept my mouth shut on the way to the E.R. and through the next three hours of sitting in a private hospital room awaiting blood work, pumped with hydromorphone.

Sometimes when I couldn't sleep, I'd count the number of boyfriends I'd had. The challenge of remembering a particular order, and a familiar repetition associated with primarily good feelings would ease me into sleep. In my delirious haze as I tried to relax enough to sleep

off the pain I thought of their names. But only fear filled me knowing that I'd either ran from them, been rejected by them, or longed for them, and none of them remained.

But there was still the guy that rode his bicycle to Minnesota from Denver as a last ditch, grand gesture to ask me to marry him. I had agreed to meet on the highest peak of Colorado in about two years if I had decided I'd changed my mind (his next last effort). I had spent a few days with him that summer traveling, rock climbing, eating pizza rolls, and watching an MTV series aimed at teens ten years our junior, and he had always provided a true sense of comfort and familiarity. And though I wouldn't be surprised if he would take me in even if I showed up on Mount Elbert with a 1 year old (he'd always, to a fault, accepted me flaws and all), this baby was certainly not his. Not to mention, I was nearly completely broke, and any money I had left would likely go to this hospital stay. I was jobless, aimless. The last thing I wanted was to head back to Minnesota, but heading back to Minnesota somehow pregnant would be a cherry on top.

I'd thought about what I'd do in this scenario multiple times. I'd have to take care of it. I couldn't keep it. Couldn't raise a child when I couldn't take care of myself. Couldn't bring a person into this overpopulated world without a clear understanding and acceptance of those implications. But now that my body potentially held that life, even if I was in extreme denial about it, these thoughts were much further from my mind.

Away from any family that I felt could get past the shock of premarital sex and being without a loved one in my picture, I felt incredibly alone. The only person I could tell was Jack.

"They said I'm pregnant, but I swear I'm not," I typed. But in my hazy state, I sent the message to a guy I'd met at a concert a week or two earlier. "LOL" was all I could respond when I immediately realized my mistake. At least the hydromorphone made me literally laugh out loud.

"All the lab work looks fine!" *Looks fine? I've waited this long to hear that? Does look fine mean I look fine for a pregnant woman?* I hadn't told the doctors at the hospital what the walk-in had told me. I'd learned that if you search hard enough for something, you'll likely find it and I didn't want that to be a baby. "Fine" had to mean normal. Nothing growing in me, no extra precautions to take.

But I didn't feel fine. They rolled me into the ultrasound room, rubbed a cold fist-like wand around my body, inside and out, to tell me I had an especially large ovarian cyst. At about my age, my mom had nearly died from multiple ruptured cysts. Although I was still fearful, I

could rest much more easily knowing I wouldn't have to live with the stigma of the alternative diagnosis.

Two days after being released from the hospital, I made my way to Craters of the Moon National Monument. I was en route to see Victor in Washington, but wanted to use the opportunity to see a few of my favorite places and have time to process the past couple days without a Jesus painting lingering over my headboard. I chose the least busy trailhead to walk along until I found a place remote enough to take off my clothes. When I was in the Mojave, I'd begun a series of nude images amongst the landscape, the shape of my body mimicking that of the other natural forms around me. The wind wailing much like it did on that day in Wonder Valley, as though it would wipe my sins away and take my tripod down with it, I rushed to photograph myself among the lava rocks. My body ached as I leaned the weight of my abdomen against the sharp porous stone, my skin shallowly sinking into every crevice. The sharpness, the crispness of the wind and cinder sand it carried, the rush in my chest, it all felt good.

I had found a free BLM campsite on the edge of a reservoir that was dried up for the season. Turning off of 26 not far out of Craters, I hit the gravel road that would eventually take me to the site. Washboarded I took my time, as the dust kicked up behind. The first lines of Nancy Griffith's version of "Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound" came into my head. "It's a long and a dusty road, a hot and a heavy load." A song originally by Tom Paxton and later covered by Johnny Cash, Nancy's was the one I'd grown up with. But until I'd grown this far, I hadn't quite felt it.

"I've been wandering through this land/ Just doin' the best I can/ Tryin' to find what I was meant to do/ And the people that I see/ Look as worried as can be/ And it looks like they are wonderin', too/ If you see me passing' by/ And you sit and wonder why/ And you wish that you were a Rambler, too/ Nail your shoes to the kitchen floor/ Lace 'em up and bar the door/ Thank the stars for the roof that's over you/ And I can't help but wonder where I'm bound..." she sang.

I woke at dawn the next day among grazing cows. I'd dreamt that I found a father and baby fox under some scrap wood somewhere. Informed by the Born Ruffians song, I believed that foxes mated for life, so I knew that something had to have happened to the mother if she weren't returning. I took them home and nursed the starving baby fox back to good health. In real life, I had been as close to being pregnant as I could come without being pregnant. In no way

was I *really* pregnant. But I was beginning to learn that even the slightest belief could have a stronger impact than reality, and take just as long to shake. A wall of smoke coming from forest fires in the north forced me to pack up my camp and continue my running.

After winding along the Salmon River, the peaks of the Sawtooths so familiar through family photos, visits throughout time, and the ink that was embedded in the skin of my inner bicep, made me burst out in a cathartic cry. Visiting these mountains felt like I was running home for the first time.

The Sawtooths were a touchstone for me. A landmark to act as a check-in point to clearly reflect on where I came from, and how far I had or hadn't come. Judging by the fluids falling from my face as I entered further into the mouth of the mountain range, my desire for companionship to share this beauty with, and the smoke of the nearby fire only adding to the cloudiness of my vision, I had a long ways to go—but I also had to remember, I really had come so far.

THE LUXURY OF NOT HAVING TO THINK

The smell of marijuana quickly replaced the scent of smoke soaked into my car's fabric seats as soon as I arrived in Wenatchee. Victor waved at me atop the butte of which his teardrop trailer, 1 acre pot farm, and various fruit fields called home. He familiarized me with the land as we snacked on apricots and cherries fresh off the trees, explained his plans for building out his friend's marijuana operation, and how you can tell if a plant is healthy based on the shape of its leaves. He gave me a big squeeze, a hug I didn't know I'd so dearly need.

The goal of our vacation together was to visit Olympic National Park. Victor had lived in Washington a couple years now so although I knew I could get around, I was emotionally drained from previous days' events and was ready for my Victor to take me under his wing like he had in California a few months earlier. We loaded up his Subaru and camper with our belongings with no clear agenda planned.

We attempted to camp in a parking lot along the beach of the Elwha while we watched DamNation on my laptop, which featured the story of the river's dam being demolished and restoring the flow of its salmon run before a local kicked us out claiming the indigenous people that held the land would not think highly of us sleeping there. We slept on national forest roads and Victor played his guitar as I wandered through the woods, climbing on giant logs. We camped on the ocean's edge near the town where Twilight was filmed, the waves drifting us to sleep. We backpacked in the Hoh Rain Forest for multiple nights, the rain poured through all of our visit except the first and last hours. "Is this what you do?" Victor asked as we hiked the few miles into camp. Victor had all the backpacking gear, but it turns out hiking and camping weren't really his thing.

"What do you mean?"

"Walking in silence?"

"I guess so. Sometimes I just get in a flow. Silence might be what I need." With a puzzled, contemplative look Victor carried on chatting about this and that, most of which I don't recall because I was too tired to care to hear.

I ended up making what felt like nearly every decision on our trip except whether or not we would get a hotel in Seattle our last night and which cut of salmon to buy at the smokehouse in Port Angeles. Victor had to have all of them, and I wouldn't argue. As we sat in the Subaru

outside the smokehouse, salmon cheek grease dripping down my arms, eating what was the best meal I'd ever had, Victor said, "I love hanging out with you. I don't have to think." I knew this was a compliment, because it's what I had come to him to seek.

TO DIE HAPPILY

I got my first tattoo my freshman year of college in Utah. Four lines made up a small rendition of Cassiopeia that cradled the space behind my ear. I learned to find Cassiopeia when I was about seven years old, camping in Theodore Roosevelt National Park with my dad and a group of his college students. An ideal spot for stargazing because of its remote location in Western North Dakota and its sparse selection of trees, Callie, a thickly eyelashed, skinny, young guy that awakened my understanding of “crush” took me on a tour through the sky. Following the camping trip, the constellation Cassiopeia stood out over and over in time. It seemed that no matter where I was (as long as it was in the majority of the upper hemisphere) physically or mentally, she was there. One constant in a tumultuous or uncertain life. I’d look to her when I felt uncertain, as though she were watching over me. If I could find her, I’d grow more certain. I’d been in hard places like this before and would undoubtedly be back in these feelings again, but like my own North Star, she was guiding my ship through the unseeable night.

Even before I learned of Cassiopeia, the stars had been a touchstone throughout my life. For as long as I can remember, when riding in a car at night through open lands where the sky was unobstructed by pollution of lights, I’d look out the window and silently, secretly cry. Especially when my dad was driving. I didn’t know what to think of it for years, but it was something I never made known as though I was embarrassed to be so emotional with no words to show. But when someone described “melancholy,” these scenes were what epitomized it for me. As time went on I learned to accept the melancholic spirit that found both comfort and sadness in the immense depth of the exterior space. I grew to consider how for all of us that depth reflected vastly inward as well, but in a way that nobody could ever fully understand no matter how hard we tried. After the death of my grandfather, the stars became a point of reflection in time as well. As my body was turned towards the passenger side window to get as many stars in my frame and hide the tears streaming down my cheek, I felt the presence of the person beside me, and the inevitable loss I’d eventually endure for loving them as deeply into the universe of my insides as possible. I didn’t think this occurrence is terribly uncommon, at least on a shallower level. Whether we made wishes on the first star we see at night, or a shooting star we had the privilege of catching, we were secretly hanging hopes, dreams, and fears over ourselves constantly.

As I flew from Minneapolis to New York City, there were no stars to see. Above the clouds, the moon shone so brightly that it was the only thing keeping me company as I sat in the window seat surrounded by strangers. I had packed my bag to move to China and was headed to NYC while I waited for my visa to be approved. I could no longer afford to travel in the states and didn't have first month's rent for any apartment near the jobs I had applied for and not heard back from. Teaching English in China offered a seemingly perfect balance of stability and the adventure that at this point I was so overstimulated by, but afraid to let go of for fear of my risk muscle turning to mush again.

I had spent six months living on the road where the only thing entirely certain was change and the uncertainty that came along with it. I had hardly made any photographs, definitely didn't use the paint set or embroidery kit or 5 other cameras I brought. Despite my slower pace, I was taking in so much change, so much new information visually, physically, and emotionally, at such a constant rate that my system had so little time to process the spaces I was in or to see them as curiously as could be. However, looking back at these months, I had so many milestones to look back on. Rather than the yearly birthday or family trip that had pretty evenly dotted my mental map of life, I had dozens of happenings to mark my time. Those markers somehow expanded my life as though I had lived enough to fill six months twenty times over. I knew this wasn't a sustainable rate of change. I knew that I couldn't keep it up. But as infinite as the dark sky that stretched beyond the plastic outside my window, I was grateful to have learned how much you can do with such little time.

The only times I've thought about myself wanting to die are when I'm happiest. A fear that life couldn't get any better, I could roll off the cliff I laid upon or let this plane crash to end it on a high. If only my parents would trust that I'd had a truly great life.

PART II

BAGELS IN BED

I was eating buttered bagels in bed with a boy from a band when I decided to stay in New York City. It wasn't because of him, though a couple weeks of a summer fling spent between his rented bedroom and my best friend Ash's apartments in the city, listening to him sing sweet tunes, having double dates with his musician friend, riding the train to hang out at the beach at Rockaway to bury our bodies in sand, shopping at the farmer's markets, and saying hello to the fruit vendor outside the warehouse in Bushwick each day started to feel familiar to me.

My visa for China was taking an incredibly long time and the hand-written note that I had to write telling the Chinese government that I had no criminal record didn't seem like a process that either of the parties could trust completely.

I began to apply for jobs, primarily in art handling, though I hadn't invested myself in the process of applying at hundreds of places like most people start their NYC stories. This boy and I were looking at records in a thrift store in Greenpoint when I got an email from the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. First they declined my application for an internship (later to explain the position didn't exist any longer), to then offer me another one in a different department. Unsure if I should leave my one chance to be stuck and have to make living work in NYC, I contemplated the decision. I had always wanted to live in the city, but in just a couple weeks I had learned to become way too attuned to the Stan Smith shoes that were the latest craze. After having wandered around naked in the desert feeling as me as I could be, I wasn't sure I could live in a place that made me so very aware of the name that was or wasn't on my feet.

A LIST OF OPPORTUNITIES

MASS MoCA was a 3 month gig starting in September that offered a small stipend and housing in the little town of North Adams, in Western Massachusetts. It was just enough to pay my bills and buy me time while I found the next thing. The room I was introduced to in the rundown multi-family house around the corner from the museum was the largest bedroom I'd ever slept in. Made of furniture so obviously donated by employees' children growing out of their bed sets, the expansive room, brightly lit by bay windows, was dotted with a small desk, dresser, and primary red colored bunk bed, with a bottom bunk so close to the top that you could hardly lift your head. With all this room, and nothing to fill it, I missed the coziness of my previous 24 square foot camper.

North Adams was an industrial town that had been on life support since the 80s. The former factory where the museum was now housed, was first an Arnold Print Works factory, supposedly dying enough fabric (some of which was then made into Union soldiers uniforms) to run the 130 miles to Boston and back each day. Sprague Electric later occupied the space and grew to employ about 4,000 residents of North Adams and the surrounding little towns. The city known for the number of steeples that pepper the hills at the base of the Berkshire Mountains was at its prime, as businesses prospered in conjunction with the influx of people and money coming to North Adams due to Sprague. However, as industry became increasingly sent overseas, Sprague shut its doors in the mid-80's leaving the town with 4,000 fewer residents, 14% unemployment rate, and acres of land and waterways consumed by toxic waste. "The diseases of despair" deemed by Tom Krens, one of the original founders of MASS MoCA, began to take over the little town. Domestic violence, teenage pregnancy, and the opioid crisis piled on top of poverty. North Adams's western sibling community of Williamstown was seen as a quintessential New England, Gilmore Girl-type of town with bright white churches to match the majority white population, marble museums, and Williams College with its deep liberal arts history—rich in all ways. The two towns signified the very clearly polarizing distribution of wealth not just found in the rust belt of Western Mass, but much of the country itself.

MASS MoCA was a non-collecting art museum that was best known for its large-scale installations. The former factory floors were cleared to leave galleries of sizes equivalent to a football field. The maintenance workers are constantly rebuilding the windows to preserve the

historic quality while attempting to remedy the chill of the vast spaces. And though the museum employs a handful of locals, and brings in about 160,000 tourists a year, it's met with a sentiment by many long-time North Adams residents that "if the museum weren't there, the factory jobs could come back" or a more reasonable statement like, "I don't understand the stuff in there"—if they had ever been inside at all. However separated along some imaginary but immensely powerful cultural line, the locals that owned the downtown properties that sat empty, not allowing for smaller, poorer, mom-and-pop style businesses to occupy them, raised their rents so high that they were just asking city folk to swoop in, gentrify, and further the divide.

"Mac's someone I could totally hook up with," Olivia, another intern exclaimed like a giddy girl on a quest from the passenger seat of our friend's SUV as we drove from our night out in Williamstown—an event that she made very clear was disappointingly quiet and ultimately not worth the wearing of her designer silk shorts. "He's someone I could fall in love with," I half-joked quietly from the dark back seat. Mac was a tall, slender guy with big ears, and strong brow bone that wore light denim shirts and Clarks desert boots, with eyebrows that lit up above his vibrant, excitable eyes. He wasn't what many would call conventionally handsome, but his build was strong and all encompassing and his energy was charismatically contagious. He was around the age of us interns and hadn't been at the museum long enough to be jaded by the comings and goings of interns with each season. He was excited to make friends, and in a town of 13,000 people, most of which kept to themselves, we were glad to have him.

I did fall in love on the third floor communications office, looking out over the museum campus and across a sliver of North Adams. As my boss, Mac would allow me to take "dream breaks" many of which he accompanied me looking out the window and making up backstories for the characters that would walk in and out of the museum entrance below us. We'd giggle together in our make believe. Getting used to a desk job was difficult for me and Mac could see me squirming in my seat as the life drained from my face. Between press release writing and website updating, he would bring me a newspaper clipping about Confucius and how to mix up life enough to surprise yourself, or share his favorite Kurt Vonnegut quote reminding me to stay soft. He would let me choose which towns I would visit to plaster with event posters, encouraging me to visit certain antique stores along the way.

Postering was an exhausting and quite fruitless effort as most posters were removed within the following week but I was thankful for the ability to leave town, especially when I didn't bring my own car out east. Getting behind the wheel of the museum's errand runner felt like freedom again. It wasn't until I drove it up the side of the hill at the edge of town and around the hairpin turn, that I looked out over the town of North Adams and realized I was living in the mountains, an idea that felt so oddly comforting to me. From up here, alone, traveling at my own speed, I felt like for the first time I could really see that this was a place that I didn't mind being.

When I returned to town from postering one day, the museum was closed and everyone returned home. I had the car keys for the night and figured I'd use the few perks I had to mix things up a bit and maybe even surprise myself.

"Are there any good Thai restaurants in town?" I texted Mac. He instructed me as to where I could pick some up, just down the street from his house in Williamstown.

"I want to eat Thai too!"

"Do you want to eat it with me?"

I spent the evening sitting on Mac's little balcony attached to his upper floor carriage house apartment that sat behind a Victorian house-turned-engineering firm across the street from Williams College. We spoke of the upcoming winter and our shared fear of hibernating, not wanting to waste our time away. We agreed to hang out with each other, to hold each other accountable to not sink into the darkness of the season's change too deep.

"Let's make a list," I said as we had already collectively gathered ideas for what we could do on snowy days to keep the depressive state away.

Not once after that did I question if I should ask Mac to join me in visiting one of the two dive bars that offered karaoke, or to take a hike to the highest nearby peak. I couldn't recall what was on the list—it lived in a box that I got from the local Goodwill that I filled with maps, a candle, and other assorted things that collectively created a kit that would allow us to have everything we'd need to keep our plans moving and feel cozy and energized throughout the coldest, darkest months. I gave it to him on his birthday just before Halloween, but as I gifted it to him, I knew it was equally for me.

READY AND WILLING

“Love is the willingness to extend oneself for the spiritual growth of another and one’s self,” Jack shared a quote by the psychologist M. Scott Peck, from a text his conflict resolution professor at Utah State had provided.

We talked a lot about love when we traveled. We melted together over stories of one another’s romances and commiserated through the depths of our similar heartbreaks. I fed off of talk like this. As though I had consumed each of my past relationships to specifically reap this energy. I shared my thoughts about various types of love. Family love and romantic love were not the only ways to understand where people sat in my heart. I was learning that the more people that I cared for, the larger my capacity to care grew. That love is not mutually exclusive, no one cancelled out another, as no two could ever be the same. As we rolled forward on the interstate, we could see ourselves growing at a nearly equivalent speed as we fed off of each other’s ideologies.

The band boy in NYC, Cameron, had visited me in North Adams once before I got together with Mac. For the couple months prior, we had been in touch, but I felt myself greatly fading while he was scheming about moving to Minnesota after my internship. It was where the rest of the band was but also near Minneapolis where he knew I saw myself ending up. Knowing the cost of one room in Bushwick, it seemed sensible enough for me to support, but I didn’t take it too seriously—I was used to guys not following through with things they’d daydreamed. And I told myself it wasn’t for me.

Cameron had booked us a cabin on a farm property in upstate New York, the sort of getaway weekend retreat you think may rekindle some affections and ideally solve every disconnection.

We sat on the corduroy couch and he described a New York Times article that was trending recently about the “36 questions that make you fall in love.” I had heard of this, and was curious about it myself, but I also knew what he was trying to say. I mustered up a mixture of willingness to be open and give it a chance along with a resentful patience and agreed to participate. I did feel as though I grew closer to him that day as we talked about death and our greatest accomplishments, but as we packed up to leave, the hard cider I’d bought from the local

orchard to bring to Mac's parents' house for Thanksgiving wrapped in sweaters in my duffel, I knew that Cameron either didn't read the full New York Times article or selectively remembered a few things. It wasn't the questions or the four minutes of staring into each other's eyes that followed that would create an affection strong enough to solidify the romantic love he sought, it was the choice each person made to decide they were ready and willing.

MY OCTOBER

“You’re my October,” Mac said to me as we drove down the county to his parents house a 45 minute drive from North Adams. It was November and though I’d been melting into him and our deep talks for well over a month, between hiding our close friendship from the rest of the museum and the fact that until just recently we were both tangled in relationships, I didn’t know that he had felt so passionately until those words hit me.

Mac’s family lived in a little town called Lenox, known for being the home to the Tanglewood Performing Arts Center and James Taylor (who did a stint of rehab in nearby Stockbridge and sings about it in Sweet Baby James), and was surrounded by other idyllic Berkshire towns reputable for their dance schools, farm-to-table cafes, and the Norman Rockwell Museum promoting the American dream that is very much at play in what is known as “South County.” The Lenox school mascot was “The Millionaires” with the Monopoly man chosen to represent all school iconography, which not-so-subtly explained a bit about how the town came to be a special kind of eco-conscious, philanthropic, organic bougie.

His family was close. Along with his uncle, his parents ran a successful business that sold humorous gift items like colorful socks with silly sayings that were sold at bookstores and gift shops around the country. Mac would meet his grandma nearly every weekend for brunch and she’d load his trunk full of scones and muffins from the Lenox bakery and vegetables from the farmers market that he never could eat entirely. He would talk to his sisters on the phone for hours and his mom was his number one confidant when he was struggling.

Some of his struggles are what drew me to Mac. After having a severe concussion due to a soccer accident in high school, his life changed completely. He had to quit sports as he knew them, had consistent migraines and neck aches, and developed a fear of hurting his head so deeply that any time my elbow would bump him reaching for a bowl on the top shelf, he’d frantically cry, “Tell me I’m okay! Tell me it’s nothing!” To different extents, I knew these fears completely. Embarrassingly, after being hit in the forehead with a basketball in the 8th grade, I felt like I’d never be the same. A day of tingling through half my body, darkened vision, and an unbearable migraine, the doctors told me there was nothing they could do to help. I’d always had headaches, but my headaches only grew worse, coupled with a jaw surgery that healed poorly and made my neck muscles tense, chronic pain was all too familiar. Instead of being the quick

witted, sharp, sponge of a student I had been previously, I could hardly retain new information, struggled to put sentences together at times, and felt constantly foggy. In Mac, I had found someone that felt similarly to the point that even the little things, like being the only people in the office at 9 am on a Monday unable to drink caffeine, felt like a bonding relief.

It was another intern's birthday on an evening in late November and before the party I asked if Mac would join me at the hairpin turn to share a beer and hot dogs from my favorite 100 year old diner on Eagle Street. I had fallen in love with North Adams; with the potential to invest myself in something; to invest myself in someone. I was tired of running and wanted to make a home. But as soon as I realized this, I was turned down for the only job that would give me a living wage and allow me to stay, and my internship was nearing an end. I had no other prospects, no place to live without work, no first months rent to establish something of my own. I needed someone to cry to. Mac and I teared up together overlooking the town. But what started as tears of sadness turned into tears of opportunity. When faced with a diverging road, we realized how much we wanted to stay on the same path and see what could be. I knew my time there, and my time with him, wasn't done, but I needed someone to tell me to find a way.

"You can live with me. We will sort it out. You can work at the Stop-and-Shop deli," he joked with eyes sparkling in the reflection of the town's distant lights in his watery eyes.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked

"What are you waiting for?" I replied the phrase we'd grown to say to each other often, jokingly impatient and encouraging the other to take a leap. As fears for the future flowed from our faces' orifices in a snotty, wet slime, we kissed a very salty kiss for the very first time.

On our way back down the mountain, we blasted 90's feel-good tunes and Mac sang as he usually would, tone-deaf and heartfelt belts that I admired so sincerely. We walked into the disco-themed party in the intern house living room, exchanging a secret smile, knowing we would be dancing the night away to an entirely new groove.

4 MINUTES

Upon finishing my internship, right in time for Christmas, I returned to Minnesota to pack up my car to bring back east. While Mac was at work, I carefully inserted my household items into his collection of tchotchkes.

“Thcocke is the word that best describes me,” he once shared as I rolled my eyes smiling. I was extra aware of not wanting to change things too completely and invade his space or shock his system, as well as my desire to make the space feel more familiar to me. He liked his lamp, books, and sculptures square on the side table, while I liked one of them at a 45 degree, but most items I left in their original position to keep the peace. This was the first time either of us had tried living with a partner, and I wanted to get it right. We were both confident and excited about the idea of sharing space indefinitely. Before I had moved in, Mac had purchased a Craftsman tool chest that he used as an accent table in the living room. “It’s as much for you as it is for me,” he said as I beamed.

Once I had ended things with Cameron I felt guilty, but free. For the first time, I was ready to commit myself to someone so fully. I believed that with my new definition of love, I was willing to put forth the effort to extend myself past challenges for this person I’d grown so fond of, but also for me.

I was worried about past tendencies to run after boring easily and wanted to grow into something stable. I knew, especially when living with someone, I would need to learn to appreciate the little things more regularly. In order to help myself stay consciously aware of those moments, I began a project documenting each day. Every morning, because I always woke before him, I’d photograph Mac asleep next to me. Sometimes he was facing my way, sometimes a lumpy ball of unidentifiable duvet, sometimes head wrapped in saran wrap to keep his psoriasis lotion from getting on the sheets. Waking up next to someone so frequently was a really special thing for me, but also seemed so potentially monotonous. By making it a ritual through photographing, it felt much more honoring. Along with the image, I’d reflect on the happenings of our relationship from the day before. Having slept much of it off, I felt that only the most poignant pieces would stick in my mind to be memorialized. I envisioned a set of little books journaling our shared experiences sitting on our bookcase that we would look back on in future years to reflect on the fond times and embarrassing moments together.

The notes I took those mornings did document many of the fondest memories as we began our shared life. Our first “fight” about tuna fish, eating weed gummies and wandering through the thigh high snow, Mac offering neck massages and back rubs without me having to ask, him lifting the sheets after farting to investigate the stink, using the bathroom without closing the door completely, going for drives after attending concerts of Big Thief and Kevin Morby where I was (for the first time in my life) comfortable enough in front of someone to really sing. Mac and I became the “art couple” according to my former workaholic boss in the communications office (someone to rarely give a compliment) one evening at a gallery opening. At night, Mac would build cardboard sculptures or spray paint shoes he found on the side of the road. I’d paint on newspapers I’d collected from my travels the months before, or doodle potential sculptures to build, and we’d take drives together to photograph the town. Shooting a glance his way after spotting an oddity out the window, I wouldn’t even have to say what caught my eye before he’d catch it and share a laugh with me. Some nights we would walk around the Williams College campus pretending to be students at a yuppie university. I gave myself the name Claire, because for the past 5 years people had called me Claire accidentally an eerily odd amount, as though I had some version of me in a parallel universe with the name and our paths would cross occasionally. Mac (not his real name) was the character he lived out as we sat by the Hogwarts-like fire in the library, an experience so dramatically different from my college experience, but not that far off from his liberal arts school upstate.

We collaborated on a redesign of one room of our apartment, giddily scrounging estate sales and thrift stores to find new items to add to the space. The bathroom became an over-the-top Jesus themed masterpiece of thrifted paint-by-numbers, gaudy gold framed portraits, and other “holy” things salon styled across the walls. We found ourselves thinking twice before letting anyone use it in case they were the type to get offended as both of us were doing it entirely ironically.

I once set up a tent in the living room where I slept for the night after watching a Planet Earth documentary inside and dreamt about the desert. Mac didn’t want to join, which admittedly disappointed me, but I woke to a note (one of many he would write to me) that said “Morning, campy. I love your spontaneity.”

One night, we wrestled in bed playfully, Mac lifting me with his feet on my chest like my dad had lifted me as a child playing airplane. He dropped me back down where I sat on his lap.

The music played a title that I couldn't recall because, without prompting by a New York Times article, we fell into each other's eyes for the entire length of a four minute song.

THANKS

Just before Christmas break, on the last day of my internship, I had emailed one of the leaders of the art fabrication department about possible job opportunities. Brad was in charge of the building 6 expansion of MASS MoCA, which was currently underway and soon to double the already massive museum's gallery space to 250,000 square feet, making it the largest contemporary art museum in the United States. "Walk with me," he said as he passed by, right before I was about to leave the administrative offices for the last time. As we walked down the stairs to the lobby, I spouted out how I had experience in galleries and I'd built a few things. But without underselling myself, I knew he'd be taking a huge chance on me. Everyone else in the fabrication and installation department, housed in the basement of the museum, wore Carharts and knew how to weld. I, on the other hand, was more familiar with the white glove sort of gallery work, though I could be very handy, and I had a curiosity that would propel me. Likely feeling the same desperation as me, Brad did take a chance. The next thing I knew, in addition to the rest of my belongings piled up in my car on the way to Minnesota, was a new pair of Carhartt overalls, a boy's size that was still too large for my frame, and were stiff enough to look like a cardboard box hanging from my shoulders. I had big pants to fill in this new role, and I knew it.

"G" and "C" are what Brad fondly called me and Chris, the other new hire.. Brad acted like a much older brother or even father type (though the same age as someone I'd later date). He made dad jokes or painfully tried to talk hip to be goofy but so consciously checked in on us and taught us endless new skills, highlighting the years of experience he had beyond me. We were his two dedicated employees, to work directly under his guidance as the leader of the expansion, though we would also occasionally work with the typical art fab crew too. My work with MASS MoCA was a six month contract, expected to expire in June. Unlike most contractors hired for this project however, because I had previously been a MASS MoCA employee, they kept me on the payroll and I was able to receive paid time off, and if I weren't under 25, I'd have used their health insurance as well. Very aware of the limited timeline of this level of security, I became fearfully conscious of my need to work as much as possible to build up savings for the next time I found myself frantically swimming in the unknown. Chris had been an employee of the production department, most experienced as a stagehand for concerts and other performance based happenings at the museum. As Brad's only two employees walking into a half unfinished

factory building that would need to be a world-class museum in just a couple months, we looked like a skeleton crew and we were just beginning to learn what that could really mean.

During the first week of work, we installed hundreds of pendant lights from a sloped ceiling in a very particular order for the artist Spencer Finch. The labor was physically arduous with a neck cranked up at the ceiling for many hours throughout many days, I could feel my muscles building as my arms trembled above me, organizing and securing the cables so they would be seen as little as possible. The physical work, though exhausting, felt good. The contradicting instructions from multiple people, which caused us to redo half of the work entirely however, worried me. I didn't want to come across as the person to complain or tell my bosses how to do their jobs, but there were some very clear things making the work more difficult than it needed to be. And unlike some of the contractors brought in specifically for that job who got angry and hastily finished, packed to go before the job was done and may not ever return, Chris and I wanted to make communications as clear as could be because we didn't have the freedom to leave. After that first major mishap however, and sending a quick text to Brad sharing our concerns for necessary preplanning, never again did we feel so unconsidered. Instead, he gave us more responsibility.

After the pendant light project and installing giant barn doors and painting things, just a couple weeks into the job, Brad asked me if I wanted to take the lead on our next big project. For months, as contractors had been renovating the entire building, a crew from Texas was on the main floor building out a very particular space. They were master sheetrockers creating rooms without corners, making them look as though they were continuing endlessly, and walls with shapes protruding or sliced at extreme angles with pristine seams. This entire floor was to be dedicated to the retrospective of the globally famous artist James Turrell, and Brad was asking me if I wanted to be in charge of the lighting. In most traditional gallery situations, the lighting, though essential in the exhibition design, would be supplementary. In James Turrell's work however, the light is everything. I didn't trust myself enough to say yes, but I did trust Brad enough by now. In a bit of disbelief and complete lack of awareness of what it would mean, I said "yes, please."

The next couple months were spent hanging off of multiple-storied scaffoldings in harnesses and hardhats, emptying my sinuses at the end of the day to find a thick paste mixed with specks of blood running down my face from the drywall dust that hazed our workspace,

eating many sausage McMuffins brought to us by the construction crew, and an occasional taco lunch too. I was responsible for identifying the serial numbers of each of the 1 ft long LED lights and tracking their placements in a perfectly aligned chain of hundreds of fixtures that we would install and ultimately work together to illuminate each space. Chris was the perfect companion for the job. He had an overall incredibly positive attitude, and immense patience. He'd pull catchy songs out like a human jukebox, and get them stuck in my head for days. He had a temper, but his foul words were only ever targeted at a stripped screw or two walls squishing him uncomfortably. The two of us—with an exception of short stint of help from an over hire (who ultimately got fired for stealing coffee from the cafe) hung every one of the 1,000+ light fixtures that would create Turrell's work.

Towards the end of the project, Turrell was flown into the tiny airport in North Adams (a ticket which cost more than I made in three months' work) to work with his studio assistant to choose the colors and luminosities of the fixtures and check our work. As Brad escorted us into the dimly lit room where he finished a meeting, everyone stood at the space's perimeter at attention and on edge as though ready to accommodate the master's every need. We approached Turrell slowly, and with an atmosphere that made me feel as though I was supposed to curtsy or get on my knees with my palms together, he shook Chris and my hands and said, "Thanks."

ART TRASH RELICS

I wasn't well versed in knowing the who's who of contemporary art. Art history was always a course that I struggled with retaining and I did little research on my own to keep up with anyone, overwhelmed by input outside of the shows I'd see and occasional articles I'd read in the dozens of newsletters I'd receive in my inbox. It took a decade or more before I realized I'd once had dinner with the incredible photographer Carrie Mae Weems, when she visited the university my dad taught at. Only 8 years old at the time, I was more impressed by the fact that the fancy restaurant served sorbet between courses. But this lack of awareness towards the caliber of artists I was working with sometimes helped me see them as regular people. While others eyes widened if they heard these artists' names, I shrugged my shoulders. Not allowing prestige to affect our interactions, also helped me just be me. I met many artists during my time at MASS MoCA, most of whom I developed more than a single word exchange between. The deputy director introduced me to a short, older looking woman with comfy looking thin pants and a little knit cap, as though she were attending a cold yoga retreat.

"Grace, I'd like to introduce you to Laurie Anderson and her friend (whose name I can't recall but held the leash that led to the most adorable wire haired terrier). Grace will be helping to install the black lights in the VR room, and eventually install the dog drawings, and can help you if you find you need anything."

"You're the one that built the camper?!" She responded with her eyebrows lifted and dimple dashing joyfully. I blushed to suddenly have the attention on me personally. The deputy director beamed as he explained he had told this artist, Laurie Anderson, a bit about us. With what felt like genuine excitement from her I surely didn't mind. I tried to meet her small talk with questions and observations as genuine as could be when the only things you know of someone are from a google search during a bathroom break pretending to pee.

Richard, the head of fabrication, would call me "the dumpster dive queen" because I'd constantly be checking the dumpster and garbage cans in the shop for materials I could use in my personal practice or to build furniture for my home. Occasionally I'd come across trash from these famous artists' installs. The paint palette Laurie Anderson used to draw and write, floor to ceiling, in her black light lit virtual reality room, scraps of Jenny Holzer's "truisms" that were wheat pasted on a fence outside, and raffia or a broken ceramic bird from Nick Cave's cloud

sculpture. The way that people around me worshiped these artists, I wondered if this was trash or if these were relics?

Christian relics fit into one of three categories. A first-class relic was a physical part of the saint's body (hair, bone, etc.) A second-class relic was an object owned or touched by the hand of the artist. And a third-class relic was any object that touches a relic of the first or second degree. Relics were saved to memorialize saints and martyrs, but were often seen as powerful tools of protection and good blessings so strong that people would pilgrimage to their presence bringing concerns or offerings.

Over time, I pulled these art trash items out of the garbage and tucked them into an envelope. I knew interacting with these people was shaping my life and career in one way or another, though I wasn't yet convinced of their status as art world saints with some holy powers that be. But maybe these objects could provide good luck on the path to a prosperous art career or protection from the instability of the field for someone who believed.

On my first day of work in art fabrication, Brad had asked "Can you paint?" Though I had a degree in art and everyone assumes that means you aim to be Picasso or Matisse, I had almost no experience with the medium. I met Mary in the bikeway on the main floor of the museum expansion. She had designed a mural to be painted on the walls of the space that would act as a loading dock for museum employees, but also a stopping point along a bike path that would physically cut through the museum, cross the river, and extend beyond the MASS MoCA property. She was a short, quiet woman with a sharp bob of straight black hair who taught painting at Bennington College. I immediately asked if she knew a friend of mine that had attended and graduated previously, and the common name put us in a good place. My relationship with Mary grew very gradually, as did the mural we painted together. Thousands of letters were projected and traced onto the walls, then painted and repainted in black and white. The letters were replicating a collage Mary had created that sliced through pages of text vertically and shifted them slightly so the words were skewed and hard to see clearly. We worked together over many months. When I had any downtime between larger installs, I had a cup of paint in one hand and a tiny brush in the other chipping away at Mary's piece. Mary and I talked of the dynamics of her childhood and east-asian heritage, and the responsibility of caring for an aging mother. She asked for details about my food sensitivities and headaches, she gave me a list

of memoir authors to read. I shared project ideas, and she told me stories about the now-famous former students she once had and an artist residency she'd spent growing a great love affair. She was slow to open up, but I grew to know Mary really well and she knew me.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asked with a concerned look on her face.

“Of course,” I responded, slightly nervous.

“Do you think I’m allergic to coffee?” I laughed and followed her question with more questions about the symptoms she was experiencing. I laughed and followed her question with questions about the symptoms that would make her think she could be. I smiled to think that she was listening to what I was saying and taking *me* seriously. Mary’s paintbrush, thrown in the trash because it was no longer clean enough to paint with, was the relic I found to mean the most to me.

ART IS HARD

“Art is hard” was a phrase that my friends and I would say throughout undergrad. I’d screen printed the words and placed them on my fridge to remind me that I thought it was okay to admit it. Though a profession assumed to be deeply attune to emotion, artists seemed to be reserved about the challenges of a creative life as though any concern or complaint showed that they weren’t passionate or self-sacrificing enough to accept the starving artist role required to “make it.” Not only did art have a limited value in society which left the workforce with overqualified positions in an underpaying field, and more often than not the personal work made wouldn’t ever give the financial returns to pay back the financial investment let alone make a profit (making art a hugely logistical challenge unless you’re a trust fund baby) but there was also a mental game to deciding to spend a life this way. It could be a deeply personal process and feel like a necessary one, but unlike math, there were no answers in art. No clear path or formulaic rules to follow. There would be infinite amounts of decisions and possibilities and no right way.

After about a week of installing Jenny Holzer light works and paintings on the third floor gallery at MASS MoCA, we were due to install one of many marble benches that had been placed around campus. Known for her use of text, each bench had one of Jenny’s “truisms” etched into it like a headstone or commemorative place of rest saying philosophical phrases or excerpts from texts like “protect me from what I want.” Each bench also weighed a few hundred pounds, was worth tens of thousands of dollars, and was tediously moved and shifted around with jacks and lifts. As the installation team, the curator, and Jenny and I stood in the gallery, Jenny scoped out the space, gauging the distance between the edge of the wall and the paintings, the corner to the bench, and right back again. We had already placed the bench in the center of the room, but the few inches that it may have felt off might have mattered. After considering the space and the literal weight of every decision’s change, Jenny threw her arms in the air, raised her voice and said “Art is hard! Blah, blah, blah,” before walking away and confirming for me that art has the same challenges no matter how many people you have making the work for you or how world famous you may be. It all boiled down to the same questions, doubts, and overwhelming possibilities.

TAKE YOUR TIME

“Take your time,” my paternal grandma always said to me. “They all seem sweet at first, but time will show their true colors.” The five love languages were back on trend recently and I was becoming increasingly aware that the way I showed my affection was by sharing time. A nonrenewable resource, it seemed to me to be the most precious thing to give. Though after just a month or two of living together, which somehow felt like half a year, it was as though the time shared was sucking out the air in Mac and I’s little home, making it harder and harder to breathe. We hadn’t taken our time moving in together, but that felt right. It was a necessary leap of faith I told myself as I tried to keep her words in mind when learning about each of our intricacies.

I was discovering that I could be exhausted easily. As a pretty independent person, I loved to do things on my own and have experiences to call mine. Alone time was a need. But I had an equally strong and contradicting desire to share my limited time with Mac. After all, I had just spent half a year focused on myself. I was ready to share something—though I knew I needed to find a balance. I needed a getaway. I didn’t have many friends outside of work, nor did I have money to sit at a coffee shop or go for drives endlessly. It wasn’t just me. Mac was equally excited to share time (and the majority of it felt so good to be shared), but also lacked the ability to choose other things to help accommodate our need for space and set up boundaries. I’d occasionally play bingo at the locals bar where they’d provide a free mixture of cheese powdered snacks and get tipsy enough to imagine Mac home already in bed and think, *I hope he’s missing me*. I knew I needed to give him time and was willing to try to figure out ways to make it work, but what I didn’t see was that I needed to give the gift of time to myself equally.

“Being able to set boundaries is when you know you can trust someone,” I remembered Jack saying to me. To have the respect to keep in mind that you are two independent people with different needs and not to take them too personally. To create a space where those exchanges can be shared safely and a need or a “no” can be heard and accepted, is a sign of real love. He told me this after sharing a lesson from his professor about the waves vs. the currents. How most people see the surface disruption of a conflict such as the dirty dishes not getting done (the waves), but ignore the driving force below (the current). This current force is something deeper—a human need not being met. Maybe it’s a need for consideration, for order, for fairness,

for gratitude, for autonomy. As long as there is a deep underlying current pulling at people, a need not being seen and heard, the waves would be bound to get choppy again.

Every Sunday Mac would have a “mood” that required extreme cleaning and little communication from me. We could share a morning drive together to take in moments of overlooks on the mountain passes, a refuge amongst the claustrophobic New England trees, but as soon as 2 o’clock hit, I knew to give him space. Space was hard to give in an apartment that was barely over 500 square feet and laid out inefficiently. The bedroom was the one room you could go to get away, but someone may interrupt you as the bathroom was only accessible through it. As time went on, the moods grew more steamy. Never was he aggressive and rarely directly mean, but I found myself tiptoeing to put my art supplies away so they wouldn’t hang up his cleaning of the coffee table, and lounging in bed until dinner time when the tides had withdrawn and he came bearing kisses and pasta dishes. During these cleans, Mac would stuff all items into the drawers or closets of our home without any order, filling them to a degree that debilitated any function other than holding them, leaving me to dig through the abundance of tangled tools to piece my art materials back together again. The day would end calm, but a tidy house isn’t tidy just because the mess isn’t seen.

I eventually sourced some of this temperament to his father. As I helped Mac’s mom rearrange and hang some artwork on their walls, his parents debated about how high above the end table a painting should hang. An inch off of his dad’s suggestion, his mom gave me the okay to put its nails in. Suddenly frustrated to a degree that was uncomfortable to watch, his dad threw up his hands and hastily yelled, “I’m going to the gym!” and walked away. It was also a Sunday. I wondered if I could be as patient and tolerant of them as his mom could be.

My dad could also have swings too, though not on a convenient schedule. Growing up, he was my best friend, but his jovial energy could occasionally quickly shift to something irritable, stubborn, and dismissive if things didn’t go as he’d planned. He’d storm off to his room likely relying on the conflict passing naturally while also passive aggressively leaving with the last word. I had learned a special sort of patience that some would call “keeping the peace,” from my mom. She encouraged waiting it out, but time moves much more slowly when you’re young and the conflict only stewed deep in my small body. I couldn’t trust that the waves would calm.

Every threat felt like it was sure to be the end of something and I felt responsible, whether or not the conflict involved me. I'd slip notes under my parents' bedroom door, my ear pressed close hoping that I could hear his thoughts through the TV program he was watching or I'd place a folded apology onto his pillow when he left his self-isolation to use the bathroom. If hard words started the conflict, I wanted nice ones to help resolve it.

I often tried to talk about how living together was going for Mac and I. I couldn't leave things unsaid or trust that the current would disappear without an equally strong opposing force. We would commiserate over our common understanding of needing some space, but rarely did we go far enough to come to any conclusions of what that looked like. Sometimes I'd cry, needing to get thoughts off my chest. Sometimes my tears would be met with hugs at least. I wondered if in my worries I was just manifesting more tension than there needed to be, but I could feel something unbalanced and as though we were moving in a direction that wouldn't work sustainably.

A curator at the museum once talked to me about relationships as we installed a show together. "I refused to date a man that had never been heartbroken," she said. And I knew what she meant. There's an appreciation and a sensitivity that forms when you don't get what you want. Mac had never felt heartbreak. Ends had always been on his terms. Sometimes, when the tensions felt especially hard, I wondered *would ending things make him realize I was worth some work?*

Mac and his mom shared a lab rescue named Lottie. She was the kind of dog that had her own Instagram and Mac oogled whenever getting a picture message of her from home. Mac's parents were out of town one evening when we picked Lottie up from the doggy day care after work. We sat on the couch off of their kitchen in the dimly lit light reflecting off the bar, in a large house of fresh air and plenty of space to breath. I tried to bring up my worries about recent distance and tension in our house to be dismissed by Mac moving to the floor to play with Lottie and pretending he didn't hear me. He nuzzled his face in her belly while scratching her back and gooing in his baby voice. Feeling ignored, tears welled up in my eyes.

"Please, can we talk?"

“I wish you were a dog so you wouldn’t talk,” he smirked at me. He got half of what he wanted, while I silently wondered what it was like to be a dog loved a bit less conditionally.

SORRY

There is a camaraderie that is developed when people go through something miserable together. The kind of connection that makes veterans want to return to the battlefield even from the security of their homes and families. I was working extremely long hours at the museum, sometimes putting in nearly 80 hour work weeks. Brad wouldn't get home to tuck his sons into bed, and Chris would text his friends to tell them he was doing another late night and couldn't hang. Those kinds of hours on top of heavy physical labor make you loopy and not able to make the best decisions, but when you're at work at 10pm on a scissor lift with your heads just barely under the metal roof and lightning strikes making the power go out, you sit there laughing and take one more for the team. There was an end in sight. We just had to tough through it all until we would be free and have something great to show for it.

The expansion of MASS MoCA was unveiled that May. After spending months building the space, with some serious labor pains near the end, we birthed the building for the world to see. Though the most strenuous efforts were invisible and went unacknowledged, we on the crew knew the emotional and physical labor that went into making the space.

"You got muscles!" Mary seemed impressed upon seeing me after not working on her mural for some time. I had grown really strong from lifting and carrying and pushing and simply holding a drill at odd angles from scaffolding. However, just as suddenly as we were done, my body seemed to go weak. Hours upon hours of power tools and painting strains wore on my arm and neck. I went home every night to fall asleep immediately with every limb surrounded by a heated rice sack.

Until I worked at MASS MoCA, I'd never been very conscious of my body. I blamed my parents for taking me out of dance when I was 4, thinking if they hadn't I would be able to touch my toes for once and not act like a stiff board on a dance floor. Though I wasn't agile, I was always strong. I grew up climbing trees and when given the option to play kickball with the rest of class or climb the rope to the gym ceiling or do pull ups for fun, I was always the only one to stay behind.

Whenever it came to working within a tighter budget to afford art supplies or a trip away, food was the first thing I would sacrifice. I'd buy whatever was cheap and would get me by,

living off of tuna fish, mac and cheese, and the ramen I'd eventually hide in the back seat of my car so Mac, who would eat salads as snacks, wouldn't see. As I grew older though, I started to develop sensitivities to everything. Fruits and vegetables would give me stomach aches and chills that made me only want to eat more bread and sugar. I was hazy much of the time, but I attributed that to my headaches.

Many of the headaches came after the embarrassing basketball accident. Though sounding minor, it perpetuated existing pains like minor headaches, and caused a major disruption to my identity. I had been the most studious child. Partially out of boredom in the little town we lived in, partially out of support and guidance from my family, and partially a fresh brain unobstructed by so much external stimuli or experience. I was quick to spout trivial facts and was proud to memorize and attend the mathlete conferences where I excelled but was cool enough to not care. Whenever I was hit in the head, I felt like these things didn't come so naturally. But the shift in my processing didn't happen so extremely that I was met with a network of support like those that need to relearn to speak. I just felt slower which made me feel dumber, less valuable, and uneasy. I expressed my stresses to my parents, but with my dad not having had many medical issues to reflect on empathically and my mom being an elementary teacher who would get students complaining about stomach aches to get out of school, to which she suggested a trip to the drinking fountain as a first step, I would often get silence or a 4th grade teacher response of "Sorry," verbally shrugging it off as though the attention I sought was actually about avoiding my multiplication problems. So instead of leaning into information like I had relied on in the past, I leaned into feelings. They were of the moment and didn't rely on memory and could be just as fleeting as I felt I had to be. However, growing up in societies that don't place as much value on the emotional side of things, made me feel like I was just swimming up a different stream. Years later my mom finally admitted, "I didn't want to say anything to worry you, but you seemed different after the accident." My heart simultaneously broke and melted after finally being seen.

When I traveled to Florida with my camper, I stayed at a beach house with my aunt and her family. I'd been unintentionally tanner than I'd ever been in my life, simply from living the majority of my time outside. So when I broke out in a severe rash after a day of floating in the pool in Siesta Key, I became extremely worried. My next stop was supposed to be the Florida Keys.

The Keys were where I spent my earliest years of life and held the spaces that occupy my first memories. We moved from the Keys to Minnesota when I was five and I'd only been back once when I was twelve. On that trip I was so excited to camp with my family just like we used to, in a place that felt so nostalgic and sweet. But my sister, a year old at the time, screamed the night away in our tent on Bahia Honda Beach. This disconnection from what I thought this trip would be and the reality only prompted me to cry and fight for time to be heard saying "My life is never going to be the same!"

The summer with my camper I was looking forward to being alone in the Keys. To feel out the place that now only sat in stories, and try to recall what was familiar to my mind's own memory and what was from photographs—without outside commentary or cries. But instead, I was stuck a few hours north, inside an overly air conditioned guest room, waking in the middle of the night to rub diaper rash cream from my stomach to my knees. There was no way I could go to the Keys and camp in more extreme heat. I sobbed, and on the surface felt like a spoiled brat unable to hang at the beach. But with this unexpected physical disruption, I was given a reminder of how a body's fragility could make the little beach babe with sun bleached hair that I wanted to be again an impossibility. I was slowly becoming more familiar with ways that my body could hold me back and consequently reshape my identity.

THE RULES DO NOT APPLY

Just a couple of days after Mac got back from an extended weekend trip to Portland to visit his sister, we both decided to take the day off of work—one of us with a belly ache, the other with a migraine. In the early evening, after we had each rested in our own ways, we decided to take a walk on the Clark Museum’s campus. Nestled at the bottom of a steep open hill which was surrounded by woods, it made a great place to get an easy view.

I pulled on the shoes that Mac had brought back for me from the Adidas sample section at the headquarters where his sister worked. I had asked for shoes so I could try to take evening runs with him at night down to the Williams College track and back.

“Alright, sporty. Let’s go!” Mac made pet names for every possible iteration of me—somehow one of the most romantic being “scissor-lifty” after he saw me three stories in the air at work one day. Once we got to the parking lot of the Clark, we found large ice chunks melting in the spring sun. I kicked one to Mac who kicked it back until we eventually set up goals and played a game of soccer. We tossed around the chunk until it would disappear entirely, then grab another replacement “ball.” Smiles on our faces and giggles coming from our tired bellies, I won and he hadn’t even gone easy on me. As an experienced soccer player losing to a girl that quit playing after two practices of an indoor league when she was 8, I teased him tirelessly as we climbed the hill to further climb a tree where we sat on opposite extending limbs and shared a beer as the sun began to set.

“I want to move to Portland,” Mac shared with me. We had always talked about moving somewhere together after spending another year or so in Western Mass, after he had gotten a solid two years experience at the museum. Portland reminded me of a stop on my summer of traveling when I visited my friend Skylar. We took hikes with dogs in the forest and read Sylvia Plath’s journal entries aloud from the book I purchased at Powell’s as we walked 10 miles through the city to eat jerk chicken at a hidden hotspot and drink spiked punch at a bar called “Church.” I knew a move was far away, but I was excited to have a place to dream around, friends to dream about, and to be reassured by the comfort of western landscape, offering views more expansive than the one in front of us to call my name.

While Mac was away finding space and creating new dreams on his visit, I was finding contentment in my surroundings and soaking up the first of our nights apart. It had been just over

a year since I first set off in my camper and I wasn't sure what I had to show for it. The past couple weeks had been spent doubting myself, my place in Mac's life, and his place in mine, fearing a lack of control, and an unhinging sense of entitlement as though, because I'd been working so hard, everything should go right. But I reveled in my alone time, occupying the living room with art supplies and sprawling out with the duvet on the couch reading Ariel Levy's memoir, "The Rules Do Not Apply." It eased my troubles to live in someone else's for a while, getting lost in Levy's perspective of how seemingly mundane or common events could illustrate how profound life could be and how the most necessary beauty can result of things not going as planned. Reflections on her text, mixed with the sun setting and raking against Mac's face, the branches casting shadows across his content eyes as he gazed across the valley, my belly ached again, but from laughs rather than the stress that it often held. Just before Mac came home from Portland, he sent a text that read, "I miss you." I reminded myself that adventures begin when everything goes wrong, right? As the glow of the magic hour illuminated my surroundings, I was grateful to be along for the ride.

THE SACRIFICE MEASURE

“You must not be superstitious.” a contractor said as we hung Laurie Anderson’s mural-sized dog drawings nearly from the ceiling. I half-laughed him off, not wanting to show my hesitancy. Whether OSHA approved or not, I had to walk under many ladders in my position at the museum and I was starting to feel the months of bad luck pile up.

My contract was ending at the end of June, Though Brad had mentioned extending it or me being hired on full time, I knew the pace of bureaucracy in the museum and developed a lack of trust towards their allocation of funds. I was two weeks out from my contract’s end and didn’t want to rely on words said in passing.

Mary had mentioned that someone she knew worked for the photographer Gregory Crewdson and they were in need of a new studio assistant at his place about an hour away. Having known the photographer’s work for years, I jumped on the opportunity, even if it meant I’d have to find another job to supplement limited hours and pay.

I had begun to grow tired of the museum anyways. Now that the curtain was drawn and I saw the inner workings of these exhibitions, I found myself increasingly cynical towards this realm of the art world. My coworkers were still amazing and I truly enjoyed the work, but the allocation of museum resources was beginning to bother me. Exhibiting artists were given tens of thousands of dollars to realize their visions, and questions weren’t asked when projects went over a materials budget to buy another \$300 roll of tape or to extend the \$10,000 catwalk. All the while, coworkers in my department that had master degrees in the field and had worked there for multiple years only made two dollars more than me. And my paystubs read barely over minimum wage.

It wasn’t news to me that artists of this caliber didn’t actually make their own work. At the scale that we were creating, there would be no way for people to create such installations on their own without taking a huge part of their lifetime to do so. But the level of acknowledgement and appreciation did surprise me.

There were many very gracious artists working with the museum, but there were also some bad eggs. These were usually the rising stars, not the well seasoned vets that I’d worked with in the museum’s expansion. They’d become demanding or rude as if there was some sort of

controlling artist persona they needed to uphold to protect their visions, even from someone with absolutely no power like me.

One artist spoke so violently to the fabrication crew that they were asked not to talk to us at all. A female artist from LA was once guided to me so I could help her create a steel peg board display. She was creating an installation in the museum's largest gallery based on a potential dystopic future resulting from material excess and greed, a critique on material culture and prompt towards environmentalism. "Let's see if we can find a *guy* to help us grind that peg down," she suggested after my supervisor had clearly told her I would be the one to help. She also went to the local big-box store to spend hundreds more dollars on more plastic toys for her project, leaving me to wonder if these artists really practiced what they preached or worked within themes because they were trending.

As a small, young-faced woman (I was still wearing boy's sized Carhartts) in a primarily male-dominated field of fabrication, discrimination wasn't something I was unfamiliar with encountering from visiting workers. Occasionally, an old man would often come out of retirement from his house on the outskirts of town to help the museum lift large, difficult objects into the building through the third floor garage door from the ground level courtyard with his experience on the lull. With every visit he'd ask how old I was or make a comment about my slender frame—comments that some may see as compliments (even if backhanded), but when paired with a comment on another co-worker's weight or how the Turrell construction workers "popped out of crates from Mexico" made me question not only why my supervisors didn't condemn his candor, but also how this specific person could possibly be necessary.

"The sacrifice measure" is a term coined by Henry Albouy, a University of Illinois economics professor, who created the metric to chart how poor a person is willing to be in order to live in a particular city. This measure could be applied to careers in the arts as well. Because the art world was filled with overqualified people applying for a limited number of underpaid positions, these institutions had no reason to raise their pay. There was a line of people waiting to fill each space. So instead of money, the arts tended to offer forms of currency that were less tangible or applicable to paying rent, such as the joy of working within a creative, cultural sector, a job description that kept you on your toes and was ever-changing, occasionally flexible schedules, or the ability to work directly with artists.

For these reasons, I was willing to take little pay or stability, and accept the shelter of my boyfriend's home to build my resume—to build connections with artists in hopes of working on their other projects; to keep myself on the good side of the tumultuous deputy director and build professional connections; to have the flexibility of taking a couple weeks off to do personal artist residencies.

However these reasons—along with making sure my boss could get home to tuck his kids in; the need to prove that the chance was taken on the right person and I was a skilled, strong employee; needing overtime pay to fund my personal artwork; and the fact that the last contractor to file workman's comp didn't get their position renewed—are also what kept me working when a heating pad was no longer all that was needed. My arm was throbbing consistently in a way that was not only physically debilitating, but emotionally exhausting, and the job that I kept working in order to fund its physical therapy was the thing that was hurting it most. I wasn't just sacrificing money, I was sacrificing my body.

Just after accepting the part time position with Crewdson, a job I'd hoped would give me a physical break, the deputy director of the museum ran into me at a dance school gala I had attended with my boyfriend's family. He introduced me to his wife and then subsequently raised his voice exclaiming how he knew I'd taken the work at Crewdson's, that nothing gets around him, and that I wouldn't be able to work at both the museum and the studio—as though I was betraying the full time position they never offered me. My pale spring skin shifted to match my bright red lips as I attempted to calmly remind him (with his wife's support chiming in) that I needed a job and that his imaginary offer wasn't going to pay the rent or the medical bills I saw coming.

A couple weeks later, the head of the art fabrication department formally offered me a part time position, along with the request that I work as many hours as I could (even if it became full time). The months that I remained at the museum while simultaneously working at the Crewdson studio, the deputy director gave me the silent treatment as we passed each other in the halls, never directing another word towards me. I told myself it wasn't about me, but his job to be responsible for (which could often be confused for in total control of) everything.

EVERYBODY'S NICER WHEN THEY'RE SAD

Mac had never camped before, Though he told me he had been backpacking in Alaska, it turned out he had worn a backpack to hike to an Airbnb. It wasn't that he told me a lie, I think I just heard it the way that I had wanted to. He also told a dramatic story about a bear chasing them along the way, and though I believed it, I wasn't sure to what degree. Spring was slowly coming upon us in New England and I was eager to get out of our tiny home and try to show him that, even together, we could find room to breathe.

Despite the fact that there was so much national forest and the Appalachian Trail ran through our town, accessing the outdoors felt challenging. The state park campgrounds were still closed for the season, I didn't know of public lands that were reachable without a big hike, and the sun was about to set, but I was determined to have us sleep outside for just one night. Just past the closed campground entrance to a state park not far from North Adams, I found a couple gravel roads that led to more gravel roads. I pulled over next to one with a large yellow gate blocking the drive that looked especially overgrown.

"We can hike a little ways into there. It's probably BLM land," I said to reassure him, though I knew my statement wasn't likely true. I figured that it was remote enough that even if it weren't, the chances of someone coming upon us during this one night's stay was slim. "Fire or tent?" I asked him and he took duties setting up the fire. After I had raised the tent over a hill and out of view from the road, I returned to the car to see Mac setting up his tipi shaped wood structure. He wasn't but four feet from the bright yellow vertical metal pole of the gate. Of all the places in these woods that he could have gone he set up right next to the only man-made structure in this plac. I could only laugh at how silly and sweet it seemed.

"Is there anything you've learned about me since we've lived together? Anything you didn't expect? Anything that bothers you?" I asked as we sat around the fire and the yellow pole that shone nearly as bright.

He thought seriously for a minute.

"You're sort of selfish because most of the laundry is yours."

"What?" I was taken aback. *How did my dirty clothing make me selfish?* My job covered me in grease and sawdust daily while he sat at a desk in his khakis. The last time he did the laundry he left it bunched up in a basket with a note on top that said "clean - will put away later"

with a smiling flower doodled alongside. How could this be what he has learned? I held it together reminding myself about conversations with Jack. It's not the waves, it's the current.

"Well, like 68% maybe," he replied.

"Anything else?"

"You need to make things—"

I interrupted him, on edge after the laundry comment. "I don't need to make things. I don't feel that connected to objects. I don't feel like I am all that passionate about the making process."

"—and be made." he finished which brought me to silence. I had never thought of it this way. The creator in me was often working in conventional modes of artmaking by making objects, but what motivated me most was thinking about how the concepts behind the work were shaping me. Living, learning, growing, and connecting—being made into whatever shape these lessons formed, as though I could be as malleable as fresh clay—was where the exciting part of living a creative life existed for me. However annoyed with how wrong he was about laundry, I knew he was right about this and for the first time I felt understood in an entirely new way.

We also talked about Portland. He said how he felt he had always fallen into things in his life. That he never had to lay the groundwork for his own path. That he never got to have an adventure of his own like I had had with my camper; that he wanted to take a chance; that he wanted to get away from the Northeast; that he wanted the challenge of doing it all alone.

I held back my tears as long as I could. I knew this was likely coming. But I had hoped things could change before I heard the words. It turned out that one of my biggest strengths, one of the reasons he admired me the most, could be one of the strongest roots of our demise. Who knew, maybe it would eventually help him to want to share things more fully too. But if he wanted something along the lines of the summer months alone that had really shaped me, he might need to find himself sitting in heavy heartbreak after all.

Holding back tears didn't last long. Eventually, after deciding we would break up when he moved in September, and agreeing we both wanted to enjoy our time together until then as much as possible, we were both entirely bawling. After crying and mumbling to the point where there was no more to say, but we couldn't let each other go, "Let's take our picture!" Mac suggested. Illuminated by headlamps, we walked to the car to set my camera on self-timer, propped it on the hood, and stood in front of it with our arms wrapped around each other. The

flash illuminated the snot and tears dripping from our faces. It was a strange request, but I knew his desire to document these feelings.

He wiped my tears and walked ahead of me back to the fire. “I like you when you’re sad. You’re nicer when you’re sad,” I said after him. “Everybody’s nicer when they’re sad,” I continued to say, quietly mumbling to myself.

I was surprised he heard me when he turned back to suggest, “that should be the name of a book.” He didn’t know it, but it was something I’d already been writing.

I laid in the tent that night, while a light pattering of rain hit the tent just as tears still fell from my cheeks to hit my sleeping bag. I knew if I loved this boy, I would have to extend myself for both of our growths. I was ready to do so and now more than ever I had a clear place to put those efforts. But I knew that would be the easy part. I could put so much courage into love, but it would take everything I had to stay soft.

BAPTISM

I packed black berries, veggies, and a couple beers to surprise Mac with a bike ride to the river for an after-work swim. I, too cold to go into the water past my thighs, held his arms as he floated on his back so he wouldn't rush down the river with the current. His face bobbed on the surface of the water.

"Hold me! Baptize me?!" I grabbed his shoulders and pulled his head gently under. The current slipped one shoulder loose and I grabbed tightly with the other. "Let me go! Let me go!" he said excitedly as his head reemerged.

"I'll never let you go!" I exclaimed as though he was falling off of a floating door in a frozen sea. I clung until the water pulled him down and under. *Just like our relationship*, I thought to myself as he floated away.

"Come over here! It's nice here." he beamed a minute later from a rock further downstream. Maybe he would invite me to Portland eventually.

A COLLECTIVE SADNESS

The day before the 4th of July, we spent the night at Mac's parents house in Lenox. Mac had made it clear to his family at this point that he was moving to Portland so conversations revolved around jobs and praises about how exciting it would be to have him living near his sister—a point that frustrated me because I thought the goal was to be challenged to do things on his own. The conversation wove between them all as I sat on the outside of whatever fabric formed among them. A loose thread tied to me when Gammy expressed concern for my arm, gave me the contact info for her orthopedic surgeon, and assured me that her carpal tunnel surgery was rather enjoyable.

I didn't feel terribly connected to Mac's family, though I really tried. In the many months I'd known them, they invited me to plenty of events and generously included me in their lives, but never asked any questions about me, the work I was doing, where I came from, or what *my* family looked like. We sat around playing games, smoking weed, eating delicious foods, and talking, but for some reason, for the majority of my time with them, it felt like it could only go so deep.

We were sitting on the screened-in porch that summer afternoon when his dad asked me about the tattoo on my inner arm, the only personal/non small-talk question I remember him really asking me. "It's a woman holding a skull," I turned my arm so he could get a better view of the simple black linework. "It's as if she's holding her future self. Because, you know, death is inevitable. It's like a *momento mori*. A reminder to live appropriately."

"I'm never going to die!" he laughed while tossing his head back. Though I knew he was slightly joking, I felt a little sad for him. He acted so young and spry and clever. He and his wife joked that when their daughters' baby was born, making them first time grandparents, Mac's mom wouldn't be called "Grandma" but "Beyonce." They were vibrant and humorous, but underneath the quirkiness I sensed a little fear. I wondered if by denying your fate, even in half-jokes, you could end up missing out on milestones that make life, even if not as long as hoped, full of opportunity.

On the 4th of July, I had to work for a lighting designer deinstalling a wedding event at the top of a mountain nearby. It was an occasional gig I'd picked up when the future of my other

jobs seemed uncertain. Before work, Mac and I took Lottie for a walk at a park near the Tanglewood Performing Arts Center's property. I imagined James Taylor playing there that evening, as he did every 4th of July, and hoped Mac would sneak me in half-way through.

We threw sticks to Lottie as we walked quietly on the footpaths through the woods. I picked up a smooth, weather-worn one for myself. Lottie nipped at it asking to play, but I refused. *This one's mine*, I thought to her hastily. I'd been collecting sticks occasionally. Especially when taking walks that felt sad. This would be part of my collection. They leaned together against the wall in my room, marking moments that I'd since moved past.

We sat on the stumps and rocks on the shore of a lake. "It's hard for me. I feel angry to hear them talk about your move like I'm not there. For them not to acknowledge that I'm not going and that it may hurt me." I held onto my sad stick, tracing the shallow ripples in the water to avoid eye contact with Mac. After saying it again a couple different ways with compounding tears, Mac seemed to soften enough to understand. But just as he started to see me, we realized Lottie was nowhere to be found.

My sadness turned to guilt as I grappled with the fact that my selfish need to talk distracted us from taking care of her. I had to find her. I couldn't give them an actual reason to not like me. I watched the time, knowing I would be late for my first day on this new job. I carried the stick in my hand, waving it in the air as I called Lottie's name through the woods, ready and willing to give it up if it meant she'd forgive me.

A PLACE OF REST

I was mourning a loss before it had occurred. I imagined this shift in my relationship to be a similar grieving process as that which is experienced when someone has a terminal illness. Life goes on somewhat normally. It has to. But there are moments that are pierced with the pain of an inevitable loss to come. As time moved on, I was feeling as though I was stabbed over and over, slowly losing the ability to heal and recover enough to move on regularly. Mac's realizations seemed less frequent, but when they happened, he was very much grieving with me.

On a Sunday during one of Mac's mood swings, I felt a silent tension building in the bedroom I occupied. But having reached the depressive stage of mourning, I was too tired to give it any attention, I needed to flee. I drove to Hillside Cemetery, a plot of land between North Adams and Williamstown that has housed the dead since the late 1700's. After choosing a place on the top of one of many of the small but steep rolling hills, not too far from my favorite headstone carved to mimic the budding trunk of a tree, I laid down on the freshly cut grass facing the sky. I felt my body sink into the soil as I mirrored the poses of rest shared by those below me. As rain started to gently fall onto my face and the notebook that lay sprawled open beside my body in which I had tried to capture the feelings I couldn't articulate, I told myself that I needed to stay out here longer. I needed to be gone. I needed him to wonder if something was wrong with me. I needed to be away from him because something *was* wrong.

Mac had started dinner by the time I had gotten back to the house. Fresh salad and fried ravioli occupied the space where the salty waters of his moody flood once resided and he was smiling proudly. I walked past him, damp and cold without words and put on an Andy Shauf song as I got ready for the shower. Mid-chorus, as Shauf sang *you know I never really met someone like you*, Mac came into the bathroom just before I undressed and grabbed my waist to rock back and forth as though we were dancing. I rested my forehead on his chest, looking down at his feet. When my eyes returned back to his I saw them surrounded by damp skin turned pink. He frowned his lips as if tightly holding together the flood gates.

Music had a way of reminding us of where we were at. As I cooked dinner one evening, singing along to Jewel's "You Were Meant for Me" he hugged me from behind and said "I'm sad today," opening a door to a space typically so filled with emotions that the access point was jammed shut.

It did the same for me. On a light day we laughed and played early 2000's hits while jumping on the bed together. Yellowcard's "Only One" came on and as the lyrics cried, *I scream my lungs out to try to get to you*, I sang until mine collapsed. I ran to the bathroom, shut the door and completely fell apart sitting on the bathroom toilet. Through tears, I clearly thought that these—the moments of extreme feelings—though they were tearing me apart, were the most beautiful things.

THE CURVATURE OF THE EARTH

When I deinstalled the wedding lights on the 4th of July, after we eventually found Lottie and all was fine, I met a man named Bill. His thin, weathered frame was dressed in cowboy boots, thick denim, and a wool hat even on one of the hottest days of summer. His gentle voice described the many lives he lived working as a racecar driver and for a woman that owned a ranch out west. He carried me in his golf cart and helped me pull out the decorative lanterns that were staked into the ground, as if knowing my still-aching arm could use the relief. We talked about the magic of the mountains and he said, “You know you’re in a good place when you can see the curvature of the earth.”

My first trip out of New England alone was to drive to North Carolina to meet my sister and parents to camp in the Smokies. We kayaked, for which my sister generously offered to do all the work in a tandem so I could use my vacation to actually give my body a rest. We hiked in the rhododendrons, crossed paths with bears, and bushwhacked through grown-over trails to find a cemetery on the top of the mountain, likely belonging to a family that occupied the land before it became Smoky Mountain National Park. Driving alone along the Blue Ridge Parkway from Boone, North Carolina back to Massachusetts, I watched the layers of haze thicken into space over the blue peaks. From roadside overlooks that expanded farther than I could comprehend I thought to myself, *this must be the place.*

ALONE TOGETHER

I moved into my own apartment the day after I returned from North Carolina. My best friend, Ash, whom I'd known since moving back to Minnesota in undergrad had decided to move to Western Mass, quitting her job at Aperture in NYC. She wanted to live more affordably, redirect her career goals and focus on her art making practice. We had found the most beautiful three bedroom apartment on a hill, with black and white checkered kitchen floor, hardwood throughout the rest, windows that allowed the light to shine in warmly throughout the day, and a living room picture window that framed an expansive view of the Berkshires. When the sun set, the mountains glowed and it was as though we had a Bierstadt painting of our own. "Can you believe we live here?!" she often asked me when the light was hitting just right. I knew she was talking about the natural beauty, but also about how we had been fortunate to find ourselves in each other's lives again.

Just after signing the lease on my new place, Mac decided he was going to stay in town a bit longer. He thought he could use a little more time at the museum and was envious of my new home in North Adams. He thought a move would be fun and shared his decision casually with a smile. What could have been seen as a great opportunity for a shift in our relationship, to take a step back and get the space that we never had and grow together more efficiently, was shadowed by the looming anger phase of grief. I was too far in and knew that the months we'd spent imagining and coming to terms with our end, had calloused me more than I wanted to admit. But I knew this anger could be a phase, and wanted time to wait and see.

To celebrate my move and take a break after days of settling in, Mac and I took a drive to the Book Mill, an old mill turned bookstore that also housed a tiny cafe. It boasted a couple beers on tap, a tasty cafe, and required an amazingly scenic drive over the mountain pass, past the bridge of flowers, and through historic towns to reach. We sat outside on one of the picnic tables and drank a couple beers in the mid-summer sun, nearly silent. The silent wasn't the sort that felt as though we were alone together—sharing company and feeling another's energy and care, but doing our own thing (the sort of alone-together Mac had been so excited to share before I had moved in). It felt as though we were living entirely different realities, no longer in touch with the other's. We were actually alone, but just existing in close proximity.

I looked around at the other people eating lunch with friends or partners or reading by the riverside. I thought back to the days when Mac and I would look out the window giggling, and make up stories about the people that surrounded us. I realized that if anyone were to look at us and assume our experience in a three sentence description, it would surely be a sad one.

I ended the relationship that night. I sat on Mac's bed and told him I couldn't do it anymore. We cried together and held each other. There was no bargaining. No asking for more. I was at the end of this long road of grieving, and his was just about to pick up speed. We hugged and kissed and for the last time, he endearingly sent me off saying, "what are you waiting for?"

I got home and ran a bath in my new-to-me clawfoot tub. I submerged myself in the water like they do in the movies when the world seems overwhelming, as though a quick dip will rinse off the weight of accumulated existential dirt. When I emerged, I saw little curly dark hairs in the crevice between the tub and the wall. A thick collection of pubic hair from someone I didn't know felt the crack, and made my dead eyes roll as I sunk back down, to try my rinse once more. I knew though that no matter how pruney I'd let my fingers get or how long my weak lungs could hold my breath, I would only emerge to a mess again.

I LOVE YOU

It had been a few days since Mac and I split up before Wiley, my coworker and downstairs neighbor, invited me to visit his family's house with him in Hague, NY. We planned to camp and play and enjoy some summer days. Wiley was a strong young man, though over ten years older than me. He had a sweet youthful face, calloused hands from working masonry before joining us at the museum, and a thick Canadian-influenced accent that reminded me of home.

After stopping at a flea market where I bought a couple tintypes and contemplated purchasing a deer head, we stripped down to our underwear for a quick jump off a family friend's pier into Lake George. Despite it being a warm, sunny, July day, the pain of the chilled water seemed appropriate for my mental state.

Wiley showed me the lean-to he and his late brother, who he'd witnessed being hit by a car as they walked on the side of the road together, had built in the trees on his parents' property. His eyes both sparkled and tired as he shared tales of how they'd slept under it, explored the woods, and shared these spaces with their tight-knit, small town community. I tried to hold the space for him to share, but could feel the sadness permeate the landscape.

We found a row boat on the side of a lake at the end of our hike away from his parents house. We tossed our overnight packs inside, grabbed the oars made of driftwood tied together, and he rowed me (my arm too sore to help) to an island across the calm water where we'd set up camp for the night.

Around the fire, eating canned smoked oysters and crackers, I played in the dirt with the beaver chewed stick I'd decided to take home with me as I vented about the reasons for my relationship's end. Though by now I'd felt like I was primarily in the acceptance phase of my grief, I'd occasionally regress to anger and speak hastily. I shared my ideas of love and what I'd hoped a relationship could be and how the things I had weren't meeting my needs. But I cried with tears that matched the oyster salt on my lips and showed the pain I still felt so heavily.

"I love you," Wiley said to me abruptly, interrupting my ramblings. It wasn't said in the way a friend says to comfort and support through the stresses I was spouting about, but more of a profession—as though it had been bottled up and the pressure within him was too much to keep a

lid on anymore. “I’ve been reading about love a lot, and looking online. I feel all the things they describe.”

My heart sank not just for him and these unrequited affections, but deflated under the pressure of taking on the weight of another relationship mishap and the need to tiptoe around his genuinely youthfully sweet, but very poorly timed feelings carefully. It was strange to me, how at the same moment, those three words were the exact things I wanted to hear from the person I missed most, and the last three I wanted to hear from the person by my side.

SIX SOLAR MASSES

When my high school friend John and I met each other to occasionally see live music, it was always to see the same folk/bluegrass band. I joked that the lead singer was my “music crush,” teasing John as I’m sure he knew that he was my real crush and had been for years. What I didn’t expect was that my music crush would be my boyfriend long before John ever would.

I was a bit taken aback when I received a message from Paul, my music crush, on Instagram. I had noticed weeks earlier that he had followed my account, and not long after I was at a favorite restaurant eating on the porch with my mom and Mac when one of his songs came on. It was an older one that I didn’t know but was really fond of, so when I asked Siri who it was by and his band’s name popped up, it felt like a serendipitous surprise in the vaguest way. He had responded to a post I’d created about art work and career paths and such, sending well wishes and saying that he admired my decisions. No prompts for further conversation or follow up, so I sent an equally distant, “Thanks for the kind words, I like seeing your day-to-day as well, let me know if you’re ever in town and maybe our paths will cross someday!” An occasional message was sent about the bluegrass festival that the museum hosts every summer, which was eventually followed by his phone number and email.

I could be a big daydreamer, getting carried away with best case scenarios of every decision in my life. So although I didn’t want a relationship and knew I had so much to process with Mac and needed some alone time, the universe had a strange way of plopping people into my life one right after another. It seemed a shame to ignore it. This couldn’t become anything much anyways, I reminded myself constantly. He was halfway across the country at his home in Minnesota, but the attention was exciting. I was also working on a project about the challenges associated with living a creative life, inspired by “art is hard” and thought maybe he could contribute. A flirty, but platonic, professional relationship couldn’t hurt.

After another week or two, and many emails that turned from very business to very personal, he described the divorce he was learning to live with the past couple years as well as the two kids he lived for, and I kept pulling out more and more. I got his first text when I was buying hangers at Ikea in Redhook and it read “Hey, it’s your new friend Paul.”

After another week or two I was boarding a plane with a ticket he’d bought me to visit him in Minneapolis and then travel to his favorite little ski town on Lake Superior’s North Shore.

I entirely questioned what I was doing, but the reminder that I could still surprise myself felt all too liberating. I was expecting it to go horribly. I imagined his ego would be much bigger than text could show and I figured he wanted me entirely for the youthful appearance seen on my Instagram. But if I went missing, my friend Abby knew where I was, as a public figure he wouldn't be too hard to track down, and I was so eager to go back home to Minnesota.

Paul was the opposite of what I expected. Much more along the lines of “best-case scenario.” He was courteous (though not in a showman sort of way), humble, and had soft thin wavy hair that felt like the head of a baby that contrasted against his coarse stubble beard, and he covered me in his denim jacket with a Townes Van Zandt patch stitched to its chest when I got cold. We stood on the porch of our room at the lodge as a storm rolled in, thundering to the beat of my nervous heart. We fooled around by the fireplace, his short frame fitting seamlessly into mine.

We cuddled by the light of the fire. He talked about sadness, about love and loss. “Happiness is a luxury,” he said to me. “I don't know that I deserve it. I'm learning how to let myself be.”

“Do you think about death?” I asked as his comments reflected those of someone that's contemplated life's ending. We shared our wonders and worries.

“I never thought I'd be lying on the floor listening to Gregory Alan Isakov with Grace Clark talking about dying. You're something else,” he smiled. I always melted a little when someone used my full name. It was flattering to feel important enough that they'd take the time. “Do you still like me after meeting me? Even with my fat fingers?” He asked as I rubbed his rounded fingertips, a shape I'd never held before. He was no superstar—just a sweet, strong, but sad human being just like me.

When I returned from my stay in Minnesota, I met Mary for tea in her dreamy artist loft apartment. The mural had been done for some time, but we tried to meet up occasionally.

“Did you sleep with him?!” she asked casually, agitating the bag in my cup of hot water with one hand while gathering berries and crackers with the other. Mary had a wonderful way of being so incredibly reserved, until she wasn't. I hoped I'd be much like her in another 40 years.

I felt the rug burn on my back disappear as a distant souvenir as I washed in the shower each day. But Paul made sure I knew he didn't want to do the same. He visited me a month later

and in-between he sent daisies and postcards and a crock pot in the mail, saying “Ash mentioned you two should make soup now that the winter’s coming. Thought this could help keep you warm.” For what he often lacked in words, taking a stoic, midwestern man’s approach to showing affection, he made up for in gifts and being present and interested in the limited chunks of time we did share.

When we were apart, I saw the pictures he’d post on Instagram being composed very much like mine. I had been photographing myself in mirrors in a very particular way, for some time and somehow it seemed the men I hung out with would often start seeing things like me. I wondered if visual literacy worked like language does. The way that when you’re around someone enough you start using the same words as them. Though I’d never say “bitchin,” a word that seemed to age Paul more than the thirteen years he had on me, when I joked that my style had rubbed off on him he replied “oh definitely.” I was comforted by the fact that even from afar we could feel each other so vividly.

“I swore on every star in the sky that I would never fall for someone again,” Paul said as though he was surprising himself too. There had been two years and six solar masses created since his divorce, plenty of weight to wish upon by the time he met me.

44 DAYS

I once read that it takes 44 days to feel better after a breakup. A 2007 study suggested that people who experienced heartbreak after relationships of varying lengths, typically felt better than they had anticipated after about ten or eleven weeks. What the words “recover” or “distress” in their findings actually meant, I wasn’t quite sure, but I didn’t care. I took the conclusion as a prescription and a project. I decided to create a journal documenting my feelings throughout the healing process for the 44 days after Mac and I ended our relationship.

These entries described how much I missed him and how he’d wear the same t-shirt with plain text across the front that read “Captain Jon” every time we would go to the drive-in to get fried eggplant and ice cream. How passing him at work resulted in me walking across the museum to find a private bathroom to cry. How I refused to give up on the dying palm plant we had bought together at Ikea, which he later gave a disastrous “haircut” because he thought it was growing haphazardly, only to declare it ugly and discard it once it browned where his cuts penetrated. I wrote of how I nursed that plant to good health until it got aphids and let Ash take over because I was over it, unable to give any more to Mac, even symbolically. I wrote about how I hadn’t thought of him all day because I was dreaming of Paul and wondering if I was rebounding or truly just happy. I wrote about how Mac had printed a letter on card stock and delivered it along with the poster that had once hung in our shared closet that said “There is hope for us yet.” And how in that letter he created a metaphor about how we had a limb cut off and just need to learn to walk again and that he’s “stupid” and “sorry” for choosing a place over me. I wrote about how I visited his new apartment and sat cross legged under a blanket on the love seat on his porch, my knee barely touching his leg. How we talked as though we were friends longing for more just as we had a year before. I wrote about how I felt like learning to walk without a limb wasn’t easy, took time, and came with a lot of doubt and restored trust in the miraculous strength and resilience of the body And how because of this, he would need to be patient with me. That I couldn’t just jump back in 100% because I was scared and I needed to find some boundaries. I wrote about how when I shared these things he said he wanted all or nothing, showing me that it was all still on his terms, and not much had changed really.

On the 44th day, I was in Portland Maine visiting my friend Brian. Well into medical school and often on call to ask about my arm or stomach pains, he intuitively knew just what I

needed to complete my prescription's cycle. We drove to the ocean, stripped down to our underwear, and dove into the sea. As I rose above the waters, gasping for the breath the cold had taken from me, the water stinging my tongue, I felt complete faith in this salty cleansing.

SEEING WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE

Over Christmas break, I took a month off work to spend in Minnesota. I met Paul at a recording studio and home where he and his band were staying while creating their next album. It was a mid-century time capsule where Nirvana had recorded *In Utero* and I sat on its fireplace's hearth imagining the mental space of Kurt Cobain sitting in the same place. We played cards, ate a group dinner at the local supper club where they roll your food out on carts, and spent the evening in the sauna off the pool. I took breaks from napping and writing and hiking in the snow covered woods to listen to them record. Tom Petty's "Wildflowers" stuck in my head for days after they recorded a cover because they finished the album so quickly and had leftover production time. I pretended that both Tom and Paul were singing that for me.

Paul dropped me off in Minneapolis, requesting he meet my dad for lunch who was going to pick me up and take me to an artist residency in Fergus Falls. Normally I'd have had no problem introducing people I dated to my family. I preferred it, actually. Both worlds meant so much to me and I wanted to see how things could flow when the two worlds collided. With Paul, I was hesitant though. I still wasn't convinced he would be in my life for long and didn't want him to become a spectacle. But maybe this was one of his ways of showing me he wanted to be around for a while, so I took it as a good thing.

A couple weeks later, Paul visited me at the artist residency in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. Driving 5 hours to spend one night, he brought Christmas and birthday gifts, and treated me to Miller Lites and pull tabs at the local bar housed in a building shaped like a boat. The morning before he left we ate at the diner downtown that also looked like a mid-century time capsule in the most genuine, small town way. I ordered biscuits and gravy and he told me he didn't want to be in a relationship. He was afraid of commitment and all the expectations it brings. This wasn't the first time I'd heard this, so it wasn't surprising. And it wasn't shared in a way that said we needed to slow down or stop, just a "yield" or maybe a "dead end" sign along the road as we kept moving forward. But I was traveling at his pace. I had the weight of my past year pulling at me every time I went home, returning from this vacation dream anyways. I was in no rush to get anywhere.

Upon completing my residency, I met with Paul in Minneapolis to head back up to Lutsen once more. Now that it was winter, we could ski and he was to play a show at a multi-night,

multi-band event he co-hosted called “ski party.” We drove from Minneapolis up north under the light of the blue wolf moon, the colors I wore always seemed to match the copper colored velvety interior of his vintage truck in the silver glow. The high temperatures were barely above 0 most days, but Paul still skied. I worked on art projects, swam in the pool, and went for hikes.

The night of Paul’s show, I kissed him good luck and joined some friends in the crowd. I watched him sing from a similar place I’d stood many times before. As my friends smiled and nudged me, swaying to the beats, I stood stiff and cold, tears welling in my eyes. A mix of happiness and pride and a melancholic depth flooded over me as though I was really hearing his songs for the first time.

I wiped my tears to join the band after the show. We stood on the side of the stage, entirely visible to the crowd as other bands played. Paul leaned his head on me and I smiled down to him then out to my friends below. I could tell they saw that we looked happy.

We skipped the mini festival’s next night of music. Paul was having stomach pains, the life of whiskey, cigarettes, and coffee likely catching up to him. I’d experienced many ulcers in my time and offered herbal tea and Omeprazole and we took turns sharing our favorite guilty pleasure TV shows. Alternating between Northern Exposure and Law & Order. He was surprised that I didn’t mind staying in, as though he thought I was there for the band life just as much as I had expected he would have a band guy’s ego. Law and Order was my comfort show. Familiar sounds and a familiar pattern, Olivia Benson always sorted it out. Not without learning some lessons and making serious mistakes along the way. “Can we watch another one?” A night in after a day of skiing with someone to ask me to watch L&O? He wouldn’t have to ask twice.

On our drive back to Minneapolis, Paul showed me multiple run down shacks that he thought we could turn into the artist residency that I’d told him I’d dreamt of building. As we passed by an abandoned auto shop he said “We could make that into our studio! You could have one half for your art and I could put a recording studio in the other.” He pointed and day dreamed aloud and continued the discussion over a stop for wild rice soup. Though sincere in his energy, I knew these schemes were a stretch. But what was very real and equally exciting, was that he was starting to frequently use the word “we.”

When Paul asked if I wanted to *actually* create a songwriting residency together in Lutsen, I asked him if he was sure about a dozen times. To begin a project that is bigger than yourselves with someone that you are romantically connected with seemed like a big task. It

meant he was either totally confident in spending time and energy with me, or he was thinking of us so casually that if things were to end, there wasn't enough connection invested that it would make a difference or cause difficulty. But coupled with the talk of shared studios and his attempts to convince me to move back to Minnesota when I said my visit had been the perfect balance of a little bit of everything I'd need—"That's what happens in Minnesota, you should stay"—I trusted it was the former rather than the latter, and didn't ask. Because either way, it felt like a good thing. And I never asked about the good things. I was riding the wave and taking things at his pace which seemed to get us further and further down a road to a destination I didn't know.

In a long-distance relationship, words were one of the few things that we had to share. Paul and I had upheld a consistent pace of calls and texts for 8 months. So when conversations grew less frequent, the subtle change felt like something. There was no reason to believe anything was wrong. Other than the fact that I was maybe giving too much advice about which dog he should adopt because I was still ridiculously insecure about my experience with Mac and Lottie, though I blamed it on my sensitive allergies. I really just wanted to feel included. But I started to develop a strong gut feeling.

Without trying to manifest my fears into reality, I sent Paul an email trying to acknowledge that I knew he'd often keep hard feelings in and let them fester to avoid conflict. I didn't want to send him a text or leave a voicemail because it was his son's birthday. There was no rush to this conversation. He had told me it was hard to share his emotions with anyone, though it was getting better the closer we grew. He didn't want to hurt anyone and didn't want to take up the space. It was also easier for him to write than build the courage to speak. I just wanted to let him know that if anything was different, that I wanted to hear it. I opened a door of communication, though I didn't expect how abruptly he would run through it waving the "dead end" sign for me to finally clearly see.

I received an email alert notification as I drove home from my workday at the Crewdson studio. I pulled over next to a historic post office in the village on my hour-long commute. He said he wasn't sure he could find it in himself to "jump in" like he saw his friends do after their divorces. That he knew I deserved someone that could make me so incredibly happy, and he wasn't sure it could be him. He said that he was in love with his ex-wife, the woman he had dated since 19, together nearly two decades and the mother of his children.

I was initially sorry for him. I wondered if he knew how to recognize the different kinds of love and come to terms with the fact that there's almost no way he would ever stop loving his ex-wife to some degree. That maybe what he missed was not her presence, but the idea of what once was and what it was supposed to be. That he's never had to grieve and move past relationships before because she was his only one. He didn't know that life could move on so differently, but just as beautifully. Maybe it was the family unit he missed. I told myself that it wasn't about me.

But then I got angry. I angered at the fact that I never got a chance to show him how I could care for his kids as I wanted to because he and his ex had established a rule that they had to be dating someone a year before introducing them to a new partner. I had only made it two thirds of the way. I understood this in theory, but it seemed to over-compartmentalize. A year is a long time to live in two worlds without being able to see those collide (My therapist later agreed, and assured me she never recommends that sort of arrangement to her couples, which felt sort of unfortunately validating). I angered at the fact that he was telling me what I deserved, rather than letting me choose for myself. I also angered at the fact that he had bought a ticket to meet me in Joshua Tree where I was going to be the one to shower him in surprises and gifts for his birthday. I was going to be at another artist residency, one I was especially excited for and proud of. We had ventured around the north woods and delved into his work plenty, I wanted my time to shine for him in the sun.

"Where is this coming from? I didn't think you cared this much," he said in response to my tone on the phone when I finally reached him.

"Of course I care! If I just wanted a fling I could get something much closer, much more easily! I was taking things at your pace! How am I supposed to be able to show how much I can care if the person I'm showing has blatantly said they don't want a relationship? If you knew I cared as much as I did, I'd maybe have scared you off before you gave it a chance! It was self-preservation! And if you actually didn't think I cared, then what expectations are you so worried about not being able to meet?!" I lit up in a fiery fury as all the good things I never asked about came back to bite me.

A BLANK SLATE

People often think of the desert as a blank slate. As if the expansive landscape had been designed for visitors to pull off onto one of the gridded roads and fill the 5 acre plot, empty homesteader cabin and all, with their garbage bags full of excess emotions and unsorted experiences, grimey and reeking of moldy flesh from going unrinsed.

“The desert will heal you,” Paul said to me. I knew his intentions were kind, but it felt a bit condescending. I didn’t want anyone to tell me how to heal, especially not the person whose actions sparked some of the pain, but I believed it just the same. Like I had believed everything he said. When he said “I’m yours” or when he said his “heart isn’t in it” anymore. I stuck all the words in one of my garbage bags and shoved it in my 49.6 lb checked luggage along with the birthday gifts I made for him because he still hadn’t decided whether or not he was going to visit me.

People say that the desert is magical. As though the soil holds energy uniquely capable of cleansing, healing, and changing. A power in the rocks, in the earth. My main intention for traveling to Joshua Tree however, was to stay at the Andrea Zittel residency. I had worked double my usual 40 hours at Crewdson’s and the museum the weeks before and after my residency to be able to take time off to stay at Andrea’s A-Z West compound. I flew to Idaho to borrow a car from my aunt and uncle and drive the rest of the way because I couldn’t afford a rental car for the three weeks of my stay. I’d felt this transformative aura alone in the sand dunes of the Mojave before, and hoped for the same time to process my feelings as I drove the same stretch of road I’d driven those two years before. I had to trust in something bigger than myself almost immediately when I noticed the 1999 Mercedes SUV my aunt loaned me had 314,000 miles on it already. But I loaded up my bag and some additional borrowed camping equipment and headed west once more.

I took the same route that I traveled when I went to Joshua tree the two years before with my camper. I had a favorite BLM campground outside Zion that I aimed to stay the night at. Though as I rolled into the property, just as the sun was setting, I found all of the sites to be full. I hadn’t prepared for this as I’d imagined it would be as empty as it was the time before. As I left the campground to see if the state park down the road had any availability, I reached the same

“T” in the road I’d been at just 5 minutes earlier, but this time there was a car pulled off to the side and a deer lying there in the middle of the intersection. I’m not sure if it was the car that was there with me, or someone that had come before, but the deer had very clearly been hit, but not badly enough that it was graced with an instant death. I watched her laying on the ground trying to inch away from us, off to the side of the road. Her limbs and neck flailing like a fish out of water, unable to get traction to move.

I immediately thought of the knife that Rob had given me before I left home with my camper. It was still in my glove box in Massachusetts. The only sharp instrument I had with me was a dulled down leatherman I had packed in my checked bag. I had been teased many times at work for how worthless a thing it was so I figured if I tried to put this deer out of her misery with what was essentially a butter knife, it would only increase her suffering. But I couldn’t sit still. In the couple of minutes that I considered what to do and hoped she would pass peacefully, the other car had driven off to leave me with the dilemma. My instinct was to get out of the car and hold her, stroke the fur on her face to comfort her and try to make her at ease. But I knew that was a selfish thought of mine. In reality, me being anywhere near the scene likely only added to her frantic feelings. I decided to race to the state park to see if a ranger had a gun. They were used to taking care of this sort of thing.

I’d been crying since I got to the intersection, feeling for her fear as well as mine. Ashamed of myself for not having the courage to take initiative enough to get my hands dirty. I didn’t have the knife, but there were plenty of large rocks nearby. I could, and should have found something. But I didn’t have it in me. I felt guilty that I knew this could happen and someone had helped prepare me, but here I was, useless and afraid.

The state park had closed for the night and there was no access to the campground due to construction. My drive back to the intersection was slightly slower than my sprint over, worried that in my rush I’d condemn another animal to misery as well as give myself more time to watch her slowly fade. In the ten minutes it took for me to drive to the park entrance and back, she had moved to the side of the road and passed away.

I got out of the car and walked over to her warm but lifeless body. I didn’t touch her. I didn’t think it would be right of me. But I knelt near and looked her in the eye and said with all of my heart, tears dripping onto the pavement, “I’m sorry.”

That night, I slept on a gravel side road about 5 minutes from where the deer would eternally rest. The back seats of the Mercedes folded in a v-shape but not in the direction that would cradle my body. Isolated in a spot that looked like it was typically reserved for ATVs or service vehicles, I felt a bit vulnerable and on edge as lights passed by every so often. But with the deer's moans ringing in my ears, I told myself. *This discomfort is nothing.*

HOW TO DO NOTHING

People also say not to meet your heroes. They will look more real than they do in the pictures or pass by you grouchily. Andrea Zittel was an artist I had admired for some time for many reasons. Her past work was much about questioning the ways in which we live and creating physical and mental structures for navigating this life. I also admired her ability to do a little bit of everything. She showed at the Whitney, but lived in the middle of the desert on her own compound where she hosted artist residencies. In exchange for my stay, I would help her make ceramic bowls to sell both at museums like the Whitney as well as from the studio itself, with a goal of eventually not depending on galleries to build a sustainable practice. Though she got lucky with her timing after completing her education at RISD and hitting NYC just right, she was an independent woman that had built something for herself without coming from loads of money or creating a spectacle.

Many artist residencies encourage artists to make, to propel processes with production and provide content to share on a social media page. Andrea however, suggested to just be. In the shipping container lined with plywood, an Eames style desk chair, wool rug, sleeping bag, and sun hat hanging on a hook in the bedroom I was able to call home for a few weeks, I found a laminated booklet of information about the program.

“I don’t always see productivity as being ‘productive’—instead, it is these down periods of being totally open to new experiences and input that can often be the most life changing,” Andrea’s text read. At a time when all I wanted to do was get the desert winds into my bloodstream, this sounded so generously like what I’d need.

I spent my time at the residency primarily hiking with intent to photograph, but more often than not coming home with a memory card that may as well have been empty. I dreamt of writing down thoughts, or even compiling stories, but my arms ached even considering the idea of hand writing or typing at any efficient speed because I’d already exhausted them by rewriting the script I’d say to Paul when we finally talked again. I took many showers in the outdoor bathroom to rinse the anxiety off my antsy skin. Full moon rising high in the still blue sky, I tried to convince myself that by growing out my armpit hair it proved that I no longer cared.

During a couple mornings each week, the other short term resident, (a weaver that lived in a Zittel-designed camper on the other side of the property) as well as Andrea’s studio

assistants, Andrea's three dogs, and Andrea herself, participated in "power hour." This was a personal practice of Andrea's to wake early and, according to a well-planned routine, accomplish many housekeeping tasks right away to begin the day. This included cleaning the chicken coop, sweeping the walkways, scrubbing the kitchen, emptying the compost toilet, and the controversial task of occasionally sweeping the desert floor. In front of the cabins, we would sweep fallen plant matter away from the base of the cacti, essentially the equivalent of raking a yard. But the act of sweeping, something typically reserved for picking up dirt from a floor, on a dirt floor itself felt a bit redundant, confusing, and a little culty no matter how tidy and satisfying the outcome.

"What makes us feel liberated is not total freedom, but rather living in a set of limitations that we have created and prescribed for ourselves," I remembered from her creative work a list of beliefs titled, "These things I know for sure." Power hour was different though. Because what may have fueled Andrea or spent her morning energy (whichever way the "power" was supposed to flow), wasn't the same that fueled me so early in the morning. I knew I was in service to Andrea in exchange for my stay, and was happy to do so, but wondered what this power hour would look like if the structure within the freedom were prescribed by me. It would likely look more like the couple hours before the actual power hour, in which I rose at 5 am (I was still on east coast time) to take a walk and drink tea in the Glodea chairs as the sun rose, illuminating me in a desert glow for the day.

Much of Andrea's thinking and ways of working resonated with me and my own work (I was making sculptures that acted as housing for every object one would need to satisfy some sort of existential goal), but her list titled "These things I know for sure," was especially powerful to me. Andrea's list focused largely on theories of design and philosophy about freedom, movement, and growth. But with the prescribed structure of her list and the spaces around me, I wondered where the unpredictable and often untidy emotions were allowed to live more fully.

I got hints about this as residents would speak about Andrea's patterns of socializing. She didn't pass me by grouchily like some may fear, but silently and subtly warm. They told me of how she created this structure of community to share, only to be worried by the scale of things. She had begun providing occasional tours of her home to the public to raise money for her studio and the non-profit community project, High Desert Test Sites. But with residents coming and going every spring and fall, I could see how eventually all the names and stories mixed with the

random public, could be very overwhelming. As we swept one day, she described a dream of building out the empty shell of a cottage on the other side of her 35 acre property. It provided views of the studio and her current home below, but could offer her the privacy and distance from the input of others that she had moved there originally seeking.

The desert allegory was often a solitary journey and until I spent time at A-Z west, a solo transformation was the narrative that spoke to me. But this visit was different. The power hours did create a special space to grow together. I got to know the ceramic studio assistant who was participating in a low residency MFA at Bard. I grew to want to know more about the studio manager who worked most diligently, likely taking on the stress of keeping everything in Andrea's life tidy, but had a ceramic practice of her own. I made plans to hang out with the studio assistant that was my age, her internship had turned into a more long term stay. Through the sweeping, we could work meditatively in a synchronous silence, or have a chatty morning about regular dramas and highlights, including the snakes that made their way into kitchens the other day.

One of these sweeps allowed us to plan a trip to meet everyone for brunch at the saloon. Those of us that lived on the grounds decided to carpool. On the long rural drive, I let myself cry. When prompted to talk about the current state of my relationship and whether or not Paul would visit, I thought back to the phone call in which he had told me he had decided to cancel his flight signaling he had also completely given up the fight, and how I couldn't tell if I was actually okay with the end to everything or just in that temporary stage of grief that I was angry enough to be glad he was gone. I shared the thoughts about his parenting techniques, which led us into further discussions about bringing kids into the world and the responsibility, which got my new friends to cry with me. One's mom had died within the past couple years of cancer. Another's had died of suicide, and she herself had just been broken up with by a man that had a child who was so incredibly important in her life. We moved from near strangers to close friends, shedding tears for each other as we drove from the dive bar brunch, slowed by washboarded backroads that somehow seemed to know we just needed time.

BAGGAGE

While I was in Joshua Tree, Jack and Henry as well as two friends of Henry's, booked a glamping campsite about 30 minutes away. I had seen Jack on my drive from Idaho to California a couple weeks earlier. We hit golf balls into the dried up reservoir, he told me about a hospital detox experience, he introduced me to his girlfriend, and I hung out with her as she asked for outfit advice before we went out for pizza at the restaurant Jack worked at. He seemed to be in a good place. Until he called me a week later telling me he had relapsed when he found a small bottle of Captain he had hid in his car, drank after hitting a deer, and then called the police only to be charged with a DUI. I wasn't sure I believed the story, but it didn't matter anyways. Consequently, he wasn't sure he would be able to come to visit me. He wouldn't be in jail and he didn't have classes, he just didn't know that he was deserving.

Jack had been an alcoholic as long as I'd known him. But only during one brief moment did I realize it during our travels together. Instead, he was much more of the person he said he wanted to be, than the person he had been known to be for so long. I didn't really know how to approach this part of him. "The desert heals" is what I wanted to say, though instead of simplifying I mentioned something about how being around a support system rather than wallowing (and likely drinking) may be the best idea.

He did end up joining, and I met them at their camp one night. I was crisp and red from a sunburn I received hiking to the philosophical carvings of Saumelson's Rocks and the cool night air felt extra sharp on my skin. I tried to tell Henry about the rocks as I thought the text would satisfy his philosophical cravings, but the rocks were not nearly as interesting to him as his steak grilling skills, and venting about the fact that his girlfriend-on-the-rocks was in the park with her friends at the same time because she was annoyed that he didn't invite her along on his trip. I was just happy to have a meal cooked for me and that I could cozy up in a tent with Jack, thankful to have an old friend by my side. I was soon met by an unexpected disruption to my sleep when I realized Jack had developed a snoring habit since our teardrop days. I put my head near his feet to distance the sound, only to be met by extreme stink.

The next day we drove into the park together. I used my arm, and extreme sunburn as excuses to not hike too long or follow them climbing up steep boulder ridges. I didn't work well on little sleep.

“Do you want to get away with me?” I asked Jack, feeling like we could use some time to get to be who we knew each other as when we were on the road years ago, away from the input of what the others thought of us—and I could use something to eat. I got permission to show Jack my apartment at A-Z West. “They don’t just let us bring anyone by. It’s sort of a sacred space,” I explained hoping Jack would see how much he meant to me. As we pulled into the driveway, Jack said, “Remind me I have something to tell you later.” The tone of his voice was hazy and slow and I knew suddenly that something was very wrong. I quickly toured him around, but knew that neither of us was thinking about the incredibly cool architecture or philosophy of the space. I had him take my picture as I sat on the bed, but my face only showed that I had invited a challenging energy into the place.

As though the space was too sacred for what I knew was coming, I prompted him to tell me as soon as we got off of the property. Jack told me that despite Henry searching all of his belongings, he had hidden some alcohol and when he went off to pee in the boulders he was actually taking a drink. With the vast amounts of fresh air and our windows rolled down, it made sense that there was too much space for me to smell the liquor on his breath. I sat in silence trying to process the contradicting feelings he was sharing with me. I was mad that he chose the time that I was most excited to share with him to tell me, but I also knew that it was because I chose him that he felt he could. I felt sad, too sad to speak. When I began to talk, I started out quietly. He told me he wanted me to be upset with him. That I should hold him accountable to being better than he was, because he admired me. I raised my voice slightly from its regularly mild tone to meet his needs. “Don’t yell at me!” he cried much louder than I’d spoken. We hugged and sat in the parking lot of the restaurant we were going to eat at and blew on tissues in silence. The only thing I knew I could do was feel for him, until an hour or two of sitting passed and the only feeling I knew to be true was hunger.

At their camp that night, I slept next to Henry on the bed covered in a burlap canopy. I didn’t want Jack to think I was punishing him, but I really just couldn’t stand another night of stinky feet or snoring. I turned to Henry, our eyes face to face as mine welled up with tears and explained our day’s events. He promised to keep an eye on him, as he always tried to do. I rolled back over and tried to rest my tired eyes. Into the night Henry put an arm around me. It was probably a habit he just did in his sleep, confusing me for his girlfriend or something. Either way,

I was well past needing any physical comforting of his but didn't have the energy to say anything. I let it hang stretched over my side as I pretended to sleep.

It took a while for me to feel at home at A-Z West, but as time passed and I was met by sweet moments, I felt more and more that I was a part of the place, and it was a part of me. Three weeks seemed to be just enough time to find my place in a space, and try to start processing, right before having to leave.

My baggage was no lighter than it had been when I got to Joshua Tree. I had mailed the wool smoking jacket and camp chair I made for Paul to him in Minnesota just to make room for the knee-length suede jacket with a fur trim I'd thrifted from the Goodwill. It made me feel like much more of a queen than the power I'd have maybe felt if I'd held onto his things out of resentment. I loaded the equally heavy bag in the car, stuffing my dull leatherman into its side pocket.

I turned off of Andrea's gravel road to get back on the highway that would lead me east towards Idaho once more. But not much more than 100 feet down the road, the car began to rev uncontrollably yet hardly move. I pulled it back onto Andrea's road and walked back to the apartment I'd just said my goodbyes to after cleaning. On my walk to seek help, on the side of the road, there was a plant—a short, grassy thing that grew in a circle shape to form a perfect ring. I was right back where I had started this trip—broken, tired, and returning to the same doubts continuously. But through embracing all of the life in the loved ones, old and new, by my side, or the ring of grasses at my feet in this seemingly barren place, I knew that the desert held more than healing, but I also wasn't alone in the suffering.

ROOM TO GROW

“The pub” on the museum campus is where you could find Richard, my gruff, English art fabrication supervisor after work most days at MASS MoCA. I met him for a shift beer, not long after I’d returned from my residency in Joshua Tree, and settled into a conversation about why I was leaving the museum for good this time. I was planning to move home to take advantage of my parents’ health insurance while still under the age of 25, to rest, and to apply for graduate school. Though the museum and my job at the Crewdson studio had taught me so many things, I was reaching a point of mental stagnancy, experiencing great physical discomfort, and even greater desire to grow and grow quickly. But I wasn’t sure Western Mass was allowing me to do so.

A couple beers in, I expressed my concern about equity at the museum, about my hesitations to give up so much of my personal energy to make others’ dreams a reality, to be left to make my personal work on weekends, evenings, or the occasional big break that I’d bust my body in equally big ways working overtime to accommodate. At A-Z West I had lived in the world of an artist I admired most, and saw a version of it for myself somewhere. But I wasn’t sure the path I was on would take me there. There had to be another way. Richard shared his experience immigrating from England to eventually take a job at the museum, sacrificing in the very ways that caused my complaints, but his driving force wasn’t to help other random artists. He did it to make time and money for his wife to create. With a sense of pride, he sent me off with high praises and a rare hug goodbye saying, “There are points in life when you need to decide whose career you’re going to prioritize.”

PART III

TO BE SEEN

I never wanted to move back to my parents' house. Though it was a backup plan when I was traveling and a safety net that, along with the support of my parents were the only things that allowed me to take the chances up until this point—I didn't see myself ever actually needing it. But my arm was tired. Still tired after a year of mixing up work habits, resting, and physical therapy. I couldn't type a page, handwrite more than a few sentences, and carrying anything caused immense strain and left it sore on top of its typical throbbing aches for days. I needed help and using my parents' health insurance for the last few months before I turned 25, while staying in their guest room rent-free, seemed like the only possibility.

I applied for my substitute teaching license to try to make money while I stayed with them. I needed something flexible enough to accommodate days off for appointments to specialists and physical therapy, and it had to be low paying enough that when I ran out of insurance and applied for state healthcare I wouldn't price myself out of what I could afford.

I began by seeing an orthopedic doctor. After enough tears describing the PT I'd done in Massachusetts, as well as heat and massage therapy and acupuncture, he asked "Are you feeling really stressed? Do you think that it could be causing this?" *Of course I'm stressed! My arm doesn't work and I just moved in with my parents and quit the jobs that I felt were a dream to come here and be with you just to have you tell me that it's all in my head!* I wanted to scream, though I cried some more and told him that I needed to get everything checked. Whether he felt this was true or did it to simply ease my mind in hopes that he was right about my anxieties, he ordered MRIs of my neck and arm, x-rays, and appointments with a rheumatologist, neurologist, and physical and occupational therapy.

Most of the tests came back clear, though my neurologist called and left a nervous message on my phone. "Bulging disks," "bone spurs," "narrowing of canal", "scar tissue," "spinal cord injury" is all I could hear amongst the jargonous ramblings. When he later showed me the images of my neck, I could see the clear indentation at C5 and C6 of my spine, and white matter on the spinal cord itself. He asked "Are you sure there wasn't an accident or injury you think caused this?" I tossed around memories of car rear endings and the concussion from getting a basketball

to the forehead, but nothing stood out as especially damaging. The doctor listed possibilities searching for a moment that would have shifted my life dramatically. As if seeing the urgency of my condition for the first time, despite my previous tears, his tone had turned from the default neutral to one of more sympathy. With a diagnosis that finally recognized my chronic ache and foggy days, to an extent that allowed the doctors to throw around the word “disability,” I left the hospital that day with a pep in my step. I wasn’t happy to be felt sorry for, or happy to have a diagnosable injury, but instead, after so many months of so many doctors and therapists shrugging shoulders or thinking passing a kleenex would ease the pains, I was happy that someone was finally listening to me.

FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH

With the diagnosis of a spinal cord injury, my doctors became more determined to try to link my arm pain. “Don’t use your arms. They need to rest. You are going to have to lean on others. Ask for help opening doors, carrying groceries, washing the dishes. Everything. Give them a chance.” I needed to start taking the healing process seriously too. But that which might heal me physically, would test me mentally.

I always thought I’d be fine quitting art to some degree. I didn’t feel attached to the process of creating but rather attached to thinking in a way that felt creative and observant. I wasn’t someone eagerly doodling in meetings like I had in high school. I had made sculptures on weekends and holidays at the MASS MoCA shop when it was empty, but I didn’t feel my work was urgent enough or I was passionate enough to *really* be called an artist most of the time . I wanted to quit quite often actually. When I made a big move and realized how much stuff I had cluttering my life due to materials and tools. When I spent all my extra money on said materials and watched friends take extended trips to Europe. When I completed a project, posted it to my website proudly, and then realized that I was likely to never be very fruitful in its return. What was I doing all of this for anyways?

I never had been very good at having someone tell me what to do. Growing up, I’d always played by the rules. I was the “good girl.” But when I had options, I ran with them and wanted to embrace any and all autonomy. So to have someone tell me to depend on others was the most challenging thing. My mom, not having been around me for a few years by now, was eager to be able to mother me regularly, insisting I drop what I was doing to comply with doctor’s orders. She was willing to take on whatever I’d need. She was also willing to buy many avocados and cook along the lines of a strict autoimmune protocol diet I’d been living with for the past few months to try to heal my stomach, food intolerances, and ideally the inflammation in my arm. I learned to lean on her because she was my mom and it came with the role. But even so, I did it reluctantly.

The tears I frequently cried to her after doctor’s visits due to pain or frustration likely persuaded her willingness to accommodate. She would occasionally cry with me. I didn’t want her to feel sad for me, but by getting more than a simple “sorry,” it felt good to have not just someone, but my mom, really see my frustration.

I felt like I'd lost almost everything. I had quit the jobs that if you'd told me two and a half years earlier I would have, I'd have been stunned. I told myself it wasn't just my body. It was true that I needed the room to grow, but I wouldn't have been back in Minnesota, broke, and sad, without this bodily failure. I felt heartbroken. I was ready to grow in so many ways, but nothing was working out and I felt more alone than ever. The memories of the travels I'd once felt an energizing pride from disappeared with every hour I wasted watching months of Netflix episodes.

I'd never enjoyed gambling. If I went home with a profit, I felt greedy. If I went home at a loss, I felt naive. If I went home even, I felt like a square. Though I knew I had done so much and taken some chances. And I knew you couldn't win big without putting all your chips down, I'd returned to my parents house not just even, but at what felt like a loss. And it was hard to remember the fun along the way.

Sometimes when I hit a rough patch, I needed to think of myself as a character in a book or movie. I needed to be able to find moments to laugh at myself, analyze the lesson in the narrative and tie together evidence to support it, and choose the point of it all. I'd done this many times. Most recently, when Paul ended things. I told myself that the climax was his realization that he longed for a family unit and that was something I couldn't provide. It was something I wasn't given the chance to try to provide. Whether or not that's the truth (though I liked to believe it was based on the things he told me), didn't matter. It's what I chose to believe and that the ability to choose felt empowering.

Rather than bouncing around neurotically between the doubt-filled insecurities that could be caused by both physical and emotional pain (like wondering if it was that I was "too young," or he had found someone with bigger boobs, or better style, or drank whiskey, or smoked cigarettes, or didn't have irrational dog stresses or something), I could choose that it was something more understandable. The choice could shape a narrative that allowed me to feel sorry for him (because sympathy was better than resentment), and though throughout the narrative I realized my faults in not asking the hard questions that could have eased the miscommunication along the way (which is probably the main point of the whole story), ultimately, the conclusion wasn't in my control and that allowed for some peace. This solidity gave me a consistent perspective to reflect upon when I found myself down again. Reminding myself of the storyline

and the purpose, I could clearly craft my ideas and my identity around that understanding and ideally move on with acceptance of what was.

“Don’t be in the story of how it should have been, but deep acceptance with how it is. The only time we can be unhappy is when how we think it should be and how it is are different. Keep finding the way that life right now is full and full of joy and full of everything you need,” the words of Boyd Varty from a TED Radio Hour rang through my speakers on repeat as I drove the 45 minute commute to my parents house from the doctor. This was a segment of an episode I listened to frequently.

I decided to make a list of these beliefs—lessons learned (though much more general than the Paul scenario) that acted as reference points and reminders. When I felt I didn’t have much else to show for my experiences, these lessons were the few things that I could call mine. They had immense value and they were something that no disability or romantic rejection could ever take away. I wanted to honor them and myself in a time when I felt worthless, by making them more concrete.

Lists of beliefs or guidelines around values are as old as text itself. The Ten Commandments and the Immaculate Heart College Art Department Rules created by Sister Corita Kent (bridging theology and art pedagogy) were a couple that frequently came to mind. These structures seemed to provide order to what was often a chaotic world, and acted as a place of reference or stable validation of beliefs. I thought of Andrea’s list. I worried about doing something too similar to the work of those that I admired, but vaguely recalled someone once telling me, “Everything’s been done before. Don’t be afraid to look at what’s come ahead of you. What did they leave out? How can you do it differently?” I decided I’d make a list that was more contemporary and less guilt-driven than The Ten Commandments, less art-specific than Sister Corita Kent’s, and more emotional than Andrea’s. I wanted to create a list that nearly entirely illustrated where my emotions would sit.

I printed my list on newsprint and hung it on the wall near the bed I spent much of my time in. Newsprint being a material that is in no way archival, would definitely discolor with any glimpse of the sun, and eventually crumble apart, I knew these points weren’t something so certain that they needed to be carved in stone. The only thing I was certain of, was that everything, the list and my beliefs, was subject to change. But in the meantime, hanging over my bed as a reminder of how far I’d come, they were the keys to depression’s escape.

TO BE

When I was eight years old I went through what felt like a very long phase of feeling empathy for inanimate objects. It wasn't just a feeling, but a deep, sometimes debilitating sensitivity. The sorrow I felt for the shopping carts that my mom and I didn't choose at Sam's Club stands out specifically. I apologized to each of the other shopping carts, but when we left the store I still had guilt throughout my body. I was bothered by the fact that I had only been able to give a couple of them a reassuring tap to tell them I'd be back to choose them someday, when they all deserved it equally. I felt weighted down, tired by this responsibility, to the point that I consciously felt as though I couldn't speak. This projection of feeling (likely my own needs) was applied to nearly everything around me until some day, when some unknown shift caused me to go back to feeling a little more normal.

While I was living with my parents to try to rest, I'd substitute teach a couple times a week. Substitute teaching was easy on my arm, but definitely not restful. I gained firsthand knowledge of the immense amount of work that my mom was putting into her job at an elementary school each day. Eight year olds could be mean. They said what they thought, including asking me, "are you even like 16?"

"Add another ten years," I'd tell them, turning it into a math equation to keep them busy until I could get them back on track with the class. But as hard as they were on me, they were even harder on themselves. I sat in on many special education and emotional and behavior disorder rooms where kids were impossible to nail down. Running throughout the halls, yelling "you can't touch me!" knowing that the only option was to follow them around so they wouldn't throw a mirror off a balcony. They never slowed down to focus enough attention to talk through something. Others were more focused, but filled with sadness. In one instance, instructors were trying to help a student choose some rewards for when he met his goals throughout the day. He refused to say he wanted anything. I was frustrated because he didn't seem as apathetic as the other teachers pegged him to be, so I sat down and talked with him one on one on the floor of the hall. "My step-dad gets mad at me if I get a reward. He thinks they give them to me when I do something wrong. Then I get grounded." He was learning that positive affirmations came with negative consequences, it made sense that after he completed the math assignment he worked on

diligently all day, he wouldn't want to be proud of himself. But it's hard to live without positivity.

Many of these young people were also mean to each other. I broke up many disagreements, one in which two girls got to the scooters first in gym class leaving only the slower scooters left for another girl to choose from. When this other girl didn't get the scooter she wanted, she ran to the hall in protest.

"The black girls are terrible! They always get what they want!" she wailed in the hallway. For Fargo, North Dakota, a widely Scandinavian-looking landscape, this school was very diverse and heavily populated with immigrant families, largely refugees from Somalia. I knew race was an inevitable dynamic in this school and I had to address it immediately. "The color of those girls' skin does not make them bad people or people that are trying to hurt you," I began.

In another class of eight year olds, two girls bickered with each other about a math game that groups of students would take turns playing against the teacher. "She's a teacher's pet!" one would say. The other would act calm and cool, but maybe roll her eyes in response. Her relaxed demeanor only upset the other girl more, likely because she was full of an opposing anxiety. After the first girl crawled under the teacher's desk for a while after storming out of the game because "the teacher's pet" won (fairly) too many rounds for her liking, the winner got a little sassier and fed up with being ragged on and started to verbally retaliate. I brought the two of them to the side of the room where no other students were playing games.

"We need to talk. Something is up with you two and it's making me really sad to see that you aren't getting along. Will each of you tell me how you're feeling? Let's take turns letting each other talk." Eventually, both girls teared up and they agreed that they were both tired and hungry and that they were feeling extra emotional. We didn't have time for a deep dive into the complexities of what it means to be a teacher's pet and why that bothers one student and how the other could understand and communicate in a gentle way, but getting them to find common ground about even the littlest challenges was a start at least. Time for these deeper dives was what I could see the students needed. However when there's 25 students to a classroom, one single teacher, and strict curriculum to follow that doesn't dedicate itself to emotional intelligence, this sort of learning got pushed aside for the parents to teach. But with racism and violent communication woven into each generation, it was hard to trust that the system was working.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and manage emotion in ways that eases stress, communicates effectively, empathizes with others, overcomes challenges, and transforms conflict.

The term pedagogue, which is now understood to be a teacher (often a strict or pedantic one according to Merriam-Webster) was previously defined very differently. In ancient Greece, a pedagogue was a slave that accompanied the elite's children to school where their formal teachers would then take over. The role of this enslaved person was to provide the student a social education. To simply *be* with the student and lead them. During these walks, the emotional education would take place. Why would an enslaved person feel interest in sharing such valuable knowledge beyond obligation? Their roles, their seemingly small positions in an unjust society, had the power to shape the future. If these slaves were playing the long game, they knew that though their efforts may not help them directly, planting seeds of empathy and understanding in these children may help them grow to be better future leaders of the world. The children they took to school would eventually become part of the elite class that held the power to decide whether or not the pedagogue's children or grandchildren may have the right to be free.

Eventually, for the majority of human history, emotional intelligence primarily became the responsibility of religion to teach. But in my experience in the Catholic church, values of morality and introspection, community, and purpose also came laced with guilt and controversy. As the world became more secular around the mid-nineteenth century, culture assumed the responsibility of these teachings. Funding and support of art, music, philosophy, and other humanities departments swelled in less religious nations. Libraries and museums were built to mimic cathedrals.

As I listened to these elementary students, I wondered if the tactics of our emotional education system (or lack of) were too passive. I was interested in making art. I had an insatiable desire to get at the root of conflicts, to put my empathy into something, to understand and connect so deeply, but was art the successful way to do it? Was trusting the ever-diverse understanding of "culture" to equip our youth and shape our future really working?

I was raised in a very privileged sphere living with white educators interested in the arts, experiencing other cultures through traveling and diverse friendships, and having kind, loving parents with enough financial security that my basic needs were always met. However, I knew I still had so much to learn. No amount of museums had shaped me so directly or helped me to

reframe my brain to unlearn society's views on love, loss, and failure as much as simply reading a philosophy book like "The Road Less Traveled" by M. Scott Peck or "The School of Life" spearheaded by Alain de Botton. To have someone directly tell me (among so many other things) that I was flawed, that everyone was flawed, and rather than pretending that we were all okay, we could use that commonality to relate, was so simply mind blowing. I knew that everyone accessed these concepts in different ways. Though an essay or two was an easy one for me to get started on questioning all of my existence, I wasn't surprised if the self-help books I bought for each person in my family would likely collect dust for all eternity. I knew that they may not care to walk down this path at all.

I signed up for mediation training as a birthday gift for myself. If I couldn't make art and if the people in my life weren't entirely interested in these subjects, I needed to find community and I wanted to grow by learning something. I wanted to figure out how to implement what I was just beginning to understand and articulate, but had always felt to be true deep in my core—about empathy, empowerment, vulnerability, self-determination and connection—into everyday scenes. Conflict applied to everyone, everywhere, and conflict, (no matter how big or small) offered an opportunity to get at the root of one's needs, to hear another, to empathize, to relate, to heal, and to grow in a more balanced direction. All of which require someone to extend themselves for another and for themselves, which in a sense, is love. By learning how to more effectively give, maybe I could find the love that I'd need.

HOW HAPPY

I met up with Paul at a bike shop cafe in Minneapolis during my mediation training. My good friend Cody was in town from Upstate New York at the same time and wanted to grab coffee. I told them both I'd meet them at this shop, not realizing the timing would overlap. Cody and his girlfriend were serious fans of Paul's band, so I introduced them both but then brushed my friends off so we could speak privately. I'd dressed nice and wore the beautiful suede jacket I brought back with me from the visit to Joshua Tree that Paul was supposed to meet me on. With "happiness is the best revenge" running through my head, I tried to shine. As if wearing someone else's skin, I hoped the leather would make me feel stronger than I knew I was.

I was flustered about organizing these people to meet and it not going as I'd expected. On top of that, I was nervous about seeing Paul one-on-one for the first time since our last phone call, and the anticipation of some sort of closure. I rambled about my life, my grad school hunt, and the guy that I was sort of dating that dreamed of moving with me to wherever I chose to attend (but in reality I knew his unfortunate fear of driving on the interstate wouldn't let our 3-hour-long-distance relationship last—but Paul didn't need to know that part.) I asked him about his kids, we talked about the future of our residency and whether or not we felt we could continue working on it together. His new girlfriend came up. I saw pictures on his Instagram of them in Paris. I knew if he was sharing her publicly she must mean something. I wondered if they met while we were still dating and the ex-wife was an easier thing to say. The girlfriend had a daughter of her own and met his kids right away. I said "I told you" and reminded him that I had mentioned the ability to see his family unit change would make all the difference in his willingness to dive in. He half smiled and agreed quietly, as though he was either just connecting the dots or had no idea what I was saying. The conversation continued on superficially, never getting any more deep. I longed for a moment of vulnerability. Maybe even another apology, one I could see come from his lips. But I knew that chapped Midwestern mouth played Minnesota nice, swallowing the acknowledgement of any challenging conflict.

But I didn't bring it up either, so I kept rambling. I told him about my arm and all of my doctor visits, the jaw surgery I'd just had, all while holding back tears. I needed to be strong. But the tears weren't just about my bodily pains, they were about everything, about everything that had gone wrong. When he left, I took deep breaths, got a hug from Cody who was probably

watching our whole conversation from across the shop, and cried over a croissant alone in the same front seat of my car that I'd cried in when Paul had sent the email that told me he couldn't do it anymore.

Maybe Paul didn't need me. I wasn't able to give him what he wanted, maybe because I didn't have it, or maybe because he didn't let me. But I hoped that by pushing him a bit in our relationship, by showing him that he could fall for someone again, I had eased him into the love he didn't know he could have—whether or not it included me. And in that way I would always be a part of whatever it is that he and his relationship would create. I hoped I'd at least helped him see just how happy he deserved to be.

SONS AND DAUGHTERS

We had just soaked in the bath-water temperature pool at the Best Western in Miles City before we sat on our double beds and watched the interview with a man that frequently visited the Neverland Ranch as a child. On edge, I watched my mom in the double bed next to me, seeing if this man's trauma was triggering anything that would show on her face.

It was my mom's spring break and we were headed west for her yearly trip to Idaho. "Visiting family isn't vacation," my dad always joked. He was right, in many ways. Our days would be full of cleaning the house, yardwork, and adjusting Gram's security settings on Facebook to make sure she wasn't getting scammed. But they were also spent making dinner, playing with the poodle, and exchanging updates on who's died, where so-and-so's moved, and what big box store is expanding the edge of town. The real adventure though, the thing I had never really done before, was taking a road trip alone with my mom. We were both excited to get away. Leaving behind the routines of the typically unacknowledged labor that filled my mom's days, and the imprint of depression in my bed, we joked about whether my dad would be cooking my sister frozen pizza or mac and cheese each night and how messy the house would be when we got back.

Gram was having a harder time walking after her knee was replaced, so we spent a lot of downtime taking drives. We tried to find the farm where she first lived as a child, before the Great Depression hit and they had to move into town to sell chickens. She talked about how her older brother saved her from drowning in the creek in the backyard. Though we'd all been there before, and had our picture taken in front of the big red barn, and though I scoured the entire satellite map following that very creek, we couldn't find the property.

We took a day trip to Craters of the Moon. On our way, in Arco, Idaho where the marquee on the tiny stone clad theatre in the dying desert town read "the first town in the world to be lit by atomic power" we stopped at "Pickle's Place" for sandwiches. Pickle's was a typical stop for my grandparents when they took my mom and her siblings on trips to the Sawtooths or surrounding area decades earlier. As we traveled closer to Craters, the snow grew increasingly thick on the desert floor. By the time we reached the visitor center, the bathrooms and gift shop were all the 4 foot tall snow drifts covering the park roads would allow us to see. It felt as though no matter how hard we tried with Gram, we couldn't quite reach anything.

I can't recall how it came up, but on our ride back to Minnesota from Idaho, I asked my mom if she ever regretted not asking or telling Gram anything about her childhood. She and her siblings had rarely talked about the culture of their household. But any conversations about trauma and abuse were especially distant from Gram.

"More often than not, kids trust that what they are in is normal. I don't even remember a lot of what happened—the details, I mean. And we just didn't talk about those things," she said dismissing it at first. I sat quietly in the passenger seat as we continued forward on I94. Eventually, for the first time, she opened up with the few bits she did remember. The touch, the words. She talked about how she would spontaneously sob at her Catholic elementary school until they sent her to her grandma's house across the street where she was given hugs and cookies. She talked about how she didn't know if others in her family had experienced it too, that maybe it was something that had been happening for more generations than she had known. She told me how her trauma skewed her understanding of her body, the language that shaped her identity, and her ability to build healthy relationships with others and especially with herself. She described how she felt guilty she hadn't said anything because it may have kept my cousin from being abused. But then she said circling back to my question about Gram, "It would only hurt her if I brought it up. I don't think she would even accept it, or admit she knew. I don't think it would help." As I heard my mom say those words, through a red face of tears and her body tense, I worried that she was only hurting herself.

I didn't want her to hurt more, but I knew the only way to get out of pain was to work through it rather than around it. I asked about how she thought her experiences affected how she raised me. She talked about the instance at the preschool, and how she didn't know what happened but assumed the worst, radiating worry. She talked about how she was much more cuddly with my sister (who she gave birth to nearly 11 years later) than she was with me. She cried hardest when she recalled a day where she picked me up from Sunday school. She described how I hopped in the car and immediately told her that I had learned in order to be healthy I needed thirteen hugs a day. She felt she wasn't giving me what I needed. Maybe I could feel the guilt caused by the walls the years of unmetabolized trauma had built, or maybe it was an early introduction to my interest in statistics and their ability to promise emotional well-being, but this memory was embedded in me too.

I picked up a day of work substituting at an elementary school when we returned home. Looking around the room, I thought of the statistics that closed out the Oprah show we'd watched in the hotel room. 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys would experience sexual assault by the age of 18 (a statistic that is debated because much abuse goes unreported). More often than not, by someone in or near their family. My heart sank imagining the number of kids that would likely feel alone in carrying such pain in their bodies, and how those bodies may eventually have sons and daughters too.

A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING

When I was in undergrad, my professor wisely required us to contact alumni of the program or other artists we knew that had continued on to receive their Master in Fine Arts degrees and ask them for advice and thoughts on getting a masters. Some said “choose a place where you’ll want to live afterwards because you’ll build a network.” Others said, “Choose a place based on the faculty’s work so you can find a mentor,” or “Choose one based on the student work,” even “Don’t go to grad school. Unless you want to teach, it’s a waste of money,” or “If you go, make sure you negotiate as much money out of them as possible.” While I was still living and working in Massachusetts, I applied to Yale. Gregory Crewdson, the artist whose studio I worked for was the director of graduate studies in the photography program there. I had grown up knowing that this was one of *the* photo programs to be involved with. It had a very distinct level of prestige.

But as I inched towards this dream, attending a crit night to watch current grads discuss their work (a much less grueling process than its reputation made it seem) and participating in an open house event where they both told attendees something along the lines of, “If you get into Yale, the school will make sure you can afford Yale,” while following it up with, “You may get tuition assistance, but fees for this and that and living expenses will probably cost you around \$24,000 per year.” I didn’t have more than \$5,000 in student loan debt at the time because I had the privilege of having a parent in an education system that allowed me nearly free schooling. But leaving with at least \$50,000 of debt, while acknowledging that although Yale can provide a huge, elite network of connections, many students don’t “make it” in the way that gets their work in museums or magazines—it didn’t seem worth it to me. I also didn’t know that my work fit the aesthetic of the program. And their program had a look.

Somehow even though each candidate's works were so distinctly their own, they had this air to them, as though there’s this mysterious magic mist over the top of each photograph, that smelled so distinctly of Yale. In high school, my dad would suggest a photographer and after looking at a few images I’d ask, “did they go to Yale?” More often than not, just based on very subtle visual indicators that I couldn’t articulate, I was right. I didn’t want my work, even if successful, to wind up looking like my professor’s no matter how much I admired them. I didn’t think I was what Yale wanted, but I decided to apply anyway. Maybe I could be someone that

said no or if I said yes, I could work against the elitist system from the inside. Either sounded empowering.

Once I was rejected, I accepted that my desire was maybe more from my interest in being like Rory Gilmore or part of some definition of “the best” rather than what was actually good for *me*. I told myself that the need to get the illusion out of my system was worth the \$100 application fee.

Now that I was at my parents’ house and I was doing more resting than working, I was worried about my portfolio and whether or not it was ready for more applications. I felt like I had so much to do, but was physically unable to do more than type the multiple cover letters required. But I didn’t see any other option. I had nothing to do for another year if I didn’t apply. I felt my muscles leaving my body, and I felt my creative spirit was doing the same. I wanted to get moving and growing again.

I had a few criteria for the programs I would apply to. They needed to be fully funded, they needed to be clearly supportive of interdisciplinary works, and ideally they would have a social practice component (with bonus points if they were in a warm place). Once I got calls and offers of acceptance from a handful of schools, I narrowed my choices to three options, the University of Minnesota, University of South Florida, and University of North Carolina Greensboro. Minnesota offered the most money and fanciest facilities. South Florida offered more money and great networking opportunities. But what caught my eye and held me the most, with the help of just enough funding, was Greensboro’s Art Truck. UNCG built out the interior of a box truck and let students and faculty use it to create various projects, many of which were community focused.

After traveling in my camper, I had been dreaming of creating an artist residency within a box truck for some time. A sort of everything-you-need live/work structure in mobile form. This mobility would allow people to take their work to locations that felt most impactful for their practice, or bring arts to communities that are often underserved—rather than expect people to come to what are often perceived as stuffy art museums or galleries. I’d pitched this idea to multiple rounds of state funded grants in Minnesota, to be repeatedly labeled “a dreamer” with a great idea, but rejected all the same. Without relying on some outside force to believe in me enough to get the seed money for a truck, I could use the UNCG Art Truck to prove that my plans were possible at least. I’d already established a web-based artist residency program in

hopes of practicing my organization and program building skills. This felt like the next step, but the financial allure of the other universities really pulled at me.

“You value community,” my mom reminded me. The other programs seemed to romanticize the artist alone in their studio and the faculty were big names doing great things but rarely around. At UNCG, it seemed different. I watched their current grad students’ Instagrams as they had peanut butter and jelly picnics as part of social practice professor Lee Walton’s class. His less conventional teaching methods seemed in line with the way I wanted to learn to think.

The graduate school decision process really tested my values. Though finances are a hugely important factor as to whether or not you can not just live but also have the funds to make work, I decided that my mom was right. I had seen plenty of the art world that surrounds money and prestige. I wanted a genuine, down to earth creative community. Sometimes you can’t have the very best of both worlds, but at UNCG, I felt like I could have just enough of a little bit of everything.

PLENTY

When I was a toddler living in the Florida Keys, my mom created the “I Can Can” from a baby formula canister. The exterior was covered in white paper and stickers with its name written in black sharpie on the side. Every time I learned something new, such as how to tie my shoes or flare my nostrils, she would honor the step by writing the task or skill on a thin slice of paper and let me place it in the can. If I was excited about it, no milestone was too small or meaningless. I’d sometimes sit on the living room floor or in the driveway on a sunny, still day dumping all of my lessons learned out onto the ground, to read them to myself over and over again until the fire ants started biting at my little legs and I called for my mom crying.

I was originally rejected from the Carrizozo artist residency program. My application met with a “Thanks, but no thanks. Try again!” I responded telling the hosts that if something came up and someone couldn’t attend, I could fill in at the last minute. I had nothing going on. I was flexible. I needed something. A few weeks before the residency was to start, I was offered a slot. I questioned whether or not I should go. I had very little money to my name, but I knew it would be good for my career. I couldn’t make any work while stuck at my parents’ house without functioning arms. I needed to do *something* to keep up. The career justification was just a way to cover up the fact that I needed it most for my soul.

I went to New Mexico early to camp in the Gila National Forest. I drove the intensely winding cliff roads through the tall pines and walked through forests bare of underbrush, the old growth trees only making me feel smaller than I’d ever felt before. But unlike the weight of my expectations smooshing me, I felt little in a comforting way. I was reminded of my time in the desert. These trees were just as important as me. Some were crooked, some were downed or a precarious lean on others was the only thing keeping them from resting on the ground, some likely had bugs crawling through their bodies, causing them to slowly fall apart, but they were all perfect, especially when together. How could I not see the beauty in my equally imperfect body?

I slept in my car at the Grapevine Campground just south of the Gila Cliff dwellings. It was along a quiet intersection of the East, West, and Middle forks of the Gila River and just up the road were hot springs for just \$3 a day. I read Adrienne Marie Brown’s “Pleasure Activism,”

a book Lee Walton had convinced me to purchase on my visit to UNCG, as I soaked and wondered, *is this the “feeling good” she says we all deserve?*

I had packed my bags for this trip the afternoon before leaving for New Mexico. This was also the afternoon after getting back from my trip to Florida which followed my trip to Minneapolis which followed the trip to Greensboro—scoping out graduate schools all in the span of two weeks. Normally I was the kind of person that got so incredibly excited about travel that I mentally, if not physically, packed my bag up to a month before I was due to leave. But this time, all I felt the capacity to do was to catch up on unwatched Dateline episodes and swallow Gas-X until I fell asleep. However, this lack of planning left me without utensils in the heart of the Gila National Forest trying to eat avocado and tuna with my dull Leatherman and bare hands. I had also forgotten a lighter or matches so any alternative food option was also out of the question. Just before digging into the slippery, stinky supper, a pot bellied man with thin white hair, Budweiser in hand, and waterproof phone pouch with a flip phone inside flopping against his chest waddled my way. “Wanna come join us?” he mumbled with a grin so sweet it showed his missing molars.

“Sure! And do you have a fork?” I replied jumping on the opportunity.

We exchanged names and Bob grabbed a fork-knife-spoon set from his truck that looked like the boy scout interlocking cutlery I had found at my neighbors garage sale, the same set I’d forgotten in my parents’ garage. I set out my rusty orange blanket next to his folding chair eating my tuna and avocado as we shared backgrounds and current situations. He and his friend had traveled there each year from a couple hours away to kayak the waters together. One had lived in Minnesota among many other places and was excited to talk about suburban Bloomington, home of Mall of America.

“You’re out here alone?” they asked. I couldn’t say no. They knew where I slept. I smiled confidently. “Cheers!” they said as though impressed and raised their beers.

After a couple cold ones we stumbled over to a tree at the entrance to the campground. Bob grabbed a branch so thick that it took up all the space his stretched out grip could give. He explained that it was incredibly old, maybe one of the oldest in the world, and he pointed to the immensely heavy chain draped around the tree’s perimeter as though to protect the vine from intruders. Over time the vine had grown in and around its links wild and abundant. Though at

this time of year in these brown spring days, you'd hardly know that this dead looking mess of sticks held so much strength.

Though I had packed paints and drawing supplies for my residency, wanting to use it as a time to experiment, I didn't do more than paint a small solid square and illustrate the pod of a yucca plant on a sheet of sketchbook paper. I had attempted to write for four hours each day, but my arms ached a short bit in, and kept me from writing the next day. I reminded myself of the residency at A-Z West, and how the least "productive" time could be the most generative. Though I had had plenty of unproductive time at my parents' home in the past months, this time was different. I could use it to explore. So while the other resident at the Carrizozo Artist In Residence was engaging with the community, painting, and building sculptures that popped in teal against the cinder rock that surrounded the town's train tracks, I drove, and walked, and thought.

I could wander with the AIR host, Paula and her partner Mike to their favorite island of life amongst the lava rocks on the west side of town, and wonder what it was like to lay naked on the slate rock sculptures they'd built into the landscape. I could take drives to White Sands National Park every other day to people watch and photograph the horizon lines as the dunes' shifted shape. I could lay in the sand and collect stink bugs in my hand. I could drive four hours to watch the sun set at Big Bend and then white knuckle drive the midnight road to Carlsbad Caverns as oil trucks nearly pushed me into a ditch. I could explore the caves and laugh to myself as children told their parents they needed to pee, multiple miles deep, to watch them reverse direction frantically. I could camp at a glampground in Marfa and befriend a handsome Mexican mustached bartender with long braids down each side of his head. And could get drunk together off of sotol and margaritas and when he offered to keep me company that night, I could say no. I could wake before everyone else, and take a shower in an outdoor stall with flowers draping in from the nearby tree and rays of sun illuminating the steam.

When the AIR hosted open studios for the community, I had a few photos of White Sands to share, a few sticks I'd collected, a stack of books I was reading including "The Road Less Traveled" and "How to Disappear," and I pinned up the list I'd made when I was at home. I couldn't show the community what I was doing. Because by many standards, I wasn't doing much of anything.

“How did you get so wise?” Paula asked rhetorically as she read the newsprint list in front of her. More than complimenting my work, complimenting my form, or even flattering my eye, those words of hers, made me melt inside. She wasn’t impressed by what I could do, she was complimenting all that made *me*.

Though life wasn’t looking the same for me lately, New Mexico showed me that I could still tie my shoes, still flare the nostrils on my little nose, still be off on my own. I could do so many things, including and maybe most importantly, surprise myself, because nothing could be just as full as everything.

IN A NEW LIGHT

I was extremely tired when I met Tag at the restaurant in Chimayo. We ordered chips and salsa and drank a beer. Especially when traveling, I'd often get in this hazy state of altitude sickness and poor nutrition, combined with a very sore neck and headaches. "I'll have what he's having," I told the waitress self-consciously too tired to decide for myself.

Tag and I had been following each other on Instagram for some time. "You're the only person on insta whose shared version of life feels real and watching it feels cathartic rather than angering or annoying," he once spontaneously messaged me. His generous words rang through my head any time I considered getting rid of the app. I enjoyed sharing pictures I may not otherwise do anything with. And I appreciated the potential to meet people that it provided. Tag was a photographer who had worked with multiple magazines and was especially known for his Instagram handle and work that coincided called @americaisdead, which chronicled dying shopping malls and the contradictions of the American dream.

After our drink, he showed me to a gift shop where they sold some of the town's famous red chili. I grabbed a big bag of powder to bring home to my family before we drove over to a local chapel he told me I shouldn't miss while passing through. He told me how people pilgrimaged there from all over the country. We talked of how he was raised in this community, how it was strange for him to see people he'd known since elementary school serving him beer when he was back in town from Europe or his new home in LA. I tried to track his story as we walked the chapel grounds, but my body and mind felt so off I wasn't absorbing properly and was embarrassed that I may not be speaking clearly as well. I was certain he thought I was much more of a bore in real life and my Instagram was not as authentic as it seemed to be.

El Santuario de Chimayo was an adobe chapel with two bell towers framing the entryway. Upon entering, at the far end of the chapel, there was a gloriously vibrant altar with patterns and shapes of pinks, reds, turquoise, and greens surrounding a crucified Jesus, and contrasting against the plastered walls. Through the chapel and a door near the altar, we accessed a room called "el pocito" (the little well). It was a humbly barren little room, with dirt floors and walls and a couple religious icons tacked to the wall high and low, in no clear order. Dug into the floor of the room, was a round hole. In it, as the poster on the wall described, was holy dirt. This

dirt could be rubbed on the body and was believed to have healing powers. Tag didn't use any of the dirt, but as a tourist, I felt obliged, smiling awkwardly I rubbed it from my forearm to elbow.

I hadn't mentioned my bodily pains to anyone at the artist residency and it sure hadn't come up during my conversation with this new person. I came to New Mexico to escape the life that had revolved around health issues, not linger in it. But rubbing the dirt on my arm—in a public place and in front of strangers—forced me to acknowledge and make visible, what I so often tried to hide. I had to own it in order to heal it. I had to let go of the stiff posture that had been attempting to hold my head high if I wanted to humbly crouch over the hole for this opportunity. I rubbed the dusty dirt into my skin as I let go of hiding. The dirt marked my worries, made my pains visible, and the release felt empowering.

In another small room adjacent to el pocito, was a prayer room. This room was the opposite of the last in its decadence. The walls were lined with crutches, images of Jesus, the last supper, Mary Magdalene and more were hanging salon style, nearly on top of each other, and sulfur-dioxide lingered in the air from the candles lit in prayer. Overwhelmed by the power of the artifacts people had left behind as testimonies of their healing, I was inspired by their belief. I didn't feel compelled to move forward thinking God was watching out for me, but instead I saw the immense strength in admitting a need for help, believing in a better future, and a willingness to ask for it. By calling upon this dirt in this chapel, maybe I could find in myself a little higher power.

PASSING THROUGH

Paul had told me multiple times that he wanted to take me to Taos. I imagined an airy adobe Airbnb, taking bubble baths, rising to the morning sun, overlooking the New Mexican mountains, and feeling carefree. So as I headed north to return back home, I decided to treat myself to a night in the place that he had built up so dreamily in my mind. *I could give myself that vacation just as much as he could*, I told myself despite knowing things were often better when shared. It was by no means the Instagrammable highlight that Paul could afford but I rented myself a night at a small apartment built into someone's garage, with a queen sized bed, running water, and power outlets. When I wasn't at the residency, I had been sleeping in my car at free campsites and Walmart parking lots. I had never booked myself a night anywhere as a destination before, only cheap hotels when it was too cold to sleep in the car or I was somewhat desperately in need of more amenities, so the \$70 evening felt like a treat.

When I arrived at the apartment after having dinner at a local bar, one of the few things open on a weekday evening in an off-season tourist town, I sat in my car for a few minutes to gather my belongings. A knock on the driver's side window startled me. The Airbnb host stood outside, her beautiful wavy dark hair tousled and smelling of patchouli. She welcomed me and described the layout of her property. Her house was across the street and she was building two more apartments with an outdoor shower to complete her meditation retreat next door.

"You're an artist right?" she asked giddily. I had explained in my message to the host when booking the room that I was traveling home from an artist residency. As she stood over me (I was still sitting in the front seat of my car), she rambled on about her art practice and how hard it was to find any sense of creative community in Taos. She said that everyone made the same kind of art, the kind that sells to people who place it above their couch or mantlepiece, and they didn't understand her abstract nature. "I'll be tiling the outdoor shower next door for a bit. Would you talk with me? I'd love to hear your story and I'd really love the company." I wanted nothing more than to fall into the food coma that the enchiladas had offered me, but it seemed as though this woman really needed to talk. *20 minutes*, I told myself.

As I brought my bags in from the car, the apartment welcomed me with the smell of lavender essential oils and burlap. I passed the bathroom that had an earthy blue tiled bathtub elevated on a platform with a candle in its window waiting for me.

“Sometimes I feel like a convenience store,” Jack once told me. I knew what he meant, especially after his brother had visited me in Massachusetts a year before. Henry and I had backpacked overnight on the Appalachian trail where I had called him out on the fact that he had left home, only coming to me because he was running from things. This revelation, though he expressed how right I was and how appreciative he was of my insight, only prompted him to return home to face his demons and leave me alone. The days I’d taken off to spend with him were tainted by disappointment that he didn’t want to see the museum or things that *I* was doing. Jack was similarly generous with his ability to listen and encourage reflection, but he was also the type that wouldn’t put it upon anyone else to make the space for him. With my trip to Taos, I was trying to make the space that I often gave to others for myself.

But I returned to the host as she gathered her tile cutting tools and clamp lights to work in the setting sun. I could give a little of my time. She asked about me, who I was and what sort of work I made. I was excited that unlike the start of the conversation, maybe this would be a two way street. Not but a few comments in, she interrupted me.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but I also feel I need to. I’ve been getting death threats. These people have bugged my phone and are messing with my internet. That’s why I couldn’t reach you earlier to give you the check-in information.” My coworker at the coffee shop I used to work at always told me to make the drinks because I couldn’t mask my feelings with a smile for the register, so I was sure my puzzled expression was nothing but obvious. “My dad is former CIA. He used to work as a spy overseas and has intel about nuclear missile sites belonging to foreign entities. He’s retiring now, but he has all this knowledge that people can’t risk leaking. So he’s been getting calls from someone. And they’ve been targeting me too.” Her voice was quieted as though she thought they could hear her speak. “While you were inside unloading, I talked to my dad and he had got another call. I don’t know what to do. I don’t feel safe here, but I can’t call police. They’ll hear me.” At this point, I knew she was not-so-subtly trying to ask me if she could use my phone. Overwhelmed by this woman’s situation, I knew she was either not in a healthy state of mind, or she was telling the truth. Neither seemed a threat to me (though odd to tell your guest that you don’t feel safe in your own home), but both equally urgent and concerning for her. It made sense why she was so eager to be heard.

Looking at the time before handing her my phone, an hour had already passed by. The sun was completely gone but I told her I'd wait with her until the police arrived. About half an hour later, the officer strolled over to her, calling her by name because they'd interacted about this topic plenty before. I wished them both a good night and slipped back into my hole in the shed. I called my dad to explain the scenario. I whispered into the phone describing how ironic it all was while laughing a bit. My voice matched the volume at which she had told me her secrets, as though I was afraid she was listening to me.

By the time I settled in, it was well past my bedtime and I had a long ride ahead the next day. The bathtub was still there waiting for me, but my time and energy had been exhausted. It wasn't the bath that I wanted, it was the ability to be alone, to slow down after an ultra packed few weeks of constant intake of new people and my surroundings. I thought back to the campground in the Gila and the couple nights I spent with time alone. Despite the lack of hot running water and charlie horses from cramped legs, compared to my vacation in Taos, solo sleeping in the car started to sound like more of a luxury.

FRESH START

The first thing I did when I got to grad school in North Carolina was build a bed in the private graduate studio I was provided. The bed slid out from under a foot-tall platform, which held my desk and other storage. I imagined building out my studio space, a long rectangular box, much like the interior of the box truck. I could craft components that could then be disassembled from my studio, and placed in the truck when the time came to build my mobile studio. But in the meantime, I would live with them as an artist, and see how they functioned.

I told myself I was going to graduate school to have a few more career options with hopefully more sustainable pay scales, the time and physical resources to focus on my own goals and needs, and to finally realize these projects I'd been scheming. But in building a bed, whether or not I wanted to admit it, I was creating a place of rest. I was worried about my capacity to keep up with other students or the "rigor" that is discussed when people promote graduate degrees. I was worried the brain fog and fatigue from my neck injury, combined with the pain of my arm, would limit me not just in what I could physically produce, but also how clearly I could think and speak. I had never been in school with these types of challenges and didn't know what I would look like as a student with disabilities.

At the graduate open house event, I ate mini sandwiches and sipped on a seltzer as I walked around the campus ballroom viewing the promotional booths of the school's clubs. I picked up a pamphlet from the disability resource office and quickly tucked it in my pocket. When I returned home, I navigated their website to come to the conclusion that because I had had so many doctors, no primary care, and was now in a new medical system that had taken months just to get my birth control prescription records in their system, the simple idea of trying to "prove" my challenges in order to get services was too exhausting, and I didn't have any energy to spare.

It seemed many people entered graduate school as an escape. Something to fix their dead end job, give purpose post-divorce, or keep them from "the real world" upon completing undergrad.

I think Molly moved to Greensboro for a fresh start. She ran from a traumatic history and wasn't hesitant to share her story. Though despite the fact that her experiences made our eyes widen and hearts sink, her smile beamed with the empowerment likely sourced from that openness and vulnerability. It allowed others to feel they could do the same. She talked of how she'd never moved away from her home in Alabama, how she was excited to decorate her room in her new apartment, and how much she loved and would miss her mom. She radiated an energy and excitement about the possibility of creating spaces that made others feel comfortable, safe, and joyous. She knew how she wanted these spaces to look and function, because they were the opposite of the darkness she carried.

We were in our second week of an intensive weekend class when Molly didn't show up. All of us immediately worried. She had mentioned feeling stressed about her roommate, harassed by a man in her complex's gym, and we knew her history of depression. I thought maybe she needed a day off. Maybe school was feeling like a lot. None of us expected that she would never return. Later that afternoon, after anxiously attempting to doodle through class while we waited for a wellness check, tears welled in our professor's eyes as she told us that Molly was no longer with us.

Though she had an untouched wall to fill with record covers of her favorite albums by Prince, The Beatles, and Florence and the Machine in her new home, in a new place, with new friends and a new goal, I was reminded that there's no such thing as a blank slate.

The next week we found ourselves as a cohort sitting in the same room where we had had class that day, in a circle with a number of graduate faculty and counselors. We passed a small tissue box from person to person as we shared stories about the numerous people's lives she touched in such a short time, and how others had lost friends or family to suicide. Those of us that had gotten to know Molly the most cried heavily, while others tried to help us by holding the space.

How do we move on from here? How do we make work that feels as urgent or necessary to address as this feeling of tragedy and immense sadness? It would take many of us a while to know, but Molly's warmth never disappeared.

EFFORT AND COURAGE

Like many of its users probably do, I downloaded Tinder out of desperation. Not out of desperation for physical affection or attention, but to meet someone outside of my art school bubble when I was too busy living between my home and studio to let it happen organically. I didn't want to date anyone. I didn't have time for that either. I wanted something platonically casual, but if it included cuddling, I wouldn't mind.

I was working my grad assistantship monitoring an empty computer lab when I saw Rob's profile. He was cute enough to cause me to pause the perpetual swiping. He had a sweet smile, but also sleeves of traditional style tattoos, and posed against things in a way that either said he was eager for attention or that he knew not to take himself too seriously. He lived in Boone, which was two hours away and not the sort of dedication I was looking for. Nearly ready to swipe him out of my life, I saw in one of his photos of an all-too-familiar, salon style wall of paint-by-number dog portraits. That wall belonged to my favorite cafe in Minneapolis, an eclectic spot that I returned to time and time again after discovering it in high school. They had the best tea assortment, offered breakfasts that didn't revolve around eggs (which I was allergic to), and had a clientele that spanned the desperately hip art kids like myself, to grayed couples grabbing coffee like many do filling McDonald's booths on weekday mornings. How someone in North Carolina, who was photographed at that cafe, could show up on my phone and offer a little slice of home was enough to swipe right.

Before I met Rob I knew there was a chance he'd leave, and I also knew I would probably still fall for him. We had messaged each other with an energy that was exciting, but an intentionality and curiosity that was grounding. I learned that he was also in graduate school at Appalachian State, though completing his final year, and was slated to do an internship that was likely to bring him to either Montana or Asheville. So although my confidence in our compatibility was enough to buy a bag of hot fries and take a drive to Boone, I consciously had to decide if I still wanted to give something that could just as easily disappear a try.

Our first date was spent eating hummus and pretzels on the steps of a church, walking through the App State campus talking, and riding in the back of a truck across a field to a bonfire atop a mountain.

“Do you consider yourself a romantic?” he asked as we strolled through the campus. I wasn’t sure how to answer. I had enjoyed the comedic, happy-ending movies, loved a shared bubble bath in candle light, was convinced you could never be gifted enough flowers, and had lived in plenty of whirlwinds, but I was no longer sure that I took those fleeting things so seriously. Maybe it wouldn’t have as many cheesy quotes or the dramatic highs and lows that made it a movie-worthy spectacle, but could romance be redefined as the ability to stick through a relationship’s lusty phase and actually try?

When I got home the next day, my brain ached from a head of smoke drenched hair, but I hesitated to wash the night away. Thoughts of Rob’s upcoming visit to Greensboro jumped around giddily in the back of my mind as I planned all the things I wanted to show him in my life. It was a time most people would call “falling in love,” but Rob and I wasn’t quite sure we got the chance to try.

Author M. Scott Peck described falling in love as the feelings someone gets, typically at the start of a relationship when everything seems unstoppable. The “us against the world” honeymoon phase of sorts. Fueled by lust and newness, these feelings would eventually fade as all feelings do. That’s when the real love would start—the kind that is always effort or courage, the kind that requires extending one’s self, taking risks, and being patient. Because there was always a good chance that Rob could leave and we never quite felt as though the world was something we were undeniably capable of conquering, Rob and I found ourselves in the generous and terrifying reality of real love from the very beginning.

A FULL SWEEP

Up until the middle of my first semester, I had been making art about the outdoors. I was still dreaming of the box truck, but was worried about money and felt like I was still settling into this experience—still working to find my footing too much to feel all right to do any public facing work. Instead, I was creating objects that offered a simulation of an experience with nature. I built a foldout unit that resembled a combo between a folding table and a coffin that people could lay under and sleep in, as light boxes above projected stars upon them. And stackable plots of earth in large trays that held sand from the beach, growing prairie grass, or lava rocks, to allow people to participate in the self-help trend of “grounding” which involved walking on the earth to balance out the ions in the body.

I was making this work because they were linked to ideas I’d thought of previously. Themes that were important to me before I was injured. In a time when I was more confident. Between what felt like an immensely structured course load of theory and little studio time, the first month of school, including classes on the weekend, along with processing grief from the death of our classmate, graduate school was feeling all too stimulating. The work that had felt the most true to me had always been based on life or a quiet, patient observation of being. But at this pace, I didn’t have the energy to see, let alone breathe. The input was numbing.

Studies have shown that feeling busy limits the parts of the brain that allow for creativity. By making work about the outdoors, I could take walks in the woods at least. Considering it “research,” it was more of a mental health mechanism than an art-making model. But at points, even the woods felt overwhelming. There was still so much life, so many limbs and leaves surrounding me. I missed the expansive views of the sweet fields of Minnesota, or the mountain peaks of the west, none of which I could get under these dense, Piedmont trees.

As an exercise for class, I considered the sweeping that I’d done at Andrea Zittel’s property, seemingly organizing the natural landscape to look tidy and intentionally sparse. I brought a broom into the woods and began to sweep. The repetitive motion started as a frantic attempt to create order, but eventually grew to a more meditative pace. After some time, I uncovered a rectangular plot of land, nearly empty of the branches and leaves that surrounded me. I stood in its center, but didn’t feel much relief.

My professor Barbara Campbell Thomas sat in for a studio visit and asked me about a list (the one I'd made at my parents' house) I'd hung on my studio wall. I talked about my injuries for the first time in this academic space. Up until this point, I hadn't admitted that making work about the outdoors wasn't what felt urgent or important to me at the time. It was the work I was scheming in a past life. It was the work of a life and a pace that I didn't want to let go of. I broke down crying, as I told her about my identity crisis and how before school even started I wasn't sure I could keep up. How I questioned the structures of academia, the definitions of "rigor," and what space it held for varying values and abilities.

"You need to go deep rather than wide," she described with the intuitive grace and maternal energy she'd often provide. "If you feel like you're standing on your head, you're doing this right."

I cried again in my studio visit with Lee. Obviously a little more nervous about how to handle it, he listened and drew a circle on the wall with a line cutting through horizontally, extending outside the sphere on both the right and left sides.

"You are here," he pointed at the right side where the line intersected the circle. "Most people think of the capital "A" Art that exists in here," his finger tracing the circle. "They start from over there," he pointed to the segment of the line that was on the left half of the circle. "With traditional educations and whatnot, they enter this sphere of what they believe art to be," his finger moving along the line towards the right and into the circle. "And a lot of people want to be at the center of it. But you're on the other side. You've seen it, and you're exiting, you're moving past it. Maybe you feel this tension of breaking that sphere and maybe it looks lonely over here," he pointed at the far right side of the line. But you find your people. Who do you want to make work for? Who are you making work with? There are too many voices to keep up with. Don't listen to them if you don't want to. Think of those people that you want to make art in conversation with as collaborators. Let those voices run through your mind. Eventually, the circle, the idea of what art can be, will grow to fit you."

I took my teardrop camper out for a stay at Carolina Beach State Park as soon as our month-long weekend class ended. Filled with long needle pines, the NC state tree, the floor of the forest that lined the beach was covered with copper colored needles. Grounds crews would walk the trails and regularly sweep, exposing the sandy white earth floor and leaving gentle rake

lines weaving a cross hatch pattern onto a fresh path. On my way back to the camper, where the trail met the paved road, I found a pine branch. It had a long stem with needles all in a bunch at one end. I guiltily snuck it home, where I pulled out some cord and stitched it into a broom. I had been trying to organize nature, but with time and attention, I was finally starting to see that all along it had been helping to tidy through me.

THE BLESSING

“I’m not sure I should go. I’m worried it’s one of those things I get really excited about, but don’t really think through,” Rob told me on the phone. I was frustrated because he was the one that initiated conversations about taking a trip together over our Christmas breaks from school. He imagined a vacation to Colorado or New Mexico or both. I knew I couldn’t afford a trip west *and* a trip to see my family. I suggested Florida, where my parents would be visiting my dad’s side for the holidays. I knew people either loved it or hated it (typically basing their decision around Orlando). But we could do a big camping trip, canoe the rivers, photograph tiny towns with the strangest oddities. We could eat roadside strawberries. We could even go to the Keys.

“Why overthink it?” I asked.

“I think the last time I went on a trip it felt like my girlfriend at the time thought of it as a big step. Like a level of commitment.” We hadn’t been hanging out for more than a few weeks so I knew his hesitancy, but I also trusted my gut instinct that we would be good at traveling together. We could maybe be good at more than that. I knew I was maybe impatient or too unafraid to do something big and take the chance, but why not?

“We can make it whatever we want it to be. I don’t think it creates any obligation beyond the trip itself. But it could be a really cool way to get to know each other. I think we could have a lot of fun. Worst case scenario, we learn we don’t want to spend more time together and we part ways afterwards. There’s never a guarantee of anything. We can take it as it comes?” Rob had to think about it for a while.

I found I was often projecting myself the way that I wanted to be, saying what I knew I could and should feel, but I’d find myself internally regressed and anxious, unable to physically keep up with the emotional skills I’d learned. My internal space was totally conflicting against my external display. It was like I was only acting out the version of me I wished I could be.

So although I had said the trip was no big deal, that I’d do it with or without him, I went to a movie alone to distract myself from a fear of rejection seeping in deeply. I wasn’t sure if the fear was coming from the fact that I wasn’t actually feeling as cool and carefree about the plans as I was saying I could be, or if it was from past insecurities that boiled up with the slightest thought that someone wouldn’t want to commit to me. My body was shaky. I couldn’t sit still. I

don't remember what movie I saw because I was in a hazy state of worry. Not just worry about rejection, but also worry that this anxiety would make him not want to go on the trip at all. I was convinced he could see that I was a mess and didn't mean the chill stuff I'd just said. I'd just proved that I was overthinking everything and already too attached.

When I returned home and got ready for bed, I took a shower to try to wash the stress out of my body. I had to remind myself that nobody could see more than I gave them. What felt hugely contradicting in my head, making me feel like I looked completely neurotic, was likely not visible to him at all—especially when he was two hours away. I told myself that if I kept presenting myself as the level-headed, sensible person I strived for, my body would eventually have enough practice that it could get in shape enough to finally keep up.

But Rob took a chance on me, and I took a chance trusting myself that however the trip would go, I'd accept the flow graciously. We packed up the day after finals and stopped at his parents' house in Charleston before setting up camp at our first location near Ocala. On our drive into the state park, we noticed a dive bar called "Cactus Jack's."

"Let's go there!" Rob exclaimed. He continued to describe how the scenario would play out. He'd slide up to the bar, the old man at the other end (who was certainly a local) would give him a nod, he'd order a cold one, and chat up the bartender to learn about the town. Rob's daydreams about interactions like this were always full of detail—the dialogue already planned out. I beamed at his ability to dream, and wondered if he ever felt disappointed if reality didn't play out as he had imagined so vividly.

But Cactus Jack's was better than either of us could have imagined. I wasn't drinking because the last time I had a beer with Rob I was up all night with extreme nausea and chills. My body hadn't been having it lately. I didn't want to feel that while camping, and my 27th birthday was the next day. I needed to feel especially fresh. Rob had a couple drinks as we sat at a folding table in front of the karaoke stage and watched the same four people get up to sing songs over and over. The only other bar goers were an old man and a small group of family or friends, with two women about our age accompanied by a middle-aged couple. Old westerns were sung and Rob contributed "Angel Over Montgomery," so happily singing, a slight bit off key. He tried to convince me to join him next. I had always been too nervous to sing in front of anyone I cared about impressing, especially without alcohol. The memory of my Gram's voice at church

crackled in my head and I was fearful I sounded the same. I was getting better though, largely thanks to Jack once telling me, unprompted as I sang to a First Aid Kit song, “you’re actually a pretty good singer.” I’d sung Iris Dement’s “Our Town” with Paul in the car because he made it known that he believed everyone could sing and admitted that despite making his living off of it, he didn’t think he had a special voice. I had sung with Mac because he was pretty much completely tone deaf. But I had never sung in public. Rob chose Sheryl Crow’s “Everyday Is A Winding Road,” and smiled at me as I followed him to the stage. The song choice didn’t really match the vibe of the night, but I bashfully sang along for as Sheryl said, *these are the days when anything goes*. I wondered what this road Rob and I were on was bringing us a little bit closer to.

Over the course of the trip, we ate fried green tomatoes at a local drive-in movie theater for my birthday, canoed through the mangroves in the Everglades to camp on a chickee platform in the water, and visited the Florida Keys. We stayed with friends from when my family lived there, Brendie, Bo, and Abbie, who made us breakfast, told us about what it was like to grow up on the islands before they became a major tourist destination, and showed us how to make sailor's knot bracelets. The last time I had seen them was for Abbie’s wedding 15 years earlier. Bo had made me a bracelet out of the sailing rope and I’d kept it on my ankle ever since. On my body since I was 12 years old, as my memories of the islands faded, it felt as though it was my only link to this place I once called home.

Rob and I took a quick dip in the water at Bahia Honda, bought into the overpriced margarita’s at a corner bar in Key West, as Jimmy Buffett (who I’d grown up listening to) was hummed on our walk through the streets, as we searched for vegan key lime pie. A margarita in the keys was worth an upset stomach I reassured myself. We took a tipsy sunset stroll along the beach at the country’s southernmost point. Sun kissed and salty skinned, I smiled at Rob and leaned in for a kiss. I felt entirely content.

Rob and I disagreed about the concept of contentment and we talked about it a lot that trip as well as in the first few months of knowing each other. It seemed harder to feel contentment when having to make life changes and plans, which Rob was constantly thinking about as he was nearing his last semester of grad school.

“Contentment is settling. People are always settling,” he explained with annoyance.

“No! Contentment is being at peace with how things are. It doesn’t mean you don’t have goals and you’re not moving and growing. But you’re not living in the instability of constantly seeking, never satisfied,” I tried to counter.

“I think we believe it means different things. And I think it can mean different things depending on how it’s used.”

“I want to use it my way. The framing feels more productive. I think it makes me more grateful,” I said stubbornly.

The day after Mac and I had camped together years earlier and decided we would eventually end things, we stopped at a junk store. I found a small framed antique embroidered affirmation that read “The blessing of this house is contentment.” I put it in our apartment and carried it everywhere I’d moved since as a token of good fortune. It never held the power to change my future or make me submit to my circumstances, but offered a reminder to take a deep breath and feel fortunate for the roof I had over my head and the love I had—whether for others or just myself—that was housed in my home. With appreciation and reflection, I could create a more optimistic energy, which could ultimately manifest my own luck and help me grow. I didn’t have that energy throughout my relationship with Mac, nor did we have the skills to communicate effectively about differing opinions. Rob’s and my ability to agree to disagree was at least a manifestation in the right direction.

INEVITABLY LOST

Tampa, Florida was where my paternal grandmother died over and over again. Shortly after my parents renovated the 500 square foot home in Minnesota for her that I later lived in, she received a stage 4 cancer diagnosis and moved to Florida to live with my aunt. I had been mourning her death for the 16 years since. My grandma didn't know it was stage 4 until ten years later though. She didn't want to know. All she wanted to keep in mind was that she needed to be there for her "grandbabies." And through multiple surgeries, bouts of radiation, chemo, and experimental drug trials, with the incredible support of my aunt, she somehow was.

My grandma still wasn't dead, but she died over and over in my mind. Whether she visited the doctor for her routine scans, my dad called to tell me that the cancer had metastasized to literally just about everywhere, the doctors couldn't fix the blood clot in her leg because it would make the cancer bleed out, or she fell and hit her head at the eye doctor's office, I felt her die every time. But with every scare, she would turn around and surprise us equally and often greater. Whether she took a hike in the state park the day after being hospitalized for the blood clot, determined to scoot along with her walker, or she'd accompany me on a climb up the steep incline of Clingman's Dome in the Smoky Mountains on hardly a fully functioning lung, she was the most stubborn person, determined not to let anything hold her back, especially from sharing time with her family.

She almost always approached her obstacles with outward optimism and warmth. As she took breaks on the way up the Great Smoky Mountain, between huffs and puffs, she would compliment how beautiful a woman's baby was, or make friends with another visitor taking their time up the slope as though they had been running buddies for years. Not only would she refuse to be held back, my grandmother rarely talked of her challenges as though they were as big as they seemed to those looking in. Whether she was describing her youth living in a garage for which they put cardboard boxes up as privacy "walls," or retelling her story about getting placed in juvenile detention with her sister at 9 years old for smoking cigarettes on the street too early in the morning and how her mom didn't exactly rush home from her travels to get her; how she'd walk around the Milwaukee Public Museum at 5 years old and once went home with an unknown couple for dinner; or how my grandpa had an affair with a woman in Vietnam and she offered to take their baby in as her own. She would laugh at herself and beam as she told us of

the love she had for her family until she cried tears of joy. I often wondered if she was naive. Did she not see how dangerous, poor, and unstable those lives were? Or did she just choose not to dwell on those things? The only times I saw her cry tears of sadness were when we listened to The Everly Brothers on long drives, when she talked about the hard life her polio-ailed sister had, the death of her father (her best friend), or when she'd have to say goodbye to my sister and I.

It felt as though we had to say goodbye often. But the typical goodbye/see-you-laters that you'd give someone when you go home from a visit didn't quite cut it. With every goodbye, I wondered if it would be the last. I hugged her closely, feeling her rounded spine on my hands, and her always-soft skin against my cheek. And I never deleted the voicemails she left each year singing her own distinct version of "happy birthday." I relished the time, but I wanted more.

The first time I had tried to dig deeper in capturing my grandma's existence was during one of her especially scary hospital stays. Hospitals seemed to have a way of hyper-sensitizing an exchange. Everyone seemed to be going through something big, on the verge of finding out if something was big or not, or relieved that their check-up was alright. This attention to the body and well-being of the self or others, mixed with the sadness of seeing the weight many were carrying seemed to make people nicer. They hold the doors open a little longer than normal.

The hospital also acted as a very clear indicator of potential end of life, which made me jump to action a bit more. I'd been wanting to try the StoryCorps app for some time. It offered a voice recorder and a list of interview prompts to initiate intimate conversations of various types. I pressed record and asked my grandma what she was most proud of, who she admired most, and if she died tomorrow, what she would want us to remember above all. The recording captured both of our tears as we worked through the questions I believed that most people were too often too nervous to talk about—as though they were too intimate, or even mentioning death would somehow bring it closer. But this still never felt like enough.

When I visited my grandma near Tampa that winter, after I dropped Rob off to fly to his family for Christmas in Charleston, I wanted to try to capture more. I watched her as she made her spaghetti recipe, the meal she'd always offer to cook for the family. I asked her to teach my sister how to scratch my back the way she had since I was first born, hoping that even when she was gone, the comforting chills of her touch could still be felt somehow. I asked her to say the words that came to mind most often whenever I thought of her like "oh crap," or "you stinker,"

and I recorded her laugh. I photographed her smile and her frown, and attempted to get everything in between.

But I didn't want to just capture my grandma. I wanted to gather artifacts of every loved one in this way. I began photographing and recording all of my family. I laughed as I caught my mom singing the wrong words, and cried when shortly after my dad made a joke he also made an irritable outburst that was embedded in the recording for history. But I appreciated the realistic, well-rounded capture of these people I loved most—including their challenges and complexities. I knew that my grandma wasn't the only one who would die in my life. She wasn't the only one who could die soon. I knew the loss of my loved ones was inevitable, and I didn't want to miss my opportunity to ask them the questions that I'd want answers to when they were gone. I wanted to believe that every hug could be the last, because it made me really feel every goodbye.

CRYING INTO CUPS

When I returned to school for the spring semester, I felt a great release from the work I'd made previously. I referred back to "The Road Less Traveled" by M. Scott Peck, a book of psychology and philosophy about life and love that I'd reread over time. When I first read it, Peck's understanding of learning and unlearning the frameworks we've been assigned through being raised in society completely shook my mind. I'd need to take breaks between each section to let myself process and my brain return to one piece as I was questioning everything I believed to be true about relationships. Much of what he was saying about how to live and be with ourselves and each other I knew in my logical mind already, but there was something especially powerful about reading it, being reassured by something concrete in front of me. I didn't feel alone. I also picked up the book "The School of Life," which wrote on emotional intelligence in every major facet of existing. This is what felt important to me. Connecting to each other, finding ways to connect to ourselves, this was what felt urgent.

And after months of watching the survivalist reality show "Alone" in the background as I worked, I started listening to music again. I blasted Bon Iver's latest album and loudly mumbled to the words that I didn't know. They weren't actual words at all, but multiple existing words spliced together to make something new and unrecognizable. I wanted to make work like this music. Work that even if it wasn't clear what I was saying, maybe it was too poetic or abstract, could still be felt. And thanks to these books and the touch stones in the landscape I'd revisited over this winter break—floating in the waters of Bahia Honda Beach, the same waters I'd floated in at 12 years old on our family trip, and the same waters I'd played in regularly as a toddler; along with driving through the flatlands of Florida I'd photographed every spring break with my dad, but with a new man in my life—I was finally starting to get in touch with myself again. Sometimes I'd even work in silence, occupied by the fact that I had finally made space for my own thoughts amid a flood of input from faculty, readings, and theory. I was starting to see myself enough again to enjoy the practice of processing my feelings.

In Lee's graduate seminar class one day, he asked us to pair up and fill a plastic punch cup with water somewhere on campus and later meet back up as a group to discuss it. A couple people gathered water from the stream within the restored woodlands near the dorms, others asked strangers for a donation from their water bottles, my partner Emily and I used our tears.

We sat on a bench and cried. We were both criers, but when we were forcing ourselves to do it, it seemed much harder to make happen. We asked each other about our families, about the death of pets, I talked about my grandma. I thought about my parents dying or losing my teenage sister far before her time. I'd get large, singular alligator style tears and attempt to collect them with my finger before I lost the liquid to a trail down my face. More often than not it would evaporate from the cup before the next one could come, leaving only a salty crystalline residue on the vessel's side. We covered the cup, with our hands, hoping to keep the moisture from escaping as we traveled across campus to show the class our discovery, only to show up with a cup void of water, but full of something unseen.

The next few weeks were filled with more than enough tears. As I started to feel more in touch with my emotions once again, I was also revisited by an immense flare up in my arm. I spent my spring break in Jacksonville, Florida. Not at the beaches with the party goers, but at the Mayo Clinic speaking to specialists. Mayo seemed to be the best of the best, happened to be in my insurance network, and I was at the end of my rope—willing to go anywhere or do anything.

“I'm really sorry you're going through this,” the resident doctor said to me with kind eyes before calling in the surgeon. “We are going to figure something out to get you some relief.” I knew he couldn't promise anything, but his belief was more than anyone had given me previously.

I waited on the beach to get my MRI results to determine whether or not I'd have surgery. It felt impossible to sit still, I had so much time to make up for now that I was feeling myself again, and taking the long weekend to leave town felt disruptive. But despite the energy, this hospital was a reminder to recognize my body's limits. I read Jenny O'dell's book, “How to Do Nothing.” If I were to have surgery mid-semester, how could I prove my worth without having made many things? I believed there was, but could I prove that there's value in doing “nothing”?

I returned to Greensboro feeling full of possibility. I was sore and exhausted physically and mentally, but was relishing it. I could sit with the discomfort as I knew surgery was on the horizon and there was the possibility of something better to come. I was thankful to no longer be numb. But sometimes what felt like a refreshing shower, could be followed by a thunderstorm.

The Coronavirus hit just after spring break. Suddenly the work I was producing about the loss of my loved ones and the headstone I was planning on making myself when I bought a bag of concrete a few days before school shut down became simultaneously too heavily appropriate

and too obvious. I had been working so hard to help myself and those around me acknowledge the fragility of life, and its inevitable loss, when suddenly everyone felt that death was knocking on the door of the home that they were quarantined to for weeks. Floods of texts followed. People I hadn't spoken to in ages found that in the slower pace of isolation—a vacuum where people were actually acknowledging mental and physical health and slowing work for a while—they had the time to catch up. After about two years of not talking, Mac texted me from his home in Portland to say hello, ask if I'd heard about the layoffs at the museum, and sent well wishes. The fear instilled by a global shift, a realization that any control we believed to have was slipping through our fingers, made the many months of posturing and pride seem petty. Not much was said, but I imagined we both worried about leaving this world without acknowledging that we still loved and cared.

After a couple weeks of isolation, I worked up the energy to revisit the project about the loss of loved ones. I figured, though I was to the brim with emotions and didn't want to bring any more worry upon myself, if my parents actually did die, I would regret not having followed through. The reason I was doing it after all, was to encourage myself and others to get over the hard hurdle of talking about something that's so hard, or so feared. This lack of energy was my hurdle to get over. I asked each of them to join me for a Zoom interview where I recorded the audio as I asked them StoryCorps-like questions. Among many things, I learned of my mom's fears, and what my dad looks like when he's holding back tears. I had collected so many recordings from my family and documented their faces, and photographed my grandma's spaghetti. But along the way I knew that none of these things were something I could package to show what these people meant to me to a random viewer as an art project. The art wasn't in the production of a *thing*, but the making of space and time that allowed for the creation of connection. And despite my attempts, no amount of these moments would ever be enough to make up for their inevitable absence. But maybe it would ease the blow.

I wasn't sure if my arm was just coincidentally deteriorating quickly, or if it was the result of all feelings heightened by these projects, the stress of the vulnerable health of my grandma with cancer, parents with asthma, and aunt who worked in a hospital in Washington, or the gluten-filled diet of Oreos and pizza rolls I'd been "treating myself" to over the month in my apartment alone, but my arm rapidly declined. I'd wake, wincing from pain as I moved it in the night. Unable to straighten it when just weeks earlier I could still hyperextend, it felt as though

all the emotional pressure of the pandemic was building in my elbow, only worsened by the cancellation of my surgery becoming an increasingly likely possibility.

“We need to prove that it’s critical in order to get you one of the few surgery slots they’re allowing right now,” the Mayo nurse explained as she clumsily took measurements of my limited mobility through the Zoom screen. I only hoped the tears in my eyes and throbbing in my elbow would radiate through the interwebs enough to mark my chart worthy.

But sure enough, after a month of living alone, making a paper mache chair for my furniture building class, eating coconut popsicles on the sunny porch, laying in the grass in the sun, planting my own garden for the first time, crying a lot, and many Instagram affirmations reassuring me that doing nothing was a totally healthy and acceptable thing, Rob arrived at my front steps ready to take me to Florida for surgery.

By this point in the COVID quarantine, I had turned my phone on airplane mode in order to sit outside alone. By choosing to be disconnected from the screen time and the eager communication links, I felt as though I had a sense of control within a scenario that felt completely out of my hands. If I had to be alone, I wanted it to be on my terms if possible. However, whatever control I felt I had, disappeared even more when I came out of the operating room with my arm in a sling and a 5 inch incision from my elbow through my forearm. I’d attempt to wash the dishes one handed or struggle to get my shirt off, and Rob would roll his eyes at me. “Let me help you!” he exclaimed. He had moved in with me from his home in Asheville to do just that, and he already was helping immensely by keeping me company. But I was scared to let myself lean in. I was afraid of giving up my autonomy. I wanted to want him, but I didn’t want to need.

We sat together in the bath, my back against his chest and arm wrapped in plastic propped on the side of the tub. We turned on the red clamp light that I used to take showers to ease headaches in the middle of the night, and Rob chose some calming background music, as we steeped in the heat.

“Do you think I’m intimate?” he asked gently. I giggled lightly under my breath at the question given our current situation. The cliché standard of intimacy—the light, the music, the skin, the heat. But I knew that wasn’t what he meant. There were so many different types of that same thing.

“What do you think intimacy means to you?” I asked. We exchanged our understanding of the word (or lack of) and how defining something can make it concrete enough to be embodied. “For me, I think it’s the closeness that’s felt when you sort of take the risk of vulnerability with someone.” I prided myself on being a pretty emotionally vulnerable person who was able to take the risk of making space to share feelings. I was excited to put them in a cup and talk about them during class. And I was willing to acknowledge that I was still actively learning about my personal complexities related to physical intimacy. But when I grumbled as Rob helped me pull my pajama pants back on, I wondered if my trust issues and my fear of losing control, were keeping me from an even deeper understanding of what that word could really mean.

SOME KIND OF PEACE

Rob was scheduled to spend his summer working at the Alpine Club's Climbing Ranch in Jackson, Wyoming, at the base of the Grand Tetons. He was done with grad school and looking for the next thing. But due to the pandemic, another seasonal job seemed like the best he'd find. He invited me along for the ride, though we knew we shouldn't travel, the work felt necessary. I daydreamed about staying alone at my aunt's cabin in Island Park, Idaho, down the street in a subdivision on the reservoir from where my Gram and Papa once owned their cabin. I'd read the summer away, and on weekends Rob and I would take turns making the two or three hour drive to see each other across the Idaho/Wyoming state line. If I stayed in Greensboro, I'd just be sitting on my couch all summer. My arm wouldn't allow much else and I'd likely waste away my savings on movie rentals and take out as I wallowed alone.

I didn't want to tell many people about our travels. I knew it was necessary for Rob to have work, and I wouldn't be putting us at much more risk, but I knew there were so many others in much more challenging scenarios, and worried we looked like all the celebrities who ran to their ranches in the Rockies from California. But we still quietly packed our bags for Idaho where there were trails to hike, woods to explore, and a much more romantic version of isolation.

We planned a stop at my parents' house in Minnesota to break up the drive. I was excited to see my family in a way that seemed especially unique to the loneliness and fear of death incited by the pandemic, and we all quarantined ahead of time. We played on the lake in the warmth of early summer days, Rob fly fished with my parents, we took my sister camping, and we drank tea out of the coffee cups that came with the house that read "Lake Bijou - As close to God's country as you can get" while we played board games into the night. But as we sat on the couch together and watched the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, I thought of another black man whose family would never have such opportunities.

My mom, sister, Rob, and I masked up and marched with a group in downtown Fargo, protesting and pleading for peace. Negative peace, the absence of violence, would be a start. But the group was large and diverse, and the energy was strong. With fists in the air, I could see a world of positive peace—visible efforts towards equity, safety, security and the meeting of marginalized people's needs. But as far as my imagination could reach, my physical voice felt

limited. I couldn't scream. I wanted to help make the people of colors' voices around me sound as strong as possible, but I didn't want to take up their space or speak for them. I felt exhausted and so extremely sad, but ashamed that I could be so easily tired when I had so much privilege at my feet. I knew that in this ever-complex condition there was no binary but I felt stuck somewhere between right and wrong. Hoping I was helping to hold some space, I marched on stolen land as tears fell down my white face.

"I think I'm racist," my mom said to me a couple days later. "I don't try to be. Sometimes the first thing that comes to my head is a judgment that I don't feel proud of." My mom had advocated for her students, especially those of color, in the academic setting for her entire career. She was a 3rd and 4th grade teacher for decades before shifting gears towards a position in enrichment services. While some of her enrichment services co-workers chose students with high test scores or especially active parents (most being white) to label as "gifted" and shower with growth-stimulating challenges and activities from higher pedestals, my mom noticed the little things. She paid extra attention to the kids that didn't necessarily do so well in the standardized methods of qualifying capacity, but focused on their problem-solving skills, their resilience, their creativity. She knew that just because a child's parents, many of which were first-generation Americans, had to work multiple jobs to make sure their family could eat, didn't mean that if given the attention and support, those students couldn't flourish too. She advocated for in-school laundry, fought for greater social/emotional support systems for students with special needs, and negotiated at union meetings to actively work to dismantle racist systems in her field and create the world she hoped to see. But I beamed as she told me that she was racist. Because acknowledging the contradicting, violent, intricacies within ourselves was the first thing we all needed to do on any path to peace.

As we continued west that summer, we entered a conservative landscape far from the protests at home. I felt selfish, exploring the places of my youth, sharing the landscapes with those I loved. Having the privilege of time and space to try to make room to feel and see me and rather than the people on the streets. But I kept the passage of James Baldwin's "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity" in mind when he said that the price for saving anyone was understanding oneself.

THE POWER TO CHOOSE

Rob and I planned a little time together before he was due to start work at the Climber's Ranch in the Tetons. I was eager to finally share my favorite Idaho spots with someone I cared for so much. I had dreamt of taking past partners to Idaho for the longest time, but never made it happen both because it wasn't the right moment or the right person. But I knew where I wanted to take him. I had the campsites planned, the pit stops, the hot springs, the lunch. It was my turn to be Rob's guide to the outdoors for once. Our first stop was Craters of the Moon.

"What do you think will happen at the end of the summer?" I asked as we drove from the oasis of lushly irrigated farm fields towards the desert flats where the only thing that speckled the landscape was the Idaho National Laboratory, a volcano, and plains of sagebrush. I was due back in North Carolina to finish school and Rob's position would only carry over until September. Though I knew my love for him and the risk I was willing to take to see where it would go, I was skeptical he would come back to North Carolina. I wondered if we were strong enough to make it through the extra-long distance.

"I'm just sort of tired swimming upstream," he said to me. "I'm not sure it's going anywhere." I knew he wasn't just talking about us. He was talking about his life—how he had hopped from seasonal job to seasonal job in the outdoor world (a field as exploitative and insecure as the art world) before getting into grad school, just to find himself back at another seasonal job upon its completion, mid-pandemic, with few other prospects. He was tired all around, and I knew this, but I still took it personally. I rambled emotionally about how it was hard for me too, but how despite that I had been choosing to give it a shot from the start. I told him I didn't trust that he wanted to be with me in any sort of future and that made it even harder. I told him I wondered if he was just with me because I was fun and adventurous, and now he saw an end in sight so it was low pressure. I told him I wanted to go back to Idaho Falls. I told him that I wasn't sure I wanted to take this trip with him. I thought to myself, that this land was too sacred to me to let him taint it. I'd rather do it on my own. I imagined breaking up. I knew it was my fear mind in control, but the idea felt just as good as it did bad.

Hesitantly, we carried on towards Craters. I kept quiet as we walked up the loose steep path of the biggest cinder cone, black coarse sand shifting under my feet unstably. I wanted him to know I was taking our conversation seriously. I walked ahead of him, hoping he would feel

that I was a little mad and didn't know what else to say. But strong, dusty gales at the cone's peak carried with them a reckoning just as they had four years earlier when I was photographing myself among these sharp rocks. The winds carried with them the memories of my past relationships, the pregnancy scare, the feeling of doing everything alone, and were once again waking me up to the idea that I needed to "extend" myself if I truly believed in my new definition of love. It wouldn't help anyone if I couldn't stay soft and fluid, even among these sharp, unstable grounds. So, we played in the wind, leaning into it with arms outstretched, giggling as it nearly toppled my thin frame over and over again. The conversation wasn't gone from my head, but it wasn't holding me down.

We set up camp that night at a BLM parking lot along the Silver Creek, adjacent to the nature conservancy my dad had photographed after finishing his MFA nearly 30 years earlier. I laid in the back of the car with the hatch open and watched Netflix crime dramas while Rob faded into the distance, scouring the creek for fish and casting his line into the sunset. This was about as far as we'd been from each other since just before my surgery, emotionally he felt even further. But I was sort of appreciating the space.

When we arrived at the Sawtooths, Rob was asleep in the passenger seat. I wanted him to see the view that made me weak in the knees as soon as it became clear, but I kept it to myself until he woke up on his own, sensing the change in his energy. His eyes shifted out of the groggy haze as he spotted the potential trout streams. Mine were lost in the gnarled, mystifying sublime of mountain peaks.

We spent one of our days hiking up a barely tracked path over boulder fields and along creeks to an alpine lake at the base of one of the signature mountains that framed the view of Redfish Lake. Carrying backpacks full of a night's gear, my arm throbbed with the shift of elevation and increased heart rate. We found a flat spot nestled in between boulders overlooking the little lake, shores littered with fallen trees from avalanche slides. Rob pulled out a hammock and attached it to a couple live trees where he ate potato chips and fished while I napped in a steaming tent in the midday sun. When dusk came upon us, we tied our gear high in a tree, and bundled up against the crisp, high altitude evening. With my mind racing from what felt like a still unresolved conversation at Craters, and having slept too much mid-day, my body refused to set with the sun as it normally would.

“Sometimes you just have to choose.” I blurted out. “Of course, life is going to feel directionless and hard to imagine if you are going with the flow and at the mercy of your circumstances. Ever since the start there’s been a chance that you’d leave my life. There’s always that chance of course, with any relationship, but even more with you. Between Montana and now Wyoming, your circumstances are making it likely that you’ll leave. I was driving home from that circle work workshop on Valentine’s day and remember you telling me you might move. I was on some overpass and had just hung up the phone. You seemed so casual in that conversation as though the potential plan didn’t affect us. But it was pivotal for me. I had to consciously choose at that moment if I was in it or not. I didn’t want to stick with it. It felt easier to say that it just wasn’t meant to be. But I love you and I’m willing to do what I can to see where that will go. And I believe by choosing, I can make that more likely to happen than if I let the universe just give me whatever it wants to give me. And love is about extending myself. I have to be patient with myself and with you which is really hard. It’s a big extension. But love is always courage or effort. I find myself at this same position again in this tent as I was in that car. I have to actively choose you over and over and it feels super shitty, but sort of exciting. Everything it requires helps me grow. That’s love. But eventually I also have to love myself and know my limits. I know I can’t be in this alone.” Rob laid next to me silently as I gathered my breath and wiped my eyes. “There’s a podcast episode from TED Radio Hour about choice. It’s really good. Would you want to listen to it? This one segment, Ruth Chang, talks about how there’s no right choice, and you’ll never know the alternative outcome, but by choosing, by taking agency, you can sort of envision your life based around that decision. Crafting your identity around a choice can make you feel more okay with whatever outcome may be. You should just listen to it sometime.”

“Let’s listen.” I was surprised by his request but felt fortunate to have it downloaded on my phone because it was one that I often revisited as a reminder. We listened to Ruth Chang and Guy Raz as animals bustled around our tent into the night. And I fell asleep, exhausted by finally, more clearly relieving myself of what I had attempted to mumble to Rob in the car on the way to Craters. I had nothing left to hold back, and the release almost made the space feel even more sacred.

EARTH WORKS

After our trip to the Sawtooths I decided to take some time to travel to Utah alone. The summer solstice was right around the corner and if there were any art event on my bucket list, visiting Nancy Holt's "Sun Tunnels" on that night would be it. I wanted to share this moment with Rob and introduce him to my friends in Salt Lake City, but I reminded myself that space is good. Space is necessary. I found plenty of it as I drove along the desert flatlands past a ghost town called "Idahome." I shook apart the Subaru Forester I'd borrowed from my Gram, driving hours of washboarded roads until I reached the middle of the Western Utah desert. I photographed the sun setting directly into the concrete tunnel as a crowd of masked people huddled- as "socially-distanced" as a huddle could be—each trying to get the same shot. I photographed the light on the mountains as it shifted with my drive. I photographed myself in the salt flats against a white horizon line. During grad school I hadn't photographed at all. But my eyes were feeling open and as though I finally had enough energy to live curiously. Photographing myself, on a trip that felt like mine, in a landscape both new and old, it was as though I could see myself again. And it felt good to be back.

After a restless sleep in the back of the car in the middle of BLM land, I arrived in Salt Lake. Jack welcomed me with kind eyes. He looked tired, but still radiated the soft and gentle spirit I'd said goodbye to in the California desert two years before, when I was unsure of what the future would bring for either of us. He'd been sober for quite some time, was active in his AA community and was with the same girlfriend I'd met years before. He had also taken up a serious interest in trail running. This slendored his frame to a degree that was unfamiliar to me. We grabbed takeout brunch from a local diner, and on a greased-up belly of hash browns, I trudged behind him on a mountainside hike. It was just like old times, despite hardly having kept in touch at all in between our visits and my huffing as we hiked. We shared thoughts on our relationships, on the things we valued, and how we wanted to spend our time. We reflected on those we loved, and those we felt maybe no longer fit as we had imagined them fitting into our lives.

At the grocery store on our way back to his house, as we bought fizzy waters and veggies to grill with his girlfriend and brother Henry. Jack said, "Man, if we hung out more, we'd have

the whole world figured out.” I hoped he knew that he was never a convenience store to me. Instead, much like the camper we shared when we first grew to know each other, Jack was much more of a mobile home, allowing us to share a little comfort and security wherever we’d go.

On my last evening in Utah, I walked on Robert Smithson’s earthwork, “Spiral Jetty.” As the sun set, my feet traced the rocks that formed each side of the raised earth as I curled into myself. It was eight years since I had been there last, just before moving from Utah to return to Minnesota for school. The spiral was underwater then. I knew it was in front of me, but couldn’t clearly see even a hint of it. But with time, the water levels would drop and reveal the grand shape that sat below the salty mirrored surface. I too felt more revealed since then. Through revisiting the land, through silent drives alone in the open countryside, through meeting with my friends, I was back in touch with myself again. But I knew it wouldn’t last. It couldn’t. Because just as the seasons would inevitably change and the snowmelt would eventually fill the Great Salt Lake, I would also ebb and flow in this clarity. But for the time being, I was going to trace my shape over and over to try to commit it to memory.

A LITTLE CLOSER TO HEAVEN

When I was at the Sun Tunnels, not apart for even a full day, Rob had texted saying he missed me and loved me. I didn't want to make it a big deal, but it felt like one, especially after our conversations in the Sawtooths. I had told him that if he didn't know what he wanted, he needed to at least be gentle with me along the way. So his choice of words, or specifically the word "love" seemed like a conscious decision. Though I was curious as to whether or not he'd say again when I got home.

We drove to Jackson, Wyoming together when I got back from Utah. Rob and I wanted to live out some of our summer plans there despite his job ultimately getting cancelled due to Covid limitations and not knowing what was next. After hiking through alpine lakes, we purchased canned wine and overpriced cheap beer at the mercantile store and set up camp on the side of a road with an impeccable view of the Tetons' peaks in the distance. In our usual roles, Rob made dinner on the camp stove, while I made the bed in the back of the car.

As the sun set behind the mountains, we sat on our sleeping pads with the car's hatch framing our view, talking about our time away from each other the last few days.

"I love you," he said.

"You do?!" I responded with a smile and a tease. I wanted to hear it again.

"I do!" he grew bashful. "I don't want to go with the flow. I want to choose you."

"At least when things feel uncertain or messy, we can be in it together. We're a team."

"Yeah. We can take it as it comes. Together."

"Every relationship feels a little closer to heaven," my friend Ash once told me as she cried through the tears of her own heartbreak. No matter how many times I heard "I love you" I was still terrified I'd find myself heartbroken too, but I didn't want it to hold me back from seeing just how close to that heaven we could be.

HOW IT GOES

My aunt took my Gram to an in-patient rehabilitation facility just before Rob and I drove west, right as nursing homes were getting hit the hardest by COVID-19. The fall she'd taken that injured her wrist was the last straw in a house dotted with her poodle's piss and shit, pants soaked in her own incontinence, a diet made of purely english muffins, a stove caked with char, and a layer of honey coating the counter—despite the verbal and physical fight Gram had put up to continue to live alone and ward off her dementia.

My aunt asked if Rob and I would stay there while we were in Idaho to make the house look occupied and keep the appliances running smoothly. Though it wasn't the mountain getaway that I'd hoped for, and we had to douse the carpet with deodorizer every day to try to rid the carpets of the urine stench, we were thankful to have a home base where we weren't feeling like guests. This became especially helpful when Rob's job in Jackson was cancelled. In Idaho with a car full of his belongings, he had both nowhere and everywhere to go. Rob turned my grandma's rocker into a job application station, we made regular weekly visits to our favorite mexican restaurant for vegan burritos and ceviche tostadas, and took day drives to the sand dunes, lava rocks, and hunted for fishing creeks. But despite full, beautiful spring days. The lack of purpose, and waning money began to wear on us both.

"Today's a hard day," Rob said as he laid face down on the pee stained living room carpet with absent eyes. My heart ached knowing he was falling into a depressive state, and I didn't know how to catch him.

I saw similarly tired eyes as I visited my Gram from outside her nursing home window. With the window cracked slightly to allow our voices to enter through the screen, we'd exchange typical small talk. I had interviewed my Gram with the personal questions of the StoryCorps app like I had my grandma in Florida a few years prior. But unlike my grandma, Gram was much more selective in what she'd share, carrying a cool aloofness about her. It wasn't because she couldn't remember. The dementia hadn't started at that point. Whether conscious or not, she chose what she would or wouldn't want to recall.

I asked about how she was once in love with a mormon boy that she couldn't marry because of her Catholic upbringing. I asked about the woman my grandfather fell for but broke

up with because he didn't believe his lower class status was good enough for her and how he spoke of her even on his deathbed. I wanted to know about the tensions behind a marriage of obligation and duty rather than love—a tension that surely carried throughout the household. I wanted to know of the joy she once had making homemade soaps and experimenting international recipes with her friend Maryanne. I wanted to know the grief of losing her son, and the denial about that son's traumatic and abusive history. Although I felt her story was inevitably my own and wanted to dig deep and hard to understand, I knew I needed to be sensitive to knowing when a moment is ripe and tread lightly until then. However, despite my efforts, the conversation was never ready. Small talk was what I'd learned to expect from her, as I had with much of this side of my family, and these prompts weren't making her any more ready. Opening up about the whole history of any one subject would pull on a thread and unravel the fabric of their family that for decades fragile stitches had barely held together. Gram couldn't let anyone see the vulnerability she'd been hiding behind her rough farm hands and thick sun tanned skin for so long.

"I'm ready to go home now," she'd tell me through the window of the nursing home as though I had any control. The extreme isolation of assisted living in the time of COVID dismantled any ties to the place she'd worked so hard to build and grow, the place she called home. Her eyes watered and fell into a rare softness.

"I want you to go home too," I reassured her, though I knew history was likely to repeat itself. Because just as she and my grandfather had set aside their wants and settled into something together that wasn't ideal, and ultimately unhealthy, I was giving up too.

The millions of dollars my uncle said Gram had acquired from selling off the farmland and the cabin had somehow turned into only a couple hundred thousand. Without her ability to regain full functions of her systems and assure people that she was eating properly, there was no way she could live without assistance and her budget wouldn't allow for the private care that would inevitably only become more and more demanding as the dementia worsened. She needed support, she needed the socialization that kept a brain sharp, and she wouldn't find that reading the newspaper and watching Wheel of Fortune at home. My mom and her sisters felt torn, wondering if someone should take her into their own home. Thinking back to my understanding of what it was like to live with her in the past and how little of those traumas were addressed or

resolved, I wondered how anyone could invite that into their life. Where should they draw the lines between obligation and duty and love when for so long there were no boundaries?

My aunt had told me to put stickers on the things around the house that meant something to me. There was little chance my Gram would ever be able to return and they would eventually need to sell it off. The contents weren't of much value except sentimental, some of which came with just as much heartache as joy. I felt wary of staking claim to things, especially while they were still hers, but I didn't want a repeat of what happened when my grandfather died and all of his belongings were tossed away. I tagged the brass jewelry box filled with costume accessories that I'd adorned myself with as a child. I thought about the tea cart she kept in her bedroom and wondered if I wanted it in mine. I found markings on the backs of frames or under boxes that said "To Susan" or "For Tony" realizing that Gram had already marked the things that were important for her to share. Sometimes they came with notes that said "This box is one that Papa bought at the pawn shop when we visited you in Minnesota." as though, for a reason I would never know, that specific purchase stood out from the thousands of other items he'd collected over the years. I scoured the house for more notes. I scanned images in the many photo albums that she'd put together of her family or vacations she'd traveled. I found pages dedicated to Redfish Lake and the Sawtooths, reminded that these landscapes had been elevated in her mind just as they had in my moms, and in mine. I found the draft of a "family history," a sort of didactic autobiography, she had been writing for at least ten years. She had multiple entries about her parents losing their farm in the depression, graduating from nursing school, the birth of her children. The stories were descriptive, but largely absent of her personal emotional interpretations of events. She would write about the same subjects years later, as indicated by the dates on the printed out writings, but as she aged the entries became more diaristic and scattered. She'd start off talking about her mom's journey from Colorado as a young adult, but then like my middle school journal would shift from subject to subject abruptly, she would express feelings about missing her dead dog, how life moved so quickly, and how the new dog had too much energy. "It's how it goes..." I didn't know if she had found a peace and contentment that I imagine often comes with the wisdom of aging, or resignation that she was always at the mercy of going with the flow. Despite the fact that she was still around and pretty capable of sharing her perspective, I looked to the few objects she chose to have in her house, the notes she left anticipating her own departure, and the images she took for connection. I read into every

indicator I could find that gave me some sort of insight as to what she really thought about this life as though she'd already left it.

A HAPPY ACCIDENT

I thought of artists Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele when I returned to school for the last year of my masters. The 1918 Pandemic was killing millions worldwide, and combined with World War 1, caused an immense amount of instability, fear, and helplessness. Klimt died suddenly from a stroke likely related to the 1918 flu, and Schiele made famous portraits of his distorted face post-mortem. Schiele also drew his wife, who was six months pregnant at the time, on her death bed during the same year. He himself died three days later.

The artists that survived reacted to the effects of the pandemic in a variety of ways. Some, such as those associated with the Dada movement, found collage to be a way to imagine cutting, reassembling, and remixing as though having some larger control in creating the bigger picture from existing parts or represented the body as a disfigured form.. The Bauhaus community took the opportunity to consider a more utopian approach by creating a school focused on bridging art and design and stripping work of excess ornamentation. Many scholars believe the clean, wood and metal based modern works that came from this time were influenced by the flu and considerations towards sanitation. Others strayed away from the charged subject of the body and leaned into abstraction. Representations of artist surroundings, whether rendered in photographs or paint, became distorted and otherworldly.

I wondered how the pandemic would affect us. I was thinking of artists in this time as a whole, but also my group of classmates. A little selection of people who had specifically set aside time to make work but whose plans were greatly interrupted by lack of access to facilities, fear and reality of losing family members or personal safety, isolation in our homes, the community we relied on dropping off completely. If we remained soft and fluid and open to these influences (as we were told to be throughout school), it would undoubtedly shape our work. But I think we as a cohort had a unique step ahead in letting our practices be influenced by existential dread. The loss of our peer earlier in the year, had certainly nudged many of us to turn especially inward. The COVID-19 pandemic only pushed some of us further. It made sense that a painter was doing less figural representation and was now creating abstract landscapes of the land where she was raised. Another collaborated with their mother to consider intergenerational exchanges related to whiteness as well as systemic racism, taking time to meet with their family to investigate their history and call upon skills passed down to learn to sew. One addressed the

power of a woman's body to give and take away life and the weight she carried from doing both. I doubled down on my connection to land, my attention to death and ways of living life, and a diaristic approach to telling stories. We would all slowly find our ways of sharing these hugely universal themes through methods that felt so intimately personal.

Maybe this was the secret of grad school? Maybe it's what everyone meant when they said that it would break you down just to build you up? They talked about the happy accidents that could arise in art when you're willing to take risks and be open to seeing opportunity. I wasn't sure that *this* hardship and trauma was what they imagined, as I didn't know that any traditional academic system could have so intentionally planned and executed such an intensive emotional education. But as I was coming to learn, the greatest lessons didn't stem from the classroom, or even a plan. They're just accidents you try to find something generative within.

NO SUCH THING

I had left Rob in Fort Collins, Colorado at the end of the summer. He had decided to stay out west where some of his friends lived, where the outdoor industry had more jobs to offer, and where he could find a different scene than the one he'd been living in on and off throughout western North Carolina for nearly ten years. It was hard to feel as though he didn't want to choose to be closer to me, but I could see what he needed. I didn't want him to make a decision that would lead to resentment, and I knew I'd be back to visit. We had plans to fly to each other every month if possible. If there were any silver lining to the pandemic it was the cheap flights. We kept reminding ourselves of the low infection rate and high air flow of airplanes and told each other that as long as we were cautious, it seemed important to prioritize. We had always been in a long-distance relationship, but this sort of distance felt like a new beast.

Over the months that I was finishing school, we would reunite for a week or so at a time. We'd play outside, cook dinners together, and watch trash TV like House Hunters to discuss what we would or wouldn't want in our own home. While together and apart, we daydreamed about what having a home together could mean and whether or not we were ready. Rob was often good at checking in and asking "How do you think we're doing?" Remembering the past relationships where I had assumed all was well only to find out things really weren't, I appreciated his ability to make space for the conversations and I grew better at doing the same.

Occasionally he would ask, "Do you still like me?" I figured he was slightly joking because the context was full of smiles and laughs, but I melted every time he asked. I wholeheartedly liked him. I did more than like. I loved, and I wanted to keep acting on those feelings, keep putting courage and effort into it, for all time. But I also knew the power of both hearing and stating that conscious choice over and over again. Because together, we were beginning to see that there's no such thing as certainty.