Rust Belt Blues

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Alison A. Stine

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This dissertation titled

Rust Belt Blues

by

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ABSTRACT

STINE, ALISON A., Ph.D., May 2013, English

Rust Belt Blues

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Alison Stine’s Rust Belt Blues is a book-length work of linked creative nonfiction essays set in former manufacturing towns in Ohio, Indiana, and upstate New York. In pieces that range from autobiography to literary journalism, she focuses on abandoned places and people in the area known as the Rust Belt—a section of ex-industrial centers stretching from New York to Chicago—covering such topics as feral houses, graffiti, and the blues. She researches the Westinghouse factory that once employed a third of her hometown, explores a shuttered amusement park, re-visits a neglected asylum, and writes of rural poverty. In her critical introduction “The Abandoned Houses are All of Us: Toward a Rust Belt Persona,” Stine examines the work of contemporary nonfiction writers born in and / or concerned with the Rust Belt, finding that their work shares traits of deflection, obsession, lying, dark subject matter, and stubborn optimism—what she calls the defining characteristics of the emerging Rust Belt persona.
Regards to Jackson:

The Blues Run the Game,

Al
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The Abandoned Houses are All of Us: Toward a Rust Belt Persona

This is my hometown: Mansfield, Ohio, rated “Worst City to Live in North America” by *Places Rated Almanac* of 1996, the year I graduated high school.


My town is a town of abandonment, oxidized steel, broken and boarded-up windows, warehouses gone to fields, fields gone to seed. More stores are closed than open. More people flee here than are born or move here.

This is the story of a band of former manufacturing towns across the upper Midwest and Northeast. On maps, we’re often shaded in red, red for the net loss, red for the rust. What’s unique about the Rust Belt? Decay is a part of life. We’re used to it, the factories leaving and leaving their structures. We don’t always rebuild. Often, we don’t raze either, letting the old buildings get taken over by weeds and rot; time will do the demolition. It’s a striking combination: the rusted steel and the rural wilderness. The land seizes control, running its course: trees sprouting up through the roofs of warehouses, mushrooms growing in the shells of old cars. Abandoned buildings, ruined houses, collapsing barns, weedy boxcars—the landscape here is so arresting, so beautiful and broken, an artistic phrase has been coined to described its rough beauty: “rust porn” (also referred to as “ruin porn”).

But in literature, the Rust Belt—especially the darkness and weirdness of the Rust Belt, the violence and seediness—has yet to really receive its due. So much has been written of the Southern Gothic, but what of the Midwestern? There is art here; there is
also madness. There is beauty and crime. There are stories worth telling. Several years ago, an independent literary journal was founded in Ann Arbor to do just that, publish stories set in and by writers of the Midwest, particularly stories of a darker nature. On their website, *Midwestern Gothic* notes an editorial interest in this “often-overlooked region of the United States ripe with its own mythologies and tall tales” (“*Midwestern Gothic: About*”). The journal defines the Gothic as “the inclusion of deeply flawed, often “grotesque” characters in realistic (and, oftentimes unpleasant) settings / situations” (“*Midwestern Gothic: About*”).

Is it unpleasant here? I remember the first time my future husband, a New Yorker, visited my family in Mansfield. He stared at the dead deer out the car window—the carcasses, in various stages of decay, along the side of the road, along many roads, so gory. Just left, left to rot. But I barely glanced at them, those carcasses. The bones and hooves and frozen blood were so familiar to me. Part of this nonchalance is the product of growing up on farms or near farms. As children, my mother and her sisters used to play in the swept-out pig houses on a neighbor’s hog farm. Why were the houses, shelters for the hogs, empty at the same time every season? Where did the pigs go? They knew, my mother and her sisters. They knew—but they still played in the houses. My grown cousin, now a father, let his own daughter help raise a couple of pigs recently. The girl wanted to name them. My cousin said, “Breakfast and Dinner. Those are their names.” We know where our food comes from here. We grow it. Some of us slaughter or hunt it. I grew up knowing the dogs at the edge of my grandparents’ farm, half a dozen or more long-eared, baying hounds, were not to be played with, nor petted or visited. They were tied with chains to their houses. Those dogs were for hunting. I grew used to the sound
of gunshots—many times, in many seasons throughout the year—shattering the otherwise tranquil setting of my parents’ farm.

Certainly our Midwestern weather may be thought unpleasant: extreme heat and humidity in the summers, numbing frozen winters, and shorter and shorter springs and falls. In my early twenties, when I moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan—a place even colder than Mansfield—to teach, one of my students reminisced about Halloween; as children, they always had to think of costumes that would be warm, that would include hoods and gloves, fur or plush. They dressed as sheep and tigers and bundled bears. Our first class was canceled due to a blizzard that next quarter. Spring quarter. I remember trudging to my car after a night class. I was wrapped, almost to oblivion, in a puffy down coat, but it wasn’t enough. I was freezing, the winds howling right up my sleeves. The snow blowing across that flat plain threatened to knock me off my feet. I remember thinking, please just let me make it to my car. Let me find my car. And let my car start. Most winter mornings of my childhood, my parents stood beside the kitchen sink, waiting for the water to a fill bucket they could pour over the frosted windshield. My mother would drive my sister and me to the bus stop and wait with us in the car when she could. But often, we had to stand out there, stomping in the cold. The bus was late; it was always late, especially on colder mornings when it too had trouble starting. Many mornings my hair, still wet from the shower, would freeze. I remember sitting on the bus, looking out the foggy window and breaking the ice off my hair, hunk by hunk. A Midwestern friend remembers her eyelashes freezing and sticking together while another friend once said that one of his clearest memories from his childhood in New York is never having a warm enough coat. Russell Brakefield, a Michigan writer whose work has
appeared in *Midwestern Gothic*, reminisced on the journal’s website about the weather:

“The Midwest, and Michigan specifically, has a way of getting under the skin. It’s a fluid life there, existence based on the seasons and their extreme polarization … that harsh diversity of seasons” (“Contributor Spotlight: Russell Brakefield”).

It was freezing in the winter or sweltering in the summer, and there was *nothing to do*. In summer, we watched television all day or baked our skin on the concrete beside the county pool, jumping into the water when the heat became unbearable. Winter was more complicated. The sun set at four. There was no movie theatre with more than two screens until I was in high school. The town roller rink burned down, possibly because kids used to smoke in the bathrooms. There was no skate park, no community center. The nearest music venue was an hour away in Columbus (Cleveland was an hour and a half). And no one came here. No band, no group with name recognition would ever come to Mansfield. Where would they play? The auditorium at the Westinghouse factory? I am not certain how my friends survived. One dropped out at sixteen. One got pregnant (that was something to do). Of my two closest friends, one spent more and more time at her synagogue; she eventually became a cantor. And the other, who was to get a scholarship to art school, worked on his paintings, spending long afternoons in his attic bedroom, his canvases tilted to the light. His room, where I occupied many hours watching him work or listening to music, had a single, peaked window which looked out onto fields, fields as far as you could see: yellow and nodding and endless.

My friend is gay, which I knew, but I did not know kids threw paintbrushes at his back in art class, mumbled slurs in the hall. He wouldn’t come out, not widely, until college. We didn’t know any other gay people, especially not any grown ups, not in
Mansfield. There was briefly and tragically, a gay bar in town. (I’m trying to remember its name—the Alternative Night Club? The Alternative Place?) The bar occupied a small white clapboard building behind the Renaissance Theatre downtown where I spent much of my time. Because that is how I survived while my friends went to religious services or drank or painted or got pregnant: I went to rehearsal. I pretended to be someone else. I pretended I was somewhere else—anywhere but here. The gay bar had a balcony, which was splashed with pink and blue and silver lights from the dance floor inside every time the door banged open. I remember, from my position in the parking lot of the theatre, waving to the men out on the balcony with drinks in their hands. They would always wave back. The bar was raided. Men were arrested. (For what? Lewd behavior? What excuse?) The bar closed.

We were far from the city and it always felt farther—far from enlightenment, far from ideas, far from music and first-run movies and art and anything decent to eat. We were virtually landlocked, isolated by miles. We were also the butt of jokes. The dominant perception when I was growing up, which persists today: Everyone is fat in the Rust Belt, fat from laziness, from too many Happy Meals. People whose legs work perfectly well drive Little Rascals around Wal-Mart where they do all their shopping. They vote Republican, if they vote at all. They own guns. They lease trucks. They are lazy, uncultured, illiterate. They are white. In high school, when I traveled to New York for a theatre conference, it was embarrassing to say I was from Ohio. Even the name of the state, the way my mouth had to stretch around the vowels, felt nasal, dumb. I felt dumb. For the rest of the country, the Midwest, particularly Ohio, stood in for something. It was an indicator of naïveté, ignorance and isolation. On television, if the
character is inexperienced, wholesome, conservative or plump, chances are, she’s from Ohio. Wide-eyed girls moving to the city, bland well-meaning parents, earnest kids—all shiny white Ohioans, as an out-of-state friend used to say. Characters from Ohio who fall into these stereotypes may be found in the television programs: *Glee, Greek, Clarissa Explains It All, Harper Valley PTA, Mary Hartman Mary Hartman, 3rd Rock from the Sun* and *The New Normal*—to name just a handful. In literature, Mary Ann Singleton, the heroine of Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City* novels, set in swinging 1970s San Francisco, is blonde, naïve—and from Cleveland. On Broadway, 1953’s *Wonderful Town* tells the story of two earnest and inexperienced sisters who move from Columbus to New York to try and find fame and fortune. Musical numbers include “Ohio” (music penned by Leonard Bernstein), where the characters lament: “Why oh why oh why oh did I ever leave Ohio?” (Betty Comden and Adolph Green). The Midwest, particularly Ohio, is a backwards cocoon of bland safety—and really, it’s best if we just stayed put.

What’s here to write about then? What nonfiction, specifically, comes out of this place? In Mansfield, I grew up only a few miles from nonfiction writer, screenwriter and novelist Louis Bromfield’s home and farm: Malabar, which was later turned into a state park. You can still visit the Big House, the barns and the fields. Horses still graze there, milk cows, big-headed sheep. Bromfield writes of the pastures of Mansfield:

> On a still day when we hear the whistles of the big diesels on the Pennsylvania Railroad, six miles away, we know that we shall have fine clear weather, and when the sound comes from the opposite direction from the Baltimore and Ohio, we know that there will be big clouds and rain.

(1)
Of the difficulties of farming, he writes “The work is never ended, and if one neglects it for a single season the picture becomes altered and changed and a certain ragged, untidy effect of carelessness creeps in” (175). Bromfield is writing here of taming the land with plows and shovels and garden rows, of keeping the wildness at bay—yet he could just as easily be speaking of the warehouses of Ohio that would fall into ruin, the rusted structures “where the trees and shrubs [would] become a tangled jungle” (174).

But Bromfield is perhaps not representative of the nonfiction writing coming out of the Rust Belt today. People have a saying about the weather in the Midwest, particularly Ohio: If you don’t like it, wait five minutes. Yet the whole region is changeable, in flux. My old high school friend moved to Columbus, and driving down his street one day, I saw many of his neighbors out: an African American woman working on her lawn, an Orthodox Jewish family walking to services, a gay couple holding hands—all on one street, one spring afternoon. The diversity of the Rust Belt is dizzying, if mostly unremarked upon by the country at large, and it extends to the landscape. There are factories and farms and warehouses and stores and scenic downtowns and row houses and roundabouts and hills and mountains and long, flat plains. How would you began to write such a place, such a various place?

Perhaps the reason more has not been said about nonfiction of the Rust Belt is because the Rust Belt occupies wide and various locales. Traditionally, the Rust Belt is a swath stretching from upstate New York to Chicago, though even these boundaries are fluid. Some would include parts of Wisconsin in the Rust Belt, or Maine—or even New York City. Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland, Flint, Pittsburgh, Gary—those are the main cities that come to mind when discussing the Rust Belt. But Youngstown, St. Louis, Akron,
Albany, Dayton, Mansfield—these cities, smaller though they may be, have been hugely impacted by the decline of manufacturing, the loss of jobs, the loss of hope. It could be argued that these smaller cities feel the impact of a closed factory more than the metropolitan areas because their economies are smaller, more fragile. There are no precise boundaries of the Rust Belt, a problem the literary journal *Crab Orchard Review* encountered when it decided to publish an issue devoted to writers of the American North. That issue, printed in 2012, is called “Due North”—but what did North mean in this context? “Is it the Midwestern rust belt, with its haunting visions of abandoned manufacturing plants, vacant small towns, and large empty cities? Does Michigan have anything in common with Maine … Where does West Virginia go?” (Allison Joseph “Editor’s Prologue: Defining the Undefined” 1). As the title of the prologue suggests, the editor of *Crab Orchard Review*, Allison Joseph, determined that, “It’s a confusing world … Out of the confusion, though, rises a region fascinatingly filled with contradictions: urban and rural, flat and mountainous, populated and barren, rich and poor and every class in between” (“Editor’s Prologue: Defining the Undefined” 2-3). Perhaps the Rust Belt is not even a place or group of places so much as it is a set of socio-economic conditions. Perhaps any area now in decline may be said to be Rust Belt. Perhaps “Rust Belt,” then, is not a geographic designator but a constructed one more than anything: a blanket term of absence, of abandonment.

So too the persona of the writer of nonfiction is a construct, a made thing. In *The Made-up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay*, Carl H. Klaus describes the nonfiction writer’s persona as “a character of sorts” cobbled together from “the sound of [a piece’s] voice, a by-product of carefully chosen words, its recollection of experience,
its run of thought and feeling” (1). The persona of a work of nonfiction is the self, the writer—only better (or worse), only more deliberate. Klaus calls it “a version of ourselves,” and argues that the writer of nonfiction is “crafting a self out of words” (2). How is the self of a persona crafted? What forms or defines it? Klaus argues “persona is inevitably shaped by both the impress of culture and the force of personal experience” (3)—what happened to us, as well as what was happening around us: our histories, our families, our settings, our towns.

The Rust Belt then, seems ripe for the writing. So much has happened and continues to happen here, so much destruction, abandonment, failure and waste. Also: waiting, striving, persisting and hoping. So much change in lifestyles and lives. What would a written self patched together from such materials be? What would that look like, sound like, be preoccupied with? What would the persona of the Rust Belt be? How could one “perform” the Rust Belt?

For this discussion, I’ve chose to limit my examination to writers of nonfiction who were born in and / or spent a sizable amount of their lives in and / or, in their subject matter, return frequently to the areas more commonly designated as the Rust Belt: Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, upstate New York. Upon critical examination, these writers share more than mere places, however. There are reoccurring threads running through their work, similarities in their storytelling style, imagery, voice and subjects. Rust Belt writers tend to tell other’s stories before their own in a tactic of deflection. Still, we often broach such troubling subjects, familiar to our small, ruined towns, as violence. We flinch but we also obsess, tell and retell, circling back in prose that is breathless, frantic. Like most creative nonfiction writers, we are troubled by
memory, yet the Rust Belt persona seems to include a fair bit of lying: making a statement, then hedging, clarifying, denying, questioning, hedging again; we don’t know—but we might pretend to. Nonfiction set in or about the Rust Belt always seems to include an element of potentiality, a kind of stubborn optimism. Despite the often grim circumstances of our lives or landscapes, we look forward; we go on. The Rust Belt persona is constructed of these particulars, a blend of voice, style and preoccupation.

_Blood on the Snow_

I’ll start with preoccupations. I began my own writing career as a playwright and poet, yet even at the beginning I was drawn to darker subject matter which confused family and alienated friends. I wrote about murder, abuse, shadows and secrets: “animaldeath, girldeath” read one of the blurbs on the back of my first book of poems, _Ohio Violence_. Reviewers always remarked about the title, the book’s body count, its often grotesque view of nature. What might be pastoral to other poets was to me “dead deer splayed in carnivalesque puppetry on the side of the road” (Erin Bertram _Rain Taxi Review of Books_). More than one critic called the book “Midwestern Gothic.” I liked the sound of that—but what did it mean exactly? Troy Jollimore came closest to explaining in a way I could understand, writing: “Perhaps the true presiding spirit of _Ohio Violence_ is the David Lynch of _Blue Velvet_ and _Twin Peaks_, those squeaky-clean all-American towns in which the possibility of grisly death ever lurks in the woods and fields” (_Galatea Resurrects_). My town wasn’t exactly “squeaky-clean.” Shadows clung to us like mud, like that “Worst Place to Live in North America” label. I had questions, which no one would answer. Why had the lake been drained? What was under the railroad
bridge? What happened to the girl who dropped out of school? What happened to the man in our neighborhood who dressed as a woman? I wondered; I couldn’t help my mind wandering to these darker places, even if—or maybe especially because—as a child, I wasn’t physically allowed to go there.

Do these preoccupations extend to other nonfiction writers from the loose area known as the Rust Belt? I think so. Alison Bechdel, born in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, details her gay and closeted father’s death—most likely a suicide—in *Fun Home*, and her mother’s struggle with mental health in *Are You My Mother?* Andre Dubus III spends a good chunk of his (sizable) memoir *Townie* writing, in bloody detail, of the many fistfights in which he engaged in the former mill towns where his family lived. Pennsylvania-born Eula Biss writes of lynching, hurricane victims and other violence in her book of essays *No Man’s Land* while Michigander Maggie Nelson ruminates, in multiple books, over her aunt’s long-unsolved murder. And Chicago-born and New Jersey-raised Patti Smith chose to center her memoir *Just Kids* not on her own successful artistic career, but on that of her friend and former lover, the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. How does she begin her book? With Robert’s death from AIDS-related illness.

Part of this somber subject matter is just the materials of our lives. As nonfiction writers, we write about what happened. When, on a job interview, Nelson is asked by a hiring committee why she is fascinated by a particular subject, she writes: “We don’t get to choose what or whom we love, I want to say. We just don’t get to choose” (*Bluets* 5). And what happens in the Rust Belt? A lot of darkness. A lot of violence: to the land (strip mining, coal mining) and to the people (low income jobs, no jobs, physical and
substance abuse). We are defined by such violence. Poet and essayist Gregory Orr writes: “I was born and raised in rural upstate New York, but who I am began with a younger brother’s death in a hunting accident when I was twelve … I held the gun that killed him … my life began at twelve” (“Return to Hayneville” 125).

But subject matter is also a deliberate choice. We can’t lie and say it never happened—but we don’t have to focus on it, either. We have the choice to not open our mouths at all, and yet we do; we open them wide. The temptation to tell, to be a voice of warning or hindsight or record, to be a voice at all, is irresistible. Midwesterners have the reputation for not talking about anything personal or uncomfortable or emotionally raw. We are always perfectly fine, especially in comparison; *At least we’re not Detroit* is the slogan of a joke tourism video about Cleveland. Perhaps when choosing such dark subject matter, these Rust Belt writers are reacting against the impulse to suppress, to pretend and deny.

And then there is the darkness of our landscape. Certainly, from New York to Illinois, the terrain is various, but all the states in the Rust Belt are marked by both rural beauty and post-industrial ruin. There are wildflower plains, wooded hills and small mountains. There are long stretches of farmland, patchwork green and yellow fields. There is space to breathe. There are also industrial corridors or former corridors, where the factories loom, lung-colored and empty. There are ghost structures: abandoned asylums, abandoned schools, abandoned amusement parks, abandoned homes. And then there is the weather, which Brakefield describes as that “harsh diversity,” vacillating from brutal heat to bitter cold. And the snow. And the snow. And the snow. Most winters, it piles up. It covers the ugliness, the rusted, the run-down, but like the Midwestern
tendency to pretend, to pretense, the pristine snow is a temporary illusion. Such a milieu also seems primed for violence; there are simply so many places to hide. As Michigan poet and essayist Ander Monson, who has written of the violent death of a high school friend numerous times over several books, once said to me, *There's just something about the image of blood on the snow.*

Such dire subject matter might place many of the texts I have mentioned into the category Ben Yagoda calls the “misery memoir.” In his thorough volume *Memoir: A History*, Yagoda defines “misery memoirs” as: “an account, usually by a non-celebrity, of childhood abuse or otherwise painful or difficult circumstances” (9). Yet it is notable that the above examples from Rust Belt writers detail, not accounts of personal experiences, not their own miseries, but *other people's*. It becomes clear early on in *Townie* that the subject of the book is not the memoirist, but his father: alcoholic, divorced, occasional deadbeat dad Andre Dubus II. Bechdel also focuses on her family, trying to imagine her father’s secret life and mysterious death; Biss’s essays center on even more distant family, ruminating on cousins and stepparents; and Nelson’s books *Jane: A Murder* and *The Red Parts* obsess over a crime that happened years before she was even born. When Nelson tells her family she is writing the first of these books about her deceased aunt, her grandfather asks, “What will it be, a figment / of your imagination?” (“Figment” 3-4). Because the crime, at that point, had not been solved, because Nelson knows so little about her aunt, her interest seems especially bizarre to her family, particularly macabre. I am no different. In this project alone, I write of a deceased circus performer, an impoverished blues musician, an abandoned insane asylum
and a murder, to name just a few of my cheerful subjects—subjects, again, that are not myself, topics that are personal and important to me but are not about me.

Perhaps such subject deflection is a uniquely Rust Belt trait, focusing attention on others’ more dire circumstances in order to console ourselves about our own (At least we’re not Detroit). Or perhaps writing about the miseries of others is a way to “ward off” personal misfortune. Many people know Orr’s story about his brother; he has written of it multiple times over the years in poetry and in prose, but Orr had his own brush with near-death as a teenager. He never spoke of the other, nearly as traumatizing, potentially deadly event in his life until a 2009 essay where he finally tells it: “my end … could have easily taken place a scant six years later, when in June 1965, I was kidnapped at gunpoint” (“Return to Hayneville” 125). Maybe writing our own story of our own pain is too personal, too dangerous. Maybe it would draw too many eyes.

And so we focus on others. About herself she is often cagey and abstract—“I dreamed of travel. Of running away” (10)—but Smith’s writing enlivens when she talks about Mapplethorpe. Writing of him as a child, she describes his eyes like jewels. She invests a scene of him coloring with the gravity and reverence of a Renaissance painter creating a masterpiece. This simple scene where nothing much happens takes multiple pages. Smith writes that Mapplethorpe “contained, even at a young age, a stirring and the desire to stir” (10). There is envy here. There is idolization. It is important to note that Smith did not know Mapplethorpe as a child; these ruminations are inferred from photographs, adapted from stories he has told her, or imagined. So too Nelson imagines her aunt. Nelson is aided in her envisioning by journals her aunt left behind, and she pores over these in order to write Jane, trying to capture her aunt’s voice: “it was not
usual that fall to find me sitting on the dark wood floor of the Ponderosa Room in a sea of pages filled with her elegant handwriting,” she writes in *The Red Parts* (7). Nelson does a good job with her reconstruction. Family members, struck by the resemblance, are moved, particularly Nelson’s mother (Jane’s sister) who calls Nelson “in tears … She said it was a miracle. Even though I had never known Jane, somehow I had managed to bring her back to life” (6). Nelson is honest and surprised about the reanimation she has done: “This felt like a miracle to me too” (6).

“That Artful Dodge”

Many details about Jane’s life—as well as death—are still fuzzy, lost to time and shoddy police work and imperfect human memory. Why was Jane’s engagement a secret? What color was the raincoat she was last seen wearing? How did she get to that cemetery where her body was found? How can Nelson even begin to know? Bechdel runs into similar issues. Her book about her father’s life and death is captioned *A Family Tragicomic.* But that does not even begin to describe it. The project resists classification. Bechdel is a cartoonist; *Fun Home* is a graphic novel. But it’s also a memoir. But it’s a memoir mostly about other people—and it often hones in on times when Bechdel wasn’t even there: her mother’s play rehearsals; her father’s private tours of the family house, given to “his more promising high school students” (61). These are scenes Bechdel must reconstruct. Along with being completely absorbing, *Fun Home* is a field of land mines for the nonfiction writer, the writer of purported truths. As a graphic novel, there are layers of invention here, possible untruths in the story as well as, innately, in the *form.* Bechdel must create narration, art and the dialogue of speech
bubbles. She must invent or loosely approximate or guess at the look on her father’s face—how to draw it—when he gives the attractive high school boy a copy of *The Great Gatsby* as well as decide what the boy must have or could have or probably (maybe?) said: how to write it.

(Re) Construction is a part of nonfiction, especially when it comes to the writing of dialogue. Memoirists “usually re-create dialogue since there’s no word-for-word record” (25) writes Thomas Larson in *The Memoir and the Memoirist*, and this is the generally accepted view. Yagoda takes this view even further, arguing “Everything … is a matter of impression” in a work of creative nonfiction, especially as creative nonfiction writers, writers of the personal essay and the memoir, usually lack the tools of reportage:

> video cameras or tape recorders are rarely on the scene as we live our lives, and a result, all memoirs that contain dialogue—which is to say all recent and current memoirs—are inaccurate … The dialogue is the author’s best-faith representation of what the people who were present could have / would have / might have said. (265)

But reconstruction takes on a different gravity when viewed in the light of another aspect of the Rust Belt persona: We lie. That is, we exaggerate, hedge, inflate, contradict ourselves and sometimes (purposefully?) confuse. Take Monson’s work and one of its recurring themes, the trope of his armless brother. After remembering how his father used to hold Monson’s hand when they went to the store to buy Matchbox cars, Monson writes, “Did he hold my brother’s hand. Was there a hand to hold” (“Index for X and the Origin of Fires” 57). It is significant that this is phrased as a question—but a question without a question mark. Monson has a brother, but he is not, in fact, armless,
an truth Monson cops to with some reluctance in *Neck Deep*, offering up some reasons as to the origin of his obsession: “I felt surrounded by armlessness. There were so many missing limbs. I made midnight ventures to the frenzied zombies who work at the Super Wal-Mart … My favorite all-time checker was a one-armed woman” (“After Form and Formlessness” 146).

Though he may not be considered a Rust Belt writer, having been born in Nebraska, essayist and poet Kevin Young published a heavily-footnoted, four hundred and eighty three page nonfiction book about lying, what he calls “that artful dodge, faking it until you make it” (17). Young’s book recalls Smith for me, a passage where she remembers watching a Doors concert early in her life, before she had started performing: “I felt, watching Jim Morrison, that I could do that. I can’t say why I thought this. I had nothing in my experience to make me think that would ever be possible, yet I harbored that conceit. I felt both kinship and contempt for him” (59). I think also of Nelson writing: “I feel confident enough of the specificity and strength of my relation … to share” (*Bluets* 61). Perhaps it’s this bravado that invests the Rust Belt persona, that which props us up, which helps us to keep going when we have nothing going for us but (false) confidence.

But maybe we’re not faking it on purpose. Maybe we really don’t know. Yagoda writes that believing memoir contains only the truth is “unrealistic and naïve … A very small number of a life’s components can even be fact-checked: place and date of birth, names of relatives, job titles, a few other details in the time-space continuum. Everything else is a matter of impression” (265), what Larson calls “an artistic likeness, rather than a replication” (16). What impresses itself on our minds enough to leave a mark, an image,
a word or two—something we remember enough to write about, years later? And what doesn’t? I was struck by another trademark of voice occurring frequently in these Rust Belt writers’ work: uncertainty. “There was a lot I didn’t seem to know” (Dubus III 10); “Something was wrong with me and I didn’t know what” (Alice Sebold 236); “We don’t know many things” (Monson 37). Monson’s “Index for X” is a lyric essay, associative, center-less and flowing. It does not pretend to know even how his subject matter connects. With the structure of annotated index, the essay details many obsessions—but it is interesting to note especially this inclusion: After describing the image of a foot falling through a rotted deck, Monson writes, “This particular detail is particularly true” (57).

What is less true then? Mostly, the distinctions, other details we have lost to time. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel mentions her own personal trouble with the truth, writing of a time in her childhood when she begin inserting the phrase *I think* after nearly every sentence in her diary because “How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for were my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those. My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst” (Bechdel 141). Also a question—also phrased *not* as a question, without a question mark—Monson remembers making an amateur horror movie with his friend Liz, who would later die: “Me on film: a steak knife in my hand, serrated blade to throat. Did this happen or did it not” (“Index for X” 62).

Such is the nature of trauma, of troubling events, especially those that occur when we are young. So many stories of my own childhood, I wonder about: Did this actually happen to me, or did I see it on TV, one of those long afternoons when my sister and I lay
stomach-down on the family room carpet in front of a glowing, lie-telling machine? I had difficulty distinguishing real life from fiction, a fact my parents discovered when I began to tell them about the twins who had murdered each other. What twins? Where? It was soon discovered that my babysitter watched—and I with her—soap operas all day.

Troubling, violent events are the ones we especially slid around. We can’t look at them—or write about them—straight-on. Monson misremembers, doesn’t remember, guesses at Liz, what happened before her death. Such slippage may be seen even more in New Jersey-born Alice Sebold’s 1999 memoir *Lucky*. The story of Sebold’s rape as a college student in Syracuse, and the aftermath, Siebold is plainly, clinically direct. The book starts with her rape. She goes through exacting, brutal detail of absolutely everything she remembers—the first line of the first chapter of the book the declaration “This is what I remember” (6). The details are monstrous—the rapist pulls out her hair, calls her dry—yet she reports them. Reportage is what parts of *Lucky* feel like, particularly the rape scene. Siebold goes into so much detail it is physically wrenching to read. And she keeps going, telling everything, *everything*, even the absences. She makes a point to tell the reader when she doesn’t know, what she doesn’t recall: “Somehow, I don’t remember how, I made it back on my feet. I remember biting him, pushing him, I don’t know what” (6). She doesn’t remember how long the drive was to the hospital. She “remember[s] the nurse better than [the doctor]” (17). Why are these minor details important? Who is ever going to call her out on them? Why does Siebold feel the need to tell the reader absolutely everything, to fess up to even the most insignificant gaps in memory? Because the rape victim is not believed, is shamed, is cross-examined, is put on the defensive. Details make you believable. Details are the weapon. And even Sebold
begins her book with imagining, a preface of sorts where she relates the story of girl who was raped and murdered before Sebold’s own rape, the fatal attack taking place in the same tunnel: “The dead girl and I had been in the same low place. We had lain among the dead leaves and broken beer bottles” (3). Sebold takes her imagination, its possibilities, even further. As she is being attacked, her eyes focus on a pink hair tie on the floor of the tunnel. She decides this hair tie must have belonged to the murdered girl: “I will always think of her when I think of the pink hair tie. I will think of a girl in the last moments of her life” (3). Did it fall or was it torn out of the doomed girl’s hair? Did it even belong to her? We don’t know. Sebold doesn’t know either. It is not exactly true, what she thinks about the pink hair tie. It is not exactly untrue either.

How is truth and truth slippage particular to the Rust Belt? It’s not—except we have been fed lies all our lives. The water is safe. The factory is fine. Mining is a good job. In 2012, I opened the Mansfield, Ohio newspaper to read a story about the old, shuttered GM Plant. It was the cover story, the headline huge and bold. The factory had sold to a development group! This was true. The group had an interested party! Not true. The interested party was bringing in one thousand new jobs! Really, really not true. My father worked in local business development, and I turned to him as he shook his head: I don’t know where they came up with that. We want to believe things. We want to cast truth in a light which is not so unbearable.

And so Biss begins her essay “Goodbye to All That” with a funny story about how her first day in New York, after she discovered her apartment didn’t come with a refrigerator, her helpful landlord found her a used one, fixed it up and left it on the stoop of the building for her—but it was stolen by the time she came downstairs. Then she
writes “But that is not the way it really happened. That is how I learned to tell the story of my life in New York. I learned to make my experience of being young and new to the city sound effortless and zany. It was not” (58). The truth, Biss writes, is that her refrigerator was stolen after a full day—a day in which she tried and failed to figure out a way to bring it up four flights of stairs herself. When she told the refrigerator story:

I didn’t mention the animal-piss stink of my room or the extreme aching sense of helplessness that overcame me when I realized that I would have to buy a refrigerator. I didn’t mention that I couldn’t hear out of my right ear because it became clogged from crying. I didn’t mention all the time I wasted in bed, starting at the ceiling, debilitated with dread. (58)

She came to New York, like Joan Didion, like countless others before, lured by a faint hope, a promise of some story or other where “the heroine was young and … the moral had something to do with being in the right place at the right time” (59). And like Didion, after whose work Biss’s essay is modeled, “I learned every detail of the story just as fast as I discovered its falsehood” (59).

_Criminal History_

Biss lies to the reader at first, telling her spruced up story, making it “effortless and zany” (58), but she just as swiftly fesses up, filling in the hard, awful details of what actually happened. We may lie but we own up to it, most of it, our exaggerations, our failings. There are many. Another aspect of the Rust Belt persona? We have rough starts, rocky beginnings. We did some bad, bad things. Dubus III describes watching a fight at school in childhood: “I liked seeing this. I liked seeing Bowman’s head bounce
against the hard floor, I liked seeing the blood splattering across his nose and mouth and chin, and I especially liked how tightly his eyes were shut against the fear, and the pain’’ (11). He and his sister listen to their parents fight, wander downstairs after their parents’ many parties and pick at the leftovers: “If there was anything left in a glass, and if there wasn’t a cigarette floating in it, Suzanne and I would take a few sips because we liked the taste of watered-down whiskey or gin” (16). Soon he starts getting into his own fistfights—“Sometimes I’d get shoved and kicked and pushed to the ground. I was still trying to figure out what I’d done to make them mad. I had not yet learned that cruelty was cruelty, and you don’t ask why, just hit first and hit hard” (19)—and he is good at this, really good; so good that as a teenager, he starts driving around, just looking for fights; so good that he eventually becomes a professional boxer (he also works for a time as the hired thug of a private eye / bounty hunter) before giving it up for writing and teaching, for creativity and a life of the mind. Dubus III is brutal in his descriptions of himself, the beatings he took as a child, and then, the beatings he himself administered, his own capacity for violence, characterizing himself as “this boy who had killed so easily, who had enjoyed it” (20).

The list of Monson’s youthful crimes begins as follows:

_Some Evidence—a Short List of Ander Monson’s Criminal History at Cranbrook Schools:_ breaking and entering; shoplifting; stealing master keys and security radios; rerouting and rewiring of a number of phones; switching a professor’s home phone with the pay-phone line, resulting in a semester’s worth of free calls and a befuddled professor … allegedly drinking; using father’s credit cards to buy way too much stuff (sorry,
Dad); using stolen credit cards to buy Ozzy Osborne tickets for a friend; stealing blank checks … using stole phone cards; electronic breaking and entering numerous fucking times; being accused of smoking inside a dorm room (the only time Monson was actually suspended, and by the way he was not smoking but was with someone who was—a rare moment of innocence in this otherwise criminal wash). (“Cranbrook Schools: Adventures in Bourgeois Topologies” 36-7)

This list goes on for more than a page and “ends with seven felony convictions (possession of credit card information)” (55), which result in expulsion from his prestigious private high school and the revocation of his college acceptances a mere three months before graduation. Like Dubus III, Monson is completely forthcoming about his (less violent though more complicated) checkered past. Perhaps such transparency is due in part to the nature of his crimes. No one was harmed, only swindled. Monson’s ingenuity and technical know-how are impressive, but most of Monson’s crimes and the way in which he executes them are laughable. As a computer hacker, “I went by the handle “The Grim Reaper,” which I got from somewhere, possibly one too many games of Dungeons & Dragons … I even had my black (of course) Land’s End bag monogrammed TGR, which I had to explain, to my immediate discredit” (50). He’s a charming criminal. His crimes betray mostly good, mostly misguided intentions, buying concert tickets for a friend with those stolen credit cards, splicing the phone lines of campus into his dorm room because “I wanted to extend the campus out as far as I could” (45)—because he wanted everyone to be connected. The harmlessness of Monson’s
persona is confirmed in his second collection of essays, *Vanishing Point*, in which he admits his unrelenting addiction to … Doritos.

Not so with Sebold. Though her courtroom testimony puts the rapist behind bars, the judge sentencing him to the maximum penalty, and Sebold seems to be getting her life together, after her college graduation, she drops out of graduate school in Houston, most likely because of an increasing drug habit. Oprah has Sebold on her talk show to discuss Sebold’s survival, and Sebold writes that she couldn’t wait to fly home in order to snort heroin. She tries other drugs, like pot and ecstasy, but “I loved heroin … Who wanted to enhance a mood? I wanted to destroy it” (235). She had survived a crime, only to become a criminal. The drugs cause her to take risks, put herself in unwise situations—often where she is the only woman. She does black tar heroin, comes to from blackouts in “Vacant lots, alleyways, and Athens” (235). Athens, Greece, that is. There, in a strange house, shooting up with strangers:

I put on someone’s jacket because I was cold. There was a used needle in the pocket. It stabbed me. I was startled for a moment, immediately I thought, AIDS. Then I did what I had become good at: played the odds.

It was Greece. How bad could the risk be? (235)

She and friends ride “the night train, high as kites, into Berlin” (235). She gets high with her students and former students from Hunter College, where she works as an adjunct (unsure herself how she ever landed the position since she was drunk and high during the interview). Getting clean, deciding to get clean, takes years and is prompted by multiple events: She watches a lover, also a drug addict, disintegrate before her eyes; she spends some time in an isolated artists’ colony in rural California where she befriends a World
Sebold’s quote, about how her rape shattered her illusions of safety forever:

appeared on page fifty-one of a three-hundred page book. I read the sentence and my name again in the bookstore before purchasing it. It was not obvious to me until I was riding home on the subway. In a book called *Trauma and Recovery*, I was cited in the first half. (239)

Sebold determines “not just to keep the book as a memento, but to actually read it” (239).

She finds a helpful therapist, begins learning about post-traumatic stress disorder, and writes, “That fall I quit dabbling in heroin” (239).

As a teenager in *Townie*, Dubus III is restless, frequently alone (his overburdened mother working, his father remarried and gone), often hungry, wearing ill-fitting shoes and clothes he’s outgrown, coats too thin for the winter. Hanging out with older neighborhood kids, Dubus III would “try whatever drugs were going around; we’d eat tabs of brown mescaline, or a quarter of LSD 25, or half a tab of four-way purple blotter acid, chemically treated paper you dissolved under the tongue” (54). He also learns “how to get high just by breathing deep and fast for a full minute, then [you] have someone put you in a bear hug and squeeze till you felt your brain float up and fizz out the top of your head” (59). Still, drinking is his high of choice, mostly beer, along with fighting. Dubus III’s descriptions of fights are frequent, and charged with an energy that seems ethereal, more spiritual than physical. Multiple times he refers to the “membrane” surrounding every person, a kind of aura or haze he has to break through in order to reach them, to disturb their universe—as well as his own. Punching is a disruption of space: “you have to move through two barriers to do something like that, one inside you and one around
him, as if everybody’s body is surrounded by an invisible membrane you have to
puncture” (135). Then he speaks directly to the addictive nature of his fighting: “one you
learned how to do that, it was easier to keep doing it” (135).

Smith “had a romantic view of drugs, and considered them sacred” (37), rarely
dabbling herself, though she does drink her way through New York and Paris; *Just Kids*
describes downing bottle after bottle of cheap “Algerian wine” (82). As for Nelson, like
Sebold, heroin is the drug in her books, but the narrator here is the observer, the lover
watching, the one cleaning up after the overdose, holding the hand, calling the hospital.
Weeping. There is a lot of weeping. Nelson remembers a “junkie boyfriend” (87) in *The
Red Parts*—and that is the only name she gives him, his only identification. She writes:
“My bed was a dope pit ... In it I had come across the overdosed body of my junkie
boyfriend on more than one occasion ... finding his blue-gray body over and over again
like so much dead meat in my bed” (39). Nelson is surrounded by drugs and druggies,
working at a bar in the East Village where people had a tendency to lock themselves in
the bathroom and use: “I knew that at least one person had died of a heroin overdose in
there, and while I hadn’t been working that night it was enough to make the whole thing
feel like Russian roulette” (38). With a drug-addicted roommate as well, her “apartment
on the Lower East Side was itself a dope pit” (39). She describes coming home at work
from the druggie bar, and having to check for guests of her roommate, “nodded-out,
dopesick girls whose cigarettes might be burning holes in his furniture ... More than once
I’d wiped up weird white crud foaming out of [the roommate’s] insensate mouth” (39).
Nelson says that she “didn’t use” (39). Still, being utterly surrounded by addicts, loving
an addict, speaks to an addictive personality, or at least an enabling one. But for
Nelson’s narrators, vices are primarily sexual, as is trouble. “I have always had an erotic fondness for asphyxiation. It feels good not to breathe a short while” (The Red Parts 85), she writes, along with:

in my first sexual fantasy: I am sent halfway across the world in a cardboard box with a lot of postage on it. The journey is long and rough and invariably involves much jostling by camels. When I arrive, a tribe of men opens the box under a hot desert sun, and out spills my small body. They are all eager to touch it. (Bluets 54)

Half of the book Bluets consists of direct appeals to an absent, cheating lover, while the book as a whole feels like a longer letter to him, many parts seemingly unrelated to love addressed to a personal you.

Voice of Obsession

Bluets is especially apt for the purpose of this examination because of the book’s obsessive nature. Bluets is a nonfiction / poetry hybrid text consisting of two hundred and forty fragments about the color of blue. The fragments are numbered, precise and neat, although their connections are loose and lyrical. In these fragments, Nelson ruminates on readings in philosophy and literature, remembers and addresses a lover, talks about an old friend, and runs down lists of blue things: things she has picked up on the street, like blue bits of paper; things friends who know of her obsession have given her, like blue dye, blue earrings. Larson wrote a review of the book in Triquarterly, characterizing Bluets as “combin[ing] spiritual inquiry with erotic obsession” (“Now Where was I? On Maggie Nelson’s Bluets”). Also obsessive? The ability of subject
matter to haunt Nelson, murder being the dominant subject of not one, not two, but three books across genres for her (the most recent: the nonfiction book *The Art of Cruelty*). *Bluets*, in this sense, is a change. But not of pace. Nelson writes, rewrites, writes again, again, as if only by getting everything out of her system can she attempt to begin to understand.

Similar nods to obsession may found in the work of Rust Belt writers Bechdel, Biss and Monson. For Bechdel, it is pathological:

> My actual obsessive-compulsive disorder began when I was ten. First it involved a lot of counting, trying to manipulate the slightly leaky bathtub faucet with my toe so that it would stop on an even number of drips … Crossing thresholds became a time-consuming procedure since I had to tabulate the edges of flooring … Life had become a laborious round of chores. At the end of the day, if I undressed in the wrong order, I had to put my clothes back on and start again. (135-7)

The adult writer Bechdel, looking back, believes her obsessiveness may have come from her fastidious, perfectionist, and abusive father, who single-handedly restored her family’s 1867 Gothic Revival house to period appropriateness, including “astral lamps and girandoles and hepplewhite suite chairs” (14), a massive library, a Chippendale, a “leather-topped mahogany and brass second-empire desk (60). Bechdel’s writing is as exacting as her father’s behavior; his attention was to the rooms, hers is to the text—the perfect word, every time. She writes, “Then there’s my own compulsive propensity to autobiography. At some point during my obsessive compulsive spell, I began a diary” (140). Bechdel’s diary, which she excerpts in her book, is thorough, detailed with the
minutia of domestic life, and often hilariously bittersweet, a window into a smart, lonely ten-year-old. She writes, “We watched the Brady Bunch. I made popcorn. There is popcorn left over” (141). She quotes verbatim from her diaries throughout *Fun Home*, lending these scenes from her past a special realness. She doesn’t just remember; she has evidence.

Nelson also used diaries from her aunt as she wrote *Jane*, “to make sure I had her right” (*The Red Parts* 7), recording the process in her memoir, where she also discusses both her own and her mother’s journals. The diaristic impulse perhaps arises from the larger writerly need to research, to record, to study, to know, to know it *all*. Upstate New York essayist and poet Aimee Nezhukumatathil spent nearly a year studying sharks in order to write a single, brief creative nonfiction essay about them, and even that research, she writes in the finished essay, was not enough: “Even though I spent almost a year studying them, I was never prepared for the size. Even though I spent almost a year studying them, I was never prepared to submit myself so completely” (“The Origin of the Whale Shark: An Ars Poetica††). Such thoroughness can perhaps be traced for some Rust Belt writers back to our work ethic, what *Time Magazine* calls in a 2012 article about Ohio “the Teutonic nose-to-the-grindstone that marks successful Midwestern towns” (Rana Foroohar “The Columbus Comeback††).

Obsession is a process of the Rust Belt persona. It is also a trademark of voice. The essays of Monson and Biss have a driven quality, bordering on relentlessness. Monson writes copiously about car washes, disc golf, baths, snow, Gerald R. Ford. In the essay “Fragments: On Dentistry,” he devotes a page and a half to the brand names of toothpastes and mints. Never bored, never ceasing, his writing takes on a breathless tone.
Several of the essays in *Neck Deck* are punctuated by multiple ellipses, none more so than the essay “I Have Been Thinking About Snow,” where the title subject is represented by dot dot dots scrolling across the page in a flutter, little flakes mounting; an essay where the negative space says as much—if not more—than the positive. 

Traditional forms do not seem to be able to hold Monson. He writes an essay in the form of the Harvard Outline, an essay in the form of an index. Many essays feature lists, as if the words are streaming out of him too fast to even make complete sentences.

Equally obsessive, Biss turns a subject this way and that, examining it, re-examining it until it starts to resemble something else entirely. Her essay on dolls is actually an essay about race. Her essay on telephone poles becomes an essay about lynching. Although this essay is thorough, it is not resolute; she mentions that Bell invented the telephone “to allow the deaf to hear” (4), but not how this might work, nor that Bell had a deaf wife and a deaf mother, nor that, for better or worse, the oral education of the deaf was Bell’s life’s main objective. But that is not the point of Biss’s essay, and unlike Monson, her work is ruthless in its trimming. Rather than digressions, Biss turns her obsessive touch to juxtapositions in this essay, as she does in most of her published pieces. Some of these concurrences are jarring, too willfully manipulated, as in “Time and Distance Overcome” when she moves from a list of crimes “real and imagined” for which black men were lynched to this little musing: “The children's game of telephone depends on the fact that a message passed quietly from one ear to another to another will get distorted at some point along the line” (10), then back to a list of antilynching bills that were introduced but failed in Congress. Biss shakes a reader hard at times, pleading, *look, look. See? Now do you see?*
Still, looking at subjects in a new way, looking beyond an object—into its past and into its future—is a specific trait of the Rust Belt persona, I believe, because this is the way we look at our towns. My middle school had once been a parts factory for NASA, and so the building was one story and had no windows. I used to roller skate at the abandoned Westinghouse factory—the long, empty corridors and warehouses were perfect for skating—which my father, a former economic development policymaker, had purchased at auction and was converting into office space. He renamed the building “The Mansfield Commerce Center,” turning all the Westinghouse signs (their logo: a large $W$ on a white circle) upside down. $W$ turned into $M$. And factories turned into schools and playgrounds, my little sister and I holding multiple birthday parties at the old Westinghouse plant, playing hide and seek among the stilled conveyer belts. Sometimes, the old factories were razed and turned into sheet metal, sold for scrap, the location converted to bare muddy fields. But often, the factories were left, just left, standing abandoned, and we looked at them, day in and out, remembering what they were, watching them rust and decay and change, and managing to find the loveliness in it. In an essay called “Things are Broke: Can Ruin Porn Help?” urban poverty researcher Richey Piiparinen argues:

I don’t feel the modern ruins littering the Rust Belt landscape are a negative. Rather, I believe that Cleveland and Detroit and other cities that have borne the brunt of a broken system are also home to something else: a possibility tied to the ubiquity of so many vacant and crumbled things.
After all, “every act of creation is first an act of destruction.”

Picasso said that. Picasso could have painted Detroit the way it is. In *Guernica*, he kind of did.

Part of the persona of the Rust Belt is seeing the beauty in the broken. Or at least, *seeing* the broken, not just walking by it, but stopping to look, to ponder, to *essay* about it. So Dubus III writes of “the battered shells of cars sitting in the weeds, many of the windshields collapsed into the front seats, the rims rusted, the lug bolts like eyes staring out at me” (49). Monson writes “More inexplicable graffiti has occurred here and is beautiful … In the four story building, there could be anything, windows broken out” (“Vanishing Point: Former City” 37). Sebold writes “The old mill, for which my neighborhood was named, had not yet been restored … Someone had torched it and the big white house now had black holes for windows and a green wooden railing that was charred and falling-in in places … I was fascinated” (35). Smith writes “we lived in temporary housing set up for servicemen and their children—whitewashed barracks overlooking an abandoned field alive with wildflowers. We called the field The Patch” (4). Biss writes “In the winter the ice groaned and cracked under the weight of all the surrounding silence” (“Goodbye to All That” 60). And I write:

The graffiti on the pylons faces the highway. So does the graffiti on the abandoned store, painted so as to be visible to traffic. Here, those arms have been painted stretching down and down, two long black columns that continue into the grass.

In this passage I am describing the work of an anonymous and prolific street artist
known as Real Detective. I first came to know Real’s work in the fall of 2008 when I
discovered a gun painted on a concrete pylon near Logan, Ohio. Behind the pylon was an
abandoned convenience store on which two women had been spray-painted, both in black
underwear and heels, one woman beating the other with a whip. The art was signed
REAL DETECTIVE. This launched my ongoing, presently five year attempt to find out
more about the artist, searching for more pieces and trying to discover Real’s identity.
This also clued me into the art, beauty and just plain strangeness going on around me.
Real’s work, stenciled and spray-painted images of girls, guns and crime scenes, much in
the artistic style of Banksy though with a noir bent all his (or her) own, was utterly
compelling, fresh and urbane. But it was not cosmopolitan. It was being done in rural
southern Ohio. No one was talking about it. No one knew about it, and yet the work was
more fascinating than anything I had seen in galleries (or on the street) in my years living
in New York and San Francisco. Only when I came back home to the Rust Belt—to
nowhere, to a place the art scenes of the west and east coast were not talking about,
would never talk about—did I find an artist to capture my imagination, to take my breath
away.

Real paints on abandoned structures, in neglected spaces: back alleys, unused
billboards, under bridges, rusted railroad cars—and by his or her art marking the space, I
began to see the inherent beauty of the space. Potential is an idea that comes up
frequently in the work of nonfiction writers of the Rust Belt. So much was. So much
could be. “Anything could happen here. Anything could have happened here. It is all
potential” (37), Monson writes in “Vanishing Point: Former City,” an essay devoted to
the Rust Belt city of Grand Rapids just after the writer moves away from it for good,
which is also the moment he begins to realize its loveliness, its uniqueness, and its hope. Piiparinen argues that by photographing abandoned places in the Rust Belt, the artistic movement “rust / ruin porn” is “capturing the inherent beauty in broken things—Ruin Porn expose[s] the failure and decay, thus clearing the secrecy, the shame, and leaving perceptual room to see” (“Things are Broke: Can Ruin Porn Help?”). A new business can always move into the factory. A new factory can always be rebuilt on the field. We remain eternally optimistic. Nowhere is this more evident than in Sebold’s book; a memoir about rape, it is titled Lucky. Lucky because, unlike the other raped girl in the tunnel, Sebold lived. Lucky because Sebold got clean, got help, gained self-awareness. Lucky because her experience gave her resiliency. She writes, “we were lucky for war and rape because it gave us something no one else had: a sixth sense that turned on when we felt danger near us or those we loved” (238).

Resiliency, hopefulness, obsessiveness—theses are extremely compelling traits, the traits good stories (and storytellers) should have. Still, I did not believe I would write a book about these kinds of people, these kinds of stories: the people of my childhood, my family, my past. I felt I was too close to it, too present—I had moved back to Ohio after years elsewhere, after all—and too far away at the same time. I had moved on, onto other stories, other (grander) myths. I meant to write about performance: makeup, bright lights, illusions, and glamour. But in the midst of the grease paint, I kept coming back to grime. To rust. In my writing about a small town theatre—intended to be my subject—I kept thinking about the small town: the abandoned buildings beside the parking lot, collapsing, padlocked but often broken into, their iron sides oxidized red. I kept thinking of the police station across the street, the courthouse and jail down the block. That
reminded me of the abandoned reformatory at the edge of town, the abandoned Westinghouse factory by the railroad tracks, all the abandoned houses. Were there stories in these hollowed places? What had happened to get them into this state? What was happening to them now?

To distract myself, I began a completely unrelated project: I would research and write a small piece about an obscure blues and folk musician from the 1960s. My husband had given me Jackson C. Frank’s CD several years ago. We both enjoyed it, but I couldn’t find out very much about the songwriter. I began to research. It would just be a tangent, my little project. My distraction, my side bit, turned into thirty pages, then sixty. Born in Buffalo, New York, Frank grew up in the small town of Cheektowaga. On March 31, 1954, he suffered burns on over half of his body when part of his elementary school went up in flames after a furnace in the boiler room exploded. The furnace was below the music room; Frank was having music class at the time. Half of Frank’s classmates did not survive the fire, and Frank would struggle with physical and psychological problems related to the fire all his life. He would also go on to become one of the most influential singer-songwriters of the ‘60s British folk revival.

Friends with Simon and Garfunkel (Paul Simon produced his album), Al Stewart, and Roy Harper, ex-boyfriend of Sandy Denny, opening act for Joni Mitchell, Frank would only put out one album. He would survive on insurance money from the fire, then on the generosity of friends. He would be homeless. After the death of his first child in infancy, he would be launched into a depression so deep he would be institutionalized. His marriage would break up. He would move back in with his parents—and one day, with his mother out of the house, he would take a bus to New York, to try to find his old
friend Paul Simon. No one would hear from Frank for ten years.

His story was the definition of the blues. And Frank too was a Rust Belt son. My side project, my tangent, had brought me back home again: back to a former manufacturing center, back to cities of snow and grit and old steel. All of the essays in this project are set in former manufacturing towns and farming communities, all part of the Midwest or Northeast: Athens, Guysville, Kilvert, Mansfield and Medina Ohio; Campbellsburg and Kokomo, Indiana; Buffalo and Cheektowaga, New York; and Paterson, New Jersey. All would be said, then, to take place squarely in the area known most commonly as the Rust Belt.

But since the term is more of a social construction, referring to the economic conditions of a place as much as if not more than the actual place; since the definition of what constitutes the Rust Belt is arguable; and since the cities themselves are almost continually in flux, can there even be said to be Rust Belt at all? The economic conditions that conspired to create the Rust Belt may, of course, be found in more and more locations as the economy has tanked. Since 2008, what town doesn’t have a closed factory, a street or two (or five or ten) of abandoned houses? Perhaps the Rust Belt is not a spot so much as a patina. Not a place, so much as a persona—always a persona. When we go to a dark place; when we skitter off the subject; when we lie; when we obsess; when we still find the beauty, the hope, the potential in our busted lives and our broken towns, maybe we’re performing the Rust Belt. Maybe, no matter where we live or call home or write from or about, maybe the abandoned houses are all of us. As Frank writes in “Carnival,” the song he always called his favorite:

I’ve seen your face in every place that I'll be going.
I read your words like black hungry birds read every sowing.

Rise and fall …

Hear me call.

Hear my name.

It is Jackson C. Frank who brought me here, back to the Rust Belt, back home—and to him I dedicate this book.
Works Cited:


Frank, Jackson C. “Carnival.” *Blues Run the Game*. Castle, 2003. CD.


PART I. SECRETS
Figure 1. Secrets, photograph by Alison Stine, 2012.
Everything Was Beautiful

We lived in an allotment, an asphalt circle that made a mile exactly—so my mom swore when she made us walk it as a family after dinner. All the houses in our little wheel were built in the 1970s. They all had avocado-colored kitchens, dark wood paneling, small yards with big trees.

But our home had the woods.

Down a hill at the bottom of a dead end, there were only two houses on our street besides our own: one to the right, one in front. To the left and back were woods, only woods, a thick brown mystery, at least an acre, though at eight or nine-years-old it seemed endless. I thought our neighbor across the street, a retiree who restored cars, might be Daddy Warbucks. I thought another set of neighbors, their house deep in the trees, might be Russian spies. I had misread the flag on their back porch, the red, gray and white buckeye emblem of The Ohio State University, for the hammer and sickle of Communism, which we were learning about in school.

The world was full of wonder. I thought I might as well hide.

I found the abandoned place in the woods to the back of our house, up on a rise but still shielded. It was a dark, wood-planked building about the size of a minivan, square, with two windows on the lower story, real glass panes and casements, and a cupola with another little window on top.

I had read The Four Story Mistake. I had read The Secret Garden. I had read The Boxcar Children. I had read. I had read. I had read. And in what I read, children always needed a hideaway, a sanctum, an escape. This was to be mine. I told no one, but set to
sweeping out the mouse smell, polishing the windows with rags I had found in our garage.

We didn’t grow up wild, my younger sister and brother and I, but we grew up free. Summer or winter, we were not expected home until dark or dinner. We had full range of the neighborhood, our grazing lands. Sometimes we hung out with the other kids in the allotment—the redheaded twins, the pale religious sisters and the judge’s son—playing capture the flag or ghosts in the graveyard, but there were problems. One of the twins was mean, and I could never remember which one until she burned me, pulled up the ladder of the tree house just when I reached the first rung, changed the rules in the middle of a complicated game when I was winning. The judge’s son set fire to things, stole things, killed small things, and once climbed the telephone tower looming over the neighborhood like a robot lord. I remember that happening at night, the last night of summer, a sudden early and awful night—too dark, too soon. We got in trouble for staying out. The judge’s son was sent to military school after that, and he didn’t write us.

But mostly we fended for ourselves: my sister and I (and brother, when he was old enough to catch up). We swung on the tire roped on a tree in our yard. My sister lined up her My Little Ponies in the driveway and ran over them with her Big Wheel. I gathered acorns and used rocks to try to pound them into flour—something I had read about in captivity narratives like *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson.*

If we yelled, my mom said, *Are you bleeding?*

If we said yes, she asked, *A lot?*
Otherwise we were fine. We were occupied. And so when I disappeared for hours in my abandoned place, no one came looking for me.

Up north, near Cleveland, there is an inland lake: Chippewa. People used to picnic there, to boat, to hold tent revivals on its wide green banks. In the 1870s, a man named Edward Andrews had a beach built on the lake and organized the grounds, naming it after himself: the Andrews Pleasure Grounds. He added to the property a roller coaster with a single drop—really just one long, bumpy fall, built into a pre-existing hill. The roller coaster cars—actually old coal cars outfitted with benches, no seat belts—rattled down narrow-gauge rails, coming to a stop only when they hit the bottom of the hill. The riders would climb out, then employees had to manually push the cars back up the hill again so the next couple in line could have a turn.

The roller coaster at Chippewa was unsafe, ineffective—and extremely popular. Andrews Pleasure Grounds was sold for a profit, and the new owner added more roller coasters: the wooden Big Dipper, known as simply “The Coaster”; the miniature, steel Little Dipper; and the wood-framed Wild Mouse. An amusement park was born.

The Chippewa Lake amusement park had its heyday during the Roaring Twenties. There was a carousel then, a Ferris wheel, a fun house, a ride called the Flying Cages where passengers were locked into brightly-painted steel contraptions about the size of elevators which then rose into the air and whirled around vertically. There was swimming on the beach, dancing in a dome-roofed ballroom where live music played. There was a midway with games and food sold from stands like the Hamburger Factory. Candy cane-shaped streetlights hung over the walk. There was the Miss Chippewa, a
canopied pleasure boat which trawled the lake offering passengers a sedate view of the 
beach and waters.

Chippewa Lake was family-operated, all this time, by the Beach family, who had been responsible for the expansion of the park and its popularity. The park had filed for bankruptcy back in 1934—even pleasure grounds were not immune to a depression—but Parker Beach, who, according to his obituary, first came to his family’s amusement park as a one-month-old infant and began working there when he was only twelve-years-old, was in the crowd when Chippewa Lake came up for sale at a bank auction. Beach had “$18 in his pocket that day in 1937, when he bought the park for $3,500… and agreed to pay the delinquent taxes and mortgages.”¹

Beach was true to his word. He paid the back taxes. He fixed up the park. He lured crowds to return with music, christening the dance hall the Starlight Ballroom, its motto: “Dancing Every Night.” Beach meant it. In 1937, the year Beach bought Chippewa back from the bank, Lawrence Welk performed his first major radio broadcast from the ballroom. Beach held dance-offs, battles of the bands. He brought car shows onto the grounds. On Sunday mornings, church services were held in the Starlight Ballroom, food and lemonade afterward for sale. The church crowds didn’t linger too long in the dance hall those Sunday afternoons; there was dancing that night, after all.

Parker Beach had grown up at Chippewa, he would grow old at Chippewa. He continued to run the park for thirty more years, until age sixty-four. It was 1969 when he retired, putting Chippewa Lake up for sale.
My abandoned place was a house, I thought, some hunter’s cabin or writer’s refuge. I had a few such places: my room, which had two windows in a corner and a rusted TV trellis beneath them, lacy with dried ivy. I had a cedar chest of treasures; I used to kneel in front of it and look at them: dried rose petals, ticket stubs, a carousel music box my dad had given me. And I had a bend in the creek behind our house where a tree jutted over the water. Half-felled, the tree continued to grow, the trunk indented just like a bus seat. I would sit, throw things in the water, hide things beneath the roots, like little things to throw: twigs and rocks and acorn caps.

But the abandoned place was better than a room or a chest or even a tree. It was an entire building, a house with walls and windows. There may have been a sink, a little kitchen, the remains of chairs and a table. It was all in miniature, just my size. Also it had an attic, the cupola accessible only by a trapdoor in the ceiling. I did not go up there, not at first. I was saving it. Surely it held something good.

Continental Business Enterprises, who bought Chippewa Lake in 1969, intended to expand and update the park, bringing it into the twentieth century—more roller coasters and modern thrill rides, less dance hall and Miss Chippewa. In nearby Sandusky was Cedar Point, after all, a massive three hundred acres of rides, mostly roller coasters, among them the Blue Streak (named after the mascot of Sandusky High School), and the Cedar Creek Mine Ride, as well as the popular Jungle Larry’s Safari. Cedar Point was so huge, it had its own railroad, ferrying passengers from one end of the park to the other. And then there was Geauga Lake in Aurora with swimming and a midway and rides
including its own version of the Big Dipper. The year Chippewa Falls was sold, Geauga Lake was building an aquarium attraction. Called SeaWorld.

But people were leaving Medina, Ohio, home of Chippewa. The factories were leaving. Steel, rubber and tire production were on the decline in Akron and Cleveland, where many residents of Medina had worked. Chippewa was unable to compete with Cedar Point and Geauga, unable to generate interest again, unable to convince people who had lost or were losing their jobs to celebrate in the summer, to ride rides, to dance and scream. The remodel of Chippewa, planned by the new owners, never broke ground. The park was never updated. What was to be the centennial anniversary season of the amusement park never even started.

In 1978, one hundred years after its opening as Andrews Pleasure Grounds, the amusement park at Chippewa was abandoned.

I let my sister in. I had to. For a while, I could leave her behind at a certain point in the woods. There was a place you had to cross over the creek by inching across a thick, old tree. The trunk had fallen conveniently over the banks of the stream, making a bridge, slick with moss. The ravine below was close, and the stream was thin, barely a trickle, sometimes just a dry bowl of leaves, but my sister was convinced—maybe I’d convinced her—you had to use the tree bridge to make it across. There was no other way. She wouldn’t do it, and I often left her fretting on the opposite side of the bank.

Then one day, in the way of children suddenly learning, suddenly deciding, suddenly brave, she would do it.
She was beside me then, in my private, abandoned house, scrambling up the counters, pushing at the attic door.

Before selling to developers, the Beach family had auctioned off what they could: the cars of the Little Dipper and Wild Mouse, for example, which could be re-used in other roller coasters. But most of the park was just left standing as Parker Beach was under the impression that the park would re-open in time for its anniversary. All the other roller coasters were left intact, as were the Rocket Rods and the Flying Cages, the Tumblebug and ticket booths, the bumper cars and fun house, the bathhouse, the ballroom, the waffle stand and the peanut stand and the Hamburger Factory, Pee-Wee golf, the stage, the carousel, the restrooms, the Ferris wheel.

One year turned into five, ten, thirty. Thirty years of silence. Thirty years of tall, steel structures standing alone in the grass. The grass began to grow. Trees began to grow. The wheel turned only in the breeze.

How the land takes over, how a place becomes wild: The iron rails oxidize, the wooden frames rot. Mice move into the dance hall. The roof of the Hamburger Factory, weakened by years of snow and mold and downed limbs, collapses onto a pile of dead leaves.

Perhaps wildness is always there, waiting in the shadows, just out of the spell cast by carnival bulbs, just beyond the parquet floor and the click of the dancers’ heels. Just off the pavement, wildness waits. And then it strikes: first one green shoot, then another, taller. The tip of a branch brushes at a window for years—and then one day grows
inward, cracking through the window, shattering the glass. Mold needs only the invitation of rain.

Beyond the highway, off any main road, Chippewa Lake was always a bit remote, nestled in the woods beside the water. The woods simply took over, stretching out. A shrub sprouted up then over the cracked cement sign to the park, obscuring the letters like a neglected grave.

Yet probably the most arresting sight at Chippewa Lake was the Ferris wheel, forever stilled by the tree growing up right through the middle, perfect and straight, as if it had been planted. The tree stood as high as the Ferris wheel, then higher, enveloping the ride as though in a hug—or a choke hold. The seats of the Ferris wheel were gone, the story being that townspeople from Medina had snuck onto the park grounds at night and manually pushed the Ferris wheel, the ride creaking and turning, to reach and remove every seat. More likely, the seats were sold off by the Beach family before they left.

Without its seats, without its riders or any hope of riders, the Ferris wheel took on many shapes, many lives in sun and shadows, many imaginative and monstrous forms. It resembled a rib cage, the chest cavity of some extinct creature with a dark spread of bones. Or sometimes, it looked like a wagon wheel, spokes and gears oscillated with rust. Or sometimes: a giant spinning wheel, stilled; instead of wool, poison ivy and sumac and sow thistle wound around the drive band.

In summer, green leaves hid the Ferris wheel, as they did most of the amusement park’s structures. In summer, the curve or two of red-brown iron that poked through the green could have been mistaken for limbs, for a twisted tree. But seven months out of the
year, the trees of northern Ohio are bare—and it could be seen, the rusted wheel, two stories tall. It could all be seen.

I picture adventurers cutting through the woods, down the path that was no longer a path, weaving through maples and bur oaks and plane trees, pushing aside saplings and whip-sharp brambles, stepping around the control boxes and electrical panels still planted in the soil like mines, and there: the Ferris wheel before them, standing silent and tall, a temple whose gods have gone away.

I’ve seen an abandoned Ferris wheel, though not the one at Chippewa. At the Richland County Fairgrounds, in my hometown of Mansfield, Ohio, there is a small one, kiddie-sized, left to flake. The white paint has mostly chipped off. The cars swing in a breeze, eerily, possibly dangerously, though the wheel is only fifteen or so feet high. Ivy spirals over the wheel like carnival lights on a string. It almost looks festive. It almost looks decorative, intentional.

I’m not sure why the Ferris wheel was left on the fairgrounds, left to rot, parked next to the rabbit barn and fenced in with chain-link to keep people away. It’s a quiet spot, shadowy. You can almost forget it’s there. The Ferris wheel is too short to be seen above the barn. You can’t hear the creaks of the wind through its spokes, not when the fair is in full swing. If the weeds creeping up and over the wheel do their jobs, you will forget it’s there eventually.

But I do know why the Ferris wheel was abandoned. The fair uses traveling carnival rides, and has for years now; a company called Bates Amusements comes into
town the morning before the fair starts and brings their own Ferris wheel. They bring their own Tilt-a-Wheel and fun house and fun slides and child-sized roller coasters.

On Sundays, their travel day, driving around the Midwest, you might see them on the highway, a fleet of semis moving in a caravan. On flat beds, the trucks carry behind them rails and cars and slides and a Ferris wheel—bigger, shiner, studded with flashing LEDS—folded up until the rides don’t resemble anything, just big pieces of dreams.

There are other places like Chippewa, dozens of abandoned amusement parks throughout the country, primarily in the Midwest and South (Ohio alone has twelve), though, like many wild things, most are disappearing. In Indiana, there was Riverside Amusement Park, shuttered in 1970 after years of losing money—at least in part because of pickets and protests related to the park’s “whites only” rule, which was not lifted until 1963. Like Chippewa, Riverside remained undisturbed, a cemetery of its own making, for decades until the River’s Edge subdivision was constructed on the site in 2005.

In 2009, Splash Down Dunes, an Indiana water park that began in 1957 as a kiddie amusement park called Enchanted Forest, was closed due to legal issues, possibly a lack of insurance. The closing was abrupt, unexpected. One summer, opening day simply did not come, though the park was ready for it, was—and always will be now, unless it too is razed—waiting: hundreds of inflated inner tubes filling the boathouse, life jackets molding on the floor. There are bandages still in the first aid building; a wheelchair, lichen blooming on its pedals. People have spray-painted fuck you people on the side of the concession stand, ass hole (two words) on a fiberglass dolphin. Frogs live
in the wave pool now. Someone has shattered the gumball machines, and stolen all the candy inside.

Called “Standing But Not Operating” (or SBNO), abandoned amusement parks have fan sites devoted to them with histories, pictures of then and now, tips on how to best break in. Because people do break in, tear down fences, smash through padlocks, cut chains with wire cutters, push back brambles and saplings and thorns. People scale up Ferris wheels, and balance on roller coaster tracks, and break their legs falling through rotted floors.

Did I ever come to Splash Down Dunes? It looks familiar, but perhaps only in the way many places of childhood do: There’s the kiddie pool, there’s a concession stand, there’s the curly slide.

I grew up in Indiana, wasted flat cornfields for miles. In winter, the snow made the ground indistinguishable from the white sky. In summer, humidity peeled the shingles from my tree house, heat blurring my eyes. I do remember visiting a water park with my little sister when I was nine or ten. It was a gray day, unseasonably wet and cold. My swimsuit tore on a water slide; boys made fun of me in line. I had a miserable time.

I’m not sure if my sister brought them down from the cupola, or simply returned to tell the tale—I was afraid to go up there myself, afraid the floors wouldn’t hold me—her blue eyes bright, her skin so pale her freckles glowed. She described them to me: the boxes, the long flat boxes with faded letters, mold marks and mouse bites; the little bombs; the paper wrapped cylinders, each with a whip-like fuse.

Fireworks. The attic of the abandoned place was packed with fireworks.
We continued our business as usual, hopping the creek and cutting the hair off our dolls and hitting acorns with rocks until summer rolled around and we got bored, or a boy—because I do believe it was a boy, the judge’s son before he climbed the radio tower and was sent away, the twins’ little brother—somebody talked my sister into it, egged her on.

My sister brought down the fireworks.

We began setting them off in the driveway, the smoke bombs, the ring rockets, the black snakes—the long, black ashy tails of which left burns on the asphalt, a singed smell in the air. My parents came to the window.

We were confronted, my sister and I, interrogated alone and together. Someone confessed. The neighbors were called. My abandoned place had an owner—the neighbors—and an identity, pedestrian and plain: It was their children’s old playhouse, a shack in the woods. They had built it years ago, forgotten about it as it grew covered with weeds then trees, forgotten the whole thing, the entire cupola, was full with fireworks, decades old.

*It’s a wonder that building hasn’t exploded,* my mom said.

We were banned from it. Too dangerous. The shack may have been torn down. No one just cleaned the fireworks from the building and gave it back to us. No one thought we wanted the playhouse for anything other than pyromania—but I had been alone there. It was a space to think. It was private. I was fixing it up. It had been mine.

Was that summer, or soon after, we were banned from the creek after my grandfather discovered sewage pipes ran cracked and orange into the water? Then we
learned the woods surrounding our house had once been a big lake, a lake at the center of the allotment—but then a little girl had drowned and the lake was filled in, the water drained, trees planted as if earth and trunks and a red brown haze and a burning smell in the fall could make people forget. It made us not want to go in there. It made us not want to play.

Was that summer, or soon after, we had a curfew? A man a few streets down, a man relatively young but with shocking white hair—I had once made eye contact with him on Halloween, tramping about the neighborhood in my costume; his porch light wasn’t on; he was outside but not distributing candy; he was chopping wood, out with an ax while children in masks and long hems tripped and blundered and dashed in and out of houses all around him—this man began wearing skirts and pantyhose and wigs and heels and riding his motorcycle around the neighborhood at night.

So what? I would say.

But he wasn’t simply dressing as a woman. His house was for sale, and the realtor told my mom he showed it by pointing out the bedroom he shared with his wife, the closet full of her fancy clothes, and the bedrooms of his daughters: their dresses, their toys, their bikes and jacks and jump ropes.

He had no wife, no daughters. He was not married, had no children.

I had to be home before dark.

So many things were taken from us. Surely this was the summer I turned thirteen. At school that year they were taking away our backpacks. Around the country, guns were showing up in schools. Our school couldn’t afford a metal detector, so we had two options: Leave the bags and purses at home and carry all our school things in our arms,
use clear plastic backpacks, so that all the contents—all our books and notebooks and pens and makeup and brushes and secrets—were visible to everyone walking behind us, everybody in the school.

At least I still had my shortcut. My best friend since fifth grade lived in Royal Oak Estates, the large new neighborhood that backed up against our own. Our two allotments were only a tree width apart, but houses in Royal Oak cost thousands more. The streets were wide and smooth. There were sidewalks. The houses were modern and manicured and close together; they all looked alike, unlike my neighborhood’s hodgepodge of styles. Royal Oak houses had small trim yards. The trees were young and thin and usually eaten by deer before they could make it past saplings. Inside the houses, there were cathedral ceilings and chandeliers and kitchen islands. The walls were beige. The carpets were beige. Everything smelled like a car.

I think I loved being in that neighborhood with its newness and its blandness as much as I enjoyed seeing my friend. I was thirteen. I wanted everything to be the same. I wanted to be the same. Royal Oak had no woods, no filled-in pond, no avocado-colored kitchens, no sewage creek, no cross-dressing motorcyclist with an ax, no mystery.

I found a way to cut through a yard in my own neighborhood, squeeze past some prickly hedges and then I was there in the manicured land. I could even bring my bike, walking it quickly past a neighbor’s staked beagle, the playing card removed from my spokes so the tick tick tick wouldn’t make him bark. I shoved my bike through the shrubs, ducked through myself and… Narnia, with leaves on my shoulders.

Our neighborhood was complete, for better or worse, a mile, a finished circle. The developers had long left, running out of woods and cash. But they were building in
Royal Oak Estates. People were buying new houses, always bigger. *McMansions*:

b:oated, brown or gray houses with odd peaks and small windows and large garages facing the street. Royal Oak was building a kingdom of McMansions. Always there was a stretch at the end of some street or other with straw instead of grass, dirt instead of roads and a big blonde skeleton for a house: framing for walls, wood planks for floors, maybe an open staircase or two, maybe light bulbs in bald sockets.

We all did it. We all broke into them—hardly breaking as there were no walls. It was ghost burglary, what we did. We stepped in around air.

Who started it? How many times did I go along, and what did we do inside those houses? I don’t remember. Talked, played cards, walked around, daring each other to do things, like step over there or jump over that. They weren’t abandoned spaces, those unfinished houses in Royal Oak, but they were ours.

Then somebody starting setting fires.

I was too late for Chippewa. I would pass the sign on the highway, *Chippewa Lake*, intended to steer people to the waterway (but also, conveniently directing trespassers), and think, *one of these days*... But I never did it. I’ve never been much of a lawbreaker. I fear trouble too much. The worry of discovery, of being seen by cops or caretakers or the absentee owners—or perhaps, worst of all, other explorers—was too great.

Chippewa was too known. I didn’t want to run into anyone when I was there, wading in the grass among the rusted coasters, seeing the great overgrown Ferris wheel for the first time, the tree shooting right up through the middle like a stick in a bicycle’s
struts. I wanted it to be my own, my private adventure, as if I had discovered it, like an archaeologist, like a child—and it would never be.

In June 2002, a girl was playing in the dance hall of Chippewa Lake, the huge structure with its ballroom three stories tall. She had matches.

By the time firefighters cut through the chains gating off the property, cut through the brush, fought through the woods and made their way to the flames, most of the structure had burned. Only a low brick wall was left of the ballroom, some twisted steel support beams. And a dance floor of ash.

The girl survived, escaped, confessed. The hotel on the property had already burned, years ago. Boys had burnt down most of it. After being caught and scolded by caretakers in the abandoned park, they had returned to light the intentional blaze.

Still, Continental Business Enterprises held onto the park for years, doing nothing, not restoring, not building, not even tearing down. For decades, the park sat still, frozen. Only the woods moved, ever over. Then in 2008, Continental Business Enterprises either renamed themselves or sold the property to an operation called Chippewa Partners LLC who then sent a press release to the *Akron Beacon Journal*. Finally, after more than thirty years, something would happen—but not to the park, not to the rusted SBNO structures, to the land. It was only the land they wanted. Chippewa Partners LLC announced ground would soon break on Chippewa Landing, a destination with a fitness center, restaurants, conference center, hotel and spa.
The destruction of Chippewa played out on the internet, with SBNO fans calling it the “final tour” and Wikipedia updating with a play-by-play. By June 2010, the roller coasters and Hamburger Factory were gone. By January of the following year, only the ticket booth, Tumble Bug, the debris of the former ballroom and the mighty Ferris wheel remained.

And then the inevitable happened. It didn’t work.

The developers ran out of money, couldn’t find backers, couldn’t generate interest. The restaurants, the conference and fitness centers, the spa—they were not to be. By April 2012, Chippewa Partners LLC had abandoned their plans, and the land—razed of its rides, the woods emptied of everything that had made it distinct: the ballroom, the midway, the Ferris wheel, even the trees—the leveled, bald land was foreclosed, scheduled for auction by the bank.

I am not certain it sold.

There are no ghost stories associated with Chippewa, though a tale persists about a roller coaster accident that never happened. But maybe the failure of Chippewa Landing, the foreclosure of the developers, is Parker Beach’s revenge. He was devastated when the park never reopened. He had so many memories of the place. He had spent his life there, grown up there. According to rumor, Beach asked his family to *bury* him at Chippewa Lake, sneak back onto their old property and bury him there beneath the Ferris Wheel or the Wild Mouse after he died—and they agreed.
Not true, says his obituary, listing his resting place as the Mound Hill Cemetery in Medina, Ohio. He died in 1992, of heart failure at age eighty-six. He was buried in the cemetery next to his wife.

But it makes a good story.

I wasn’t there when the fire started, the fire in the Royal Oak house, but I heard about it at school, or from my parents. Somebody whose name I do not remember was caught. Somebody got off with a warning. The unfinished houses were closed down to us, the construction sites fenced and locked, forbidden as the abandoned playhouse had been forbidden.

The hedge grew wild and tall without me always breaking through it; I drove to my friend’s house in Royal Oak instead. I was too old to concern myself with ruined things, anyway. There was high school to think about, college. So many new things, shiny and plastic. I graduated, went through a slew of jobs, always a new place. Every few years, a new apartment.

And then.

And then.

And then.

What was an early sign of the 2008 recession for me? Abandonment. Another house indistinguishable from a row of houses, except one day it looked darker. No lights would come on at night. Then the front lawn started its march toward wild. With no one to mow, the sedge shot up, bold and thick, brushing the bottom of windowsills, a sea of burdock and chicory and ironweed studded with wild carrot, nodding and white. Weeds would sprout from the gutters, patches of moss green the roof. Shingles would fall off.
Shutters would fall off. Cracks would appear in the driveway, ever widening. It didn’t take long for ruin to happen, even in the suburbs, even where I lived, even in Royal Oak Estates. It was like it had been waiting.

During the final tour of Chippewa, adventurers scrambled to take pictures, to see the abandoned park one last time, to preserve what they could in memory and in photographs. Many flocked to the site even as it was being destroyed, jockeying for place amid the diggers and skid steers and chain saws and cranes, holding their cameras up above their heads for one last shot.

A funny, sad thing happened.

Destroying the park, bulldozing the trees, tearing up the decades of weeds and foliage and debris, exposed the rides clearly for the first time since the 1970s. In the pictures of the final tour, finally, you can see Chippewa, the ghost of what it was, the skeletons of the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the Wild Mouse. They all look smaller without their cloak of leaves. They look weak, rusted and old.

Once the tree was ripped out of its middle, the Ferris wheel seemed small somehow, child-size, its naked frame as delicate as a spider’s web, and like a web, ruined by a strong enough breeze.

Sometimes when I drive by an abandoned house, I think about what I could do with it. I think about what it would take to bring it back: tearing up the mousy carpets, re-shingling the rotted roof. I think about painting, adding shutters. I think about bringing light to the windows.
The land will reclaim some of these abandoned houses, has already done so, trees pushing up from the foundations, weeds busting in through the windows, animals like mice and rats and raccoons moving in. “Feral houses” I’ve heard them called. And there is beauty in that.

But these houses are each also evidence of failure, of individual heartbreak, of hurt. One month, one year—and they were lost. Someone was moved from here, perhaps forced from here. Someone had to look back. Someone didn’t want to go.

In this sense, I am glad I never saw Chippewa. I of course could never return it to glory; after a few years of abandonment, probably no one could. The price was too high, the rust too thick, the roller coasters too unsteady and outdated. Chippewa Lake could never compete, could never bring them back. And where did the crowds go who lost their jobs in steel and rubber and copper and iron? Where did the children go who rode the Wild Mouse until they spun? Where did the couples go who met at the Starlight Ballroom, who danced all night, then left the hall breathless, to walk barefoot on the beach of the lake and gaze up—not at the stars, but at the Ferris wheel, that wonder, that helm which would turn all night when the summer was new, when everything was beautiful, when the lights could be seen for miles.
Blue

My dad did well at the county fair. Not as well as last year, but still, he collected nine ribbons: four firsts, one second, four thirds. The first-place ribbons are blue, of course; the second, red; and the third, stark white, pale as the pumpkin that came in second to my dad’s prize-winner. My dad also won ribbons for beets, squash, cooking onions, wax beans.

It’s really a matter of timing at the fair—timing, good luck and guesswork. Entry forms and fees are due weeks before the vegetables are harvested. You have to anticipate what will be ready, what will not, what will be heavy or glossy or ripe enough to win. It’s a gamble, leaving vegetables in the field because the insects or animals might get to them first. Cut and on the counter, the food might spoil.

The morning before the fair, vegetables are due in the Arts and Crafts Hall. There are strict rules as to their presentation: beets, for example, must have their stalks trimmed; onions are to be left untrimmed. The vegetables must be placed on a plain white paper plate. The plates are arranged by category on long tables covered with thin, white paper. Vegetables take up one whole side of the hall. On the other side, displayed in tiers on another long table, are jellies, jams and baked goods: cakes, pies and breads.

As with the “Agriculture and Horticulture” category my dad entered, most of the entries in “Baked Goods” were submitted by women. Women brought in cardboard platters of cakes and vegetables and fruits by the box-load, husbands hurrying behind with stacks of white paper plates. Women shined jars on their shirttails (I swear I saw a woman spit-shining onions). Women positioned their pies on the table just so. Women
volunteers staffed the fair, assigning tables, taking entry forms, fielding questions, handing out ribbons. But most of the judges were men.

What’s at stake at the county fair? A few dollars (for most categories, first prize is less than five, and it descends from there)—and those ribbons.

When I was a child visiting my grandparents, I slept in my uncles’ old room, and there was a corkboard on the wall tacked with ribbons my uncles had won as boys in 4-H. There were photographs too: my youngest uncle at eight or nine, pulling on a rope lead attached to a faceless, huge beast. There were pictures of some anonymous animals, long lost, long sold. The ribbons were pink. There were white ones and red. And there were blue.

Blue. There is no blue like a blue ribbon: pure, dark, royal-blue satin, offset by gold lettering. Gold-braided ties hung down from the ribbons in my uncles’ room, small white cards stapled to the back on which to write the memory: Hog, 1982. Rabbit, Market Class ’86.

At night before I fell asleep, always on the lower berth of the bunk bed, my little sister having scrambled up the ladder first, I would touch those ribbons, rub the blue between my thumb and first finger to feel their thinness, their sheen. I touched the ribbons so much that some of them begin to fray, to wear beneath my fingers.

I was born in the country, in Phlox, Indiana, a tiny town named after a flower. Our nearest neighbor grew corn for Orville Redenbacher’s Popcorn. My parents owned land, but did not farm it, letting it go to grass and seed. Soon enough my parents moved the family to Kokomo, Indiana—and on and on to suburbs of Indiana and Ohio, small cities of rent and rust. I was not a country girl. I was never a country girl. I would never
raise an animal for anything other than companionship. I would never bake a pie from scratch. I would never can preserves. I would rarely rise at dawn. I touched the blue ribbons and knew: I would never win one.

My dad only started a garden two years ago, though my parents have lived on a former dairy farm in Ohio, complete with a barn, two-hundred-year-old farmhouse and twenty-five acres, for half my life. Before his garden, the acres were mostly wooded. Before the garden, my dad started up the tractor only for mowing and for hauling garbage and recycling bins up and down the long gravel drive. Before the garden, the barn was used for storage. The yard behind the barn was just a yard.

Both my parents grew up on working farms in Indiana, and one of my earliest memories is riding in a combine harvester, my maternal grandfather at the controls. I lean against the big windshield, my entire body pressed against the glass. I must be three or four. I am only three feet tall, and we are at least ten feet off the ground. The angled windshield makes it feel like flying. It’s fall, and the wheat—if it is wheat—flies beneath my feet, snapping and chuffing. I remember the smell, the sharp scent of ground dust, and the blur of the grain, a color that could only be called autumn, that could only be called amber: *amber waves of grain*. Amber is my middle name. *I’m supposed to love this*, I remember thinking. *It’s in my name.*

My mom was the second oldest of six: three girls, three boys, right in a row. My grandfather said he had wanted a big family so the kids could help out, and help out they did. As a child, my uncle lost a toe to the combine. My aunt’s husband was gored by a bull. Two of my three uncles and their families still farm, and while my aunt is retired,
she and her husband collect tractors and care for a stable-full of strawberry Belgian
draft horses. All the children of my cousins raise pigs, ride horses, enter their county
fairs—and win.

My dad had only one younger brother, and neither of them went into farming. My mom’s family farm was about profit, selling Christmas trees for extra cash in winter, strawberries in summer—but my dad’s was about survival. They ate what they grew or raised or traded for. There were no processed foods, no junk food, no pesticides. Not because of health-consciousness or righteousness, because there was no money for those things.

“I didn’t know we were eating so well when I was a kid,” he told me once. “I thought we were just poor.”

He speaks about his mother’s green beans with a reverence most people assign to miracles. He doesn’t know the name of the beans. They were an old heirloom variety, the seeds saved in wax-paper envelopes, passed down for years. My grandfather would plant the seeds and grow them, and my grandmother can them, store them in the cellar. I ate them, ladled from a china tureen, though probably not too many of them and probably not without protest—the beans, dark and strange and fragrant in a broth of onions and simmered ham.

My grandmother died when I was nine. No one thought to save seeds, to ask about varietals. She died in the winter, and I’m not sure there was a garden that year, if anything grew, if anything was planted.
Decades ago, before my dad started his garden, we grew pumpkins, just to try it: home-grown jack o’ lanterns in time for Halloween. We ended up growing a beast, a pumpkin larger than my five-year old brother, a hundred pounds at least. The hard, curved ribs of the pumpkin expanded so much they turned white, like a belly stretched with child. We would have won the county fair, if we would have entered it. (But how to get the pumpkin there? Wheelbarrow? Forklift?) My grandfather quietly asked for the seeds.

The thing about pumpkins is that they take over everything, the little green-curled vines snaking out, wrapping around any other plants in the garden in an ever-tightening noose, strangling the other plants, killing them. Their urge to survive is so strong, the will to grow and stretch and crowd out and live. And this is why tomatillos grow encased in inedible, crinkly skin; why the young persimmon tastes acerbic and bitter. And this is why the sunflowers, in autumn, turn their heads down, to hide their heavy faces from the birds, to keep their seeds safe: to live.

The glaciers stopped shortly after reaching what is now Ohio. In their wake they left sheets of rocks, studding the soil just under the surface. A shovel, plunged in shallowly, brings them up on every turn. The earth here would be great for vineyards, the grapes doing best in difficult, clotted soil, soil in which they would have to struggle—but the growing season is too short: frost in October, snow still in April.

My father plowed a space behind the barn, roughly the width of the barn. He paid my sister, who was fresh from school and unemployed at the time, a dollar for each rock she hoed out of the earth.
In hindsight, it was an expensive arrangement. She pulled out rocks by the hundreds, dumping muddy barrel-loads into the weeds by the creek.

The earth of my parents’ farm, though rocky, is also incredibly rich. For years, the property was a working dairy farm run by Swiss immigrants. They raised cows, sold milk, made cheese. In the back, two creeks join, almost directly behind the house. There was a millstone here for grinding neighbors’ grain. The soil contains decades of dried manure from those dairy cows—and the creek still holds a cracked gray millstone. It is severed, the stone, and drowning, the two pieces submerged at different bends in the creek, the halves of a water-logged heart.

Along with the farmhouse, there were two white wooden barns on the property before the bigger one began to sag back into the earth, the sides slipping, rotting in the deflated, helpless way barns do, like a man forced to his knees. The paint flinching from the walls—soon even that milk white would fade. So many barns in the Rust Belt are the memory of barns, hobbled and splintered, a bone pile of boards, blending amid the weeds. Eventually, my parents paid some men to take the barn down, tearing out the beams, tossing the usable woods into trucks, pitching the rest as I stood in the woods and grieved.

A few years ago a woman drove up the long, gravel driveway to the farmhouse. She was at least ninety, and while her granddaughter came with her, she drove herself. She had been married in this house, she said. My mom let her in, and she walked to the dining room; she knew the way. There—in the archway between the dining room and living room, the least-used rooms in my parents’ house, though the most lovely, with ten-
foot ceilings, shining wood floors of thick, seven-inch maple planks, and the doors!
The heavy, eight-foot tall arched doors that open out like the entrance of a cathedral, doors with black iron fixtures, doors that are the strangest, most ornate, most expensive features of an otherwise simple farmhouse; when my parents had found the doors, dusty and cobwebbed and watermarked but still usable, in one of the barns, they had wept—the woman had been married there, on the threshold between rooms, the doors thrown open. She left the house, satisfied. She had just wanted to see it again.

My dad planted tomatoes, cherry tomatoes and peppers. He planted tomatillos (my contribution) and eggplant (my sister’s). He planted squash. He planted a somewhat obscure but delicious lettuce called Black-Seeded Simpson, never sold in grocery stores because the pale leaves are too delicate to ship. He did not plant green beans that first year of the garden. He did not plant peas; my mother has always hated the smell of them cooking and refused to make them. (I ate peas for the first time at age twenty, on a study-abroad program in England.) He planted strawberries. He planted raspberries. He planted beets. He planted cabbage. Everything grew.

Even things he didn’t plant grew, curved bumpy squash and striped, bottom-heavy gourds we were not sure were edible. My uncle—the one who had lost a toe to a combine—told me these kinds of vegetables, the ones you don’t plant, the ones that just show up once you’ve tilled, are called volunteers.

Weeds grew of course, noxious and clotting: crabgrass and bluegrass and timothy, thistles and ground ivy. Pretty creeping things like aster and goldenrod. Queen’s Anne lace, which has many names: wild carrot, bee’s nest, bird’s nest, lace flower and—the
worst and most wonderful name for a plant I have always thought ethereal, fleeting and harmless—devil’s plague.

My dad fought with a groundhog that first year of the garden. The animal dug under the fence to gorge on tomatoes and tunnel into cantaloupes. The more “exotic” food the groundhog left alone, the eggplants so untouched and perfect my father won a blue ribbon. (The groundhog also ignored the tomatillos, green bulbs protected in their paper caps, but attempting to pass off a plate of these as “heirloom tomatoes” was less than successful at the fair.)

His second year with the garden, my dad invested in a better fence, sturdy wire dug three feet into the ground, and about four and a half feet above. The underground fence stopped any tunneling, and above ground, orange and white strings were looped between the wooden posts. Deer are afraid of enclosed spaces, afraid of getting trapped, and the strings were supposed to stop them.

But some deer jumped the fence, avoided getting tangled, and ate the entire crop of edamame (also my sister’s idea).

As a child, my dad didn’t go to school at planting and harvesting time. No one did. It was expected; the kids, even the youngest elementary schoolers, were needed to help in the fields. As children, my mom and her sisters used to play in the pig houses of their neighbor’s hog farm, sweeping the little wooden enclosures out after the pigs had gone off in big, rattling trucks to another house, one referred to only as “the processor.”
As a child, I was ashamed to have such knowledge: that pigs slept in houses, that strawberries were dusted with lime, that rabbits could die simply by getting wet. I spent most of my childhood in comfortable, middle-class, Middle America. Ohio, the heart of it all. There were fields of corn and wheat and alfalfa bordering our schools—you could see blazes of gold and green in the distance through the windows of our classrooms—but none of my friends’ families worked them. My classmates’ parents were teachers, chemists, assistants, businesspeople. They worked at bland, anonymous jobs. They wore suits, carried briefcases. They didn’t rise at daybreak. At the end of the day, they didn’t come home with dung on their boots. My own father was a businessman, my mother taught elementary school. For most of my life, I believed this meant they had gotten out, escaped the rural poverty of their parents and parents before them. My parents had accomplished something. They had run, found each other and fled.

It is true my parents were both the first in their families to go college—my mother obtaining a Master’s degree—though some of my mother’s younger siblings graduated, and most of the children of cousins are expected to. It is true neither of my parents ever worked in agriculture. It is also true they came back.

I am not sure how many times we drove past the dairy farm, set back from the road: the white farmhouse in a dip between hills. It wasn’t on our way to school or the mall or dance class, or anywhere my parents took me, but still, we seemed to find a reason to pass it all the time. We were living in a fine neighborhood, our square blue house on a dead-end. We had a small swimming pool and a trampoline. I had friends
within biking distance. We were positioned right next to—but were not part of—the rich neighborhood, where the most popular kids in school lived. It was only a hedgerow away. On Halloween, my sister and I would sneak through a neighbor’s yard, tipping off a hysterical beagle, and slip through the hedge. A few pushes through brambles, and we were in Royal Oak Estates. Many of the houses there gave out full-sized candy bars on Trick or Treat night.

Royal Oak. Even the name sounded wealthy. The streets were wide and smooth, the houses large and indistinguishable; the yards, trim mounds of chemical green. It was so big, so clean, so bland. I dreamed of living there. My parents dreamed of something else.

This was long a source of shame for me: that at my grandfather’s house, there was a party line; if you picked up the black rotary phone, often another person down the road was talking and you had to hang up and wait. That the road was a dirt road. That the water at my other grandparents’ house tasted funny, from the well. That my uncles had a set of full-body Carhartts hanging on the door of the basement above the coal chute. That there was a coal chute. That my grandfather drank warm milk every morning from goats he had milked himself.

That when we visited my grandparents, everyone woke up before my sister and me. Uncles, aunts, grandparents, parents, cousins—everyone was awake, had finished breakfast already, had finished cleaning up the breakfast dishes, by the time my sister and I rolled out of bed. The frame of my uncles’ old bunk bed would rustle, the springs of the mattresses squealing, if either of us stirred, so my sister and I often woke at the same
time. Then it was a scramble as we pushed each other back. It was a race to see who could get out of the room faster. The prize was not being teased. Last one up in the morning would be greeted with hoots and ribbing: “We’d thought you never get up.”

It was often only eight-thirty or nine.

I understood that my own family was different, my parents, brother and sister. We were apart from our extended family. One generation had separated us, and miles and jobs and the expectations of jobs. We didn’t have to rise at dawn. We didn’t have to be outside. Our skin wasn’t tan. Our hands weren’t rough. We didn’t ride in a truck. We didn’t sell trees in December and strawberries in June. We didn’t know country music. We didn’t know the names of birds.

The old white farmhouse house we used to drive by fell into disrepair, the owners too elderly to care for it. It came up for sale. My parents bought it.

Still, it took years to really return to the country. My dad planted a strawberry patch by the old well, and attempted to make a pond in the back, the clay soil sucking up the water and turning into a swamp, thick with snapping turtles and a bug-haze. But that was it for a long time. No animals filled the barns. No seeds were planted in the old, hard earth. My dad mowed everything, the huge expanse of front and back yards, for years, before deciding to let most of it grow up into goldenrod and sedge. (His other idea, a herd of sheep or Longhorn steer to trim the grass, was vetoed by my mom.)

My parents had lived on their farmhouse for more than a decade before they began to work the land. Before my dad turned up his first shovelful of dirt. Before he staked tomatoes. Before he entered the fair. Before he begin canning, filling the kitchen
in summer with steam and dozens of clattering, sterilized glasses; giant pots on the stove boiling with stewed tomatoes, pepper jelly or juice or applesauce. Everyone else left the house, left him to the hot, exhausting, precise work of boiling, measuring, filling, listening for the *pop* that meant the jars had sealed.

The canning, even more so than the farming, was an overdue signal to me that my parents missed their childhood, that it had impressed them, haunted them, so much so that they longed for it. They wanted to recapture it, to give it to *us*.

What had been waiting for them, anyway, in the cities to which my parents and others like them had fled, small cities like Kokomo and Muncie, except brownfields, boarded-up stores, the ghosts of a manufacturing past? Mansfield, where my parents had settled us when I was nine, had once been home to dozens of factories—Westinghouse, Tappan Stove, Ohio Brass, Mansfield Tire & Rubber, GM, Armco Steel—all of which would close by the time I left home at eighteen.

There *was* real wealth here. There was living, there was hope—but it was in the ground.

Maybe my sister understood that when she pulled hundreds of rocks out of the earth for a garden. Maybe my brother did when my dad, a few days after my parents bought the farmhouse, came home with a puppy and handed it over. (“A boy needs a dog,” my dad said.)

It became a source of pride: that I know how to choose corn, gut fish (a skill I used on my honeymoon); that I always, always know when it is going to rain. To this day, I prefer tomatoes the way my parents taught me to eat them: straight from the
ground, bitten into like an apple, unwashed. I like my strawberries that way too, small and warm, a little gritty.

My dad grew beans this year: green and yellow wax beans. They are not the beans of his youth. We tried them, and they are good but not the same. Whatever taste he remembers, whatever capsule of salt and earth and rain and time—it is not there, not yet. Next year, he might try again.

The significance is not lost on me that, though my parents both grew up on farms, my dad is the one gardening, the one canning. My mom offers advice and assistance, but she’s content to stay out of it. Possibly this comes from being female. She doesn’t wish to repeat, for fun, the chores she was forced to do as a girl: the picking, the endless cooking and canning and cleanup in a stifling kitchen, all in a starched dress, petticoat and apron.

My mom once told me she had never owned a pair of pants until college, and when I told this story to my partner’s family, my mother-in-law said, “Didn’t she wear pants, growing up on a farm?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t think it was that kind of farm.”

It wasn’t that kind of life, not for her.

My grandfather and uncles worked in the fields and woods, took the hunting dogs off their chains for romps, shot turkeys and deer and rabbits, rode tractors, drove combines. My mother and her sisters and their mother worked in the garden, bending over plants, picking till their fingers bled; and in the hot, steamy kitchen, skinning and salting and cleaving meat, pouring over boiling pots, scrubbing dishes for eight.
Maybe that’s why my dad doesn’t know the name of the green beans; he was never taught it. Maybe that’s why he has come home from the fair these past few years delighted by his fistful of blue, and has plans already for next year: more beets, Brussel sprouts, maybe a few hives of bees. Maybe that’s why he has plunged himself into gardening, preserving and cooking, concocting exotic recipes of salsa and chutney, making ice cream with berries he’s grown himself.

And maybe that’s what he wants to pass onto me, a girl child spared the drudgery of my mom’s childhood: He wants me to know a farm boy’s joy.

His father would catch a black snake every winter, and throw it in the corncrib. The snake would live at the bottom of the mound of corn, and keep the structure free of mice, eating any that dared squeeze through the slatted walls for food or to escape the cold. My dad was afraid to go near the corncrib. He said the snake would always start out small—but by the end of the season, it would be huge, fleshy and slick.

The hams were kept in a dry shed, hung in the rafters to cure. Club-shaped, the hams were as solid as bricks. Once he dashed through the shed so fast, he ran into a ham and it knocked him unconscious.

Once he leapt from the roof wearing only a cape and landed in the arms of forsythia.

Once he plunged his fist in a tin tub of lard.

Often he was caught stealing baby ears of corn out of the fields and eating them raw: immature, pale yellow sweet corn, only a few inches long and soft as butter, plucked
when the corn silks first appeared from the ears. His parents would scold him for
ruining the crop, “Why do you *do* that?”

“They’re delicious,” he said simply.

And I know they are.
Real Detective

*If I told you I did it, would you believe me? –“Style Wars”*

A partial list of images:

- bound women
- guns
- policemen
- police cars
- train engines
- blindfolded women
- women on their knees
- the word *secrets*
- the word *no*

First: the guns.

Along Route 33 in southern Ohio is the Motocross track with loops of dirt and little kids practicing, their bodies flying, faces disguised by helmets like daredevil astronauts. For a time, signs on the back of the bleachers announced *The Loretta Lynn Invitational*.

Maybe I saw them after the track: the guns, the big black hand guns and the fists coming out of black sleeves. The guns and the hands were stencils, spray-painted on concrete pylons, an abandoned foundation, the bones of a house or building. An empty semi van had been parked in front of the pylons, a message painted on its side in red: *Convenience Store Wanted*, with a number. There was a small, square building beside the van and the pylons, just waiting.
No one would turn it into a store. No one would call that number. The painted arms on the pylons were attached to nothing; the guns pointing... where? At the sky.

The hands, I think now, are supposed to be female: the wrists thin and sculpted, the moon-shaped nails. There are details on the sleeves, some kind of embroidery, some kind of tying-back of the cuffs. The graffiti on the pylons faces the highway. So does the graffiti on the abandoned store, painted so as to be visible to traffic. Here, those arms have been painted stretching down and down, two long black columns that continue into the grass. There’s a backdrop behind the arms, bright wavy lines of brown and blue and green. He took his time.

Because there are women in this image on the abandoned store wall, and the artist—or vandal, or criminal, or kid—took his time painting them.

Both women, spray-painted black and white from stencils, are dark-haired, tall. One has her back to the highway, her hands tied behind her with rope: a secret she’s showing traffic. She’s wearing a short black skirt, flipped up to expose the tops of her stockings, and a bustier. She’s being whipped by another woman wearing black underwear, high black boots and long gloves. The expression on the second woman’s face—I can only describe it as calm, relaxed. The whip’s in her hand as if by accident, some scrap of leather that drifted in the wind and found itself in her fingers.

Then I notice the name, the signature in wavy black letters:

Real Detective

It’s hard to remember which image I see next.
Maybe it’s the woman looking at a vampire bat, her hands tied behind her back?
Maybe it’s the armless woman on her knees? Maybe it’s the cheerleader with the head of a cow skull? Is this when I finally start seeing?

Graffiti has always seemed like trash to me, something to pass by. It was the conversation of strangers. It didn’t concern me. Someone else would clean it up.

My town, Athens, has a truce of sorts with the artists, as it has with various forms of expression. You’re allowed to sit on your roof here—but no more than three people on a rooftop at a time, and dogs are frowned upon, although I see them, tails wagging beside the stretched-out, sunning bodies of their masters. There are street fests, daylong celebrations of drinking and music: Palmerfest and Springfest and Numberfest. Roads are blocked off, cops patrolling until two or three or four in the morning, depending on the size of the crowd, at which point some signal is given, the cops call it over and start rounding everybody up toward home.

It’s a casual town we live in, a small town with a big school: Ohio University. The streets are brick and uphill. The houses have porches. The porches have couches. Everything is covered in a slow-creeping vine. We’re famous for the parties—especially the Halloween block party, when streets are closed and thousands of out-of-towners show up to stroll around downtown in costume. (It’s usually the out-of-towners who make trouble, who drink too much, who bring knives, who get arrested.) We’re also known for organic farming. Local beer. The insane asylum. And once upon a time, brick: Star Brick, clay blocks with a pressed, six-pointed star in the center, made for years just up in the road in Nelsonville. Then the factory closed down. Then it was mostly destroyed. A few kilns and stacked chimneys remain, bricks blackened by fire.
The asylum now goes by the name the Ridges, a campus of buildings up on a narrow hill across the bridge from the university. For more than a century, it was a residential institution for the mentally ill. Opened in January of 1874, one of the first patients was a man named David Fremau, who “thought he was the second coming of Jesus.”

Once, the property was enormous, one hundred sprawling acres, mostly pastoral: trees and hills overlooking the town; a lake where asylum residents were permitted to boat and sun themselves and wade; a working farm and orchards where residents were encouraged to walk and pick and garden, supplying the asylum with fresh fruit and vegetables, and giving patients some exposure to the outdoors. The buildings and grounds were designed by Herman Haerlin, a disciple of Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park and the Columbian Exposition Fairgrounds of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair.

The center structure of the Ridges, the hospital building that once housed over five-hundred patients, is beautiful and terrible: six stories tall, made of bricks “fired on-site from clay dug on-site.” There are white porches, tiered like a cake, two towers rising above the trees. The building is supposed to resemble a house.

Perhaps a house in nightmares. Perhaps a wedding cake on fire.

The windows are high and gabled and barred. Much of the Ridges has been renovated over the years. But the bars have not been pried from the windows.

It was the bars I saw when I was in high school, visiting the university with my parents. I didn’t know what I wanted to do—maybe journalism? We drove to Athens
and got lost. My dad saw a big, brick building on a hill and started toward it. Up and up the hill we drove, the woods crowding in over the road, the road spiraling and narrowing. The temperature dropped as the shadows fell over our car. The building at the top looked huge and dark. There were no cars in the cracked parking lot. Those trees had not been trimmed in years.

And on all the windows: bars.

I saw the bars and knew we were in the wrong place. “This isn’t it, Dad,” I said, annoyed and insistent and sixteen, trying to cover my panic, “This isn’t it.”

Ideas of what constituted treatment for mental illness changed over the years, worsened. At the Athens Asylum for the Insane, patients were submerged in ice-water baths or restrained in soaking cold sheets. They were subjected to electro-shock therapy and lobotomies. They were drugged with heavy, anti-psychotic medications like Thorazine.

And then in the 1980s, they were let go.

Ronald Reagan’s sweeping “reform” of the treatment of mental illness reevaluated the criteria for institutionalization, and, in a cost-saving measure, closed many hospitals across the country. By the time my parents and I stumbled onto the grounds of the Ridges in the mid-1990s, it had been abandoned. Some patients in Athens were transferred to a much smaller facility on the other side of town. But other patients at many closed hospitals, the Ridges included, were simply abandoned out onto the streets.
Ohio’s Banksy* says one of the very few websites I’ve found that mentions the Rust Belt street artist known as Real Detective. Real’s art, at least the pieces that first began appearing on abandoned storefronts and train cars and alleys sometime around 2008, features women spray-painted from stencils. The women are usually tied up, usually stylized with 1950s hair and lingerie, high black Bettie Page heels. There are guns; there are whips.

There is a resemblance between the images of Real and the British artist Banksy, a butcher who turned to street art in the 1980s, mostly as a form of political protest. There’s a likeness in the stark beauty. It’s there in the stenciling, of course, in the soft black shapes.

Stenciling graffiti works much in the same way stenciling posters or decorative borders does: A design is cut out of plastic or paper, taped onto a canvas (a brick wall or a cement block or train car or bridge), and paint is sprayed across. Then the stencil is yanked away to reveal the image, its perfect lines. Some artists, like Banksy, like Real, use multiple stencils to create layers, shading and shadows.

A partial list of Real’s stencils:

- the front view of a barreling train engine
- the torso of an armless, blindfolded woman with an open mouth
- a woman looking straight at the viewer
- a barefoot woman, her ankles bound with rope
- a standing man
- a heart
- a standing woman in heels, her hands bound
-a disembodied, black sleeved hand holding a gun
-a skull
-two skeletons driving a car
-a heavy-faced cop with a mustache
-a cow skeleton
-a screaming man
-the disembodied head of a woman with dark eyes

What are the advantages of stencils? They’re consistent. Stencils make it easier to replicate an image, get the work out and get it noticed. I first started to recognize Real’s work because I spotted the same woman again and again: the armless one with the blindfold. Stencils are precise, allowing for details otherwise impossible with wide-spraying aerosol paint— wrinkles on a dress, tangled hair.

Another advantage of stencils, particular to graffiti artists: Stencils are fast.

What Real is doing—as artful and strange and provoking as I believe it to be—is illegal. Specifically, the crime is referred to as “unauthorized tagging.”

In Huntington, West Virginia, just an hour away from Athens, two men were convicted of unauthorized tagging in 2010. Their sentence was typical, perhaps a little harsh: thirty days in jail; five months suspension; one hundred hours of community service which, of course, involved cleaning up graffiti, theirs and others.

Their crime? Spraying ZOMBI all over town.

In a case that spanned years—ZOMBI on lampposts, ZOMBI on mailboxes, ZOMBI on doors, ZOMBI on the abandoned theater downtown (“always a good place to spot ZOMBI tags,” according to a local graffiti website), ZOMBI in all caps, without a
always with a little flourish, a squiggle or tail or flick of paint through the o—one Ronald Copley and one Steve Gartin were eventually arrested “spray painting a ‘Z’ and an ‘O’ on an electric box and police suspect they were painting ‘ZOMBI.’” However, police say they need more proof.”

Eight months later, the police must have found it: Copley and Gartin were sent to jail.

Before I moved to Athens, a friend of mine lived there, and I visited her in her old, tilting house on a side street paved in broken bricks. She rented a room in a houseful of artists, druggies, friends. There were tapestries nailed to the windows. She kept a statue of the Virgin Mary over the sink in the kitchen, turning the Virgin’s face away when the sink was full of dirty dishes.

When we pulled into the driveway, my friend made sure to wave broadly to the neighbors sitting on the porch of their own tilting Victorian. The neighbors were older, men and women with creased skin, sagging faces, their feet propped up on the porch rail, cigarettes in fingers stained with cigarettes. “We think they came from the asylum,” my friend said to me softly as she waved. “Every few days someone comes out from the county to make sure they’re taking their medications.”

It was 1996 or ‘7. The last patient from the Ridges had been released in ‘93.

In the years when the buildings at the Ridges sat vacant, before most of them were redone and repurposed as classrooms, offices, an art center and a museum, kids broke into the asylum: teenagers, students from the university, my friend. One night, her
boyfriend lifted her up through a high, open window, and she tumbled inside, spilling alone into a dark hall.

Paint peeled from the walls. There was graffiti on the ceiling, mold and water damage. She saw a room with a single, broken child’s desk. A room with a wire-framed bed. She said there was one hall filled entirely with prosthetic limbs.

I don’t know if she saw—I don’t know if it is real—the message I have heard is written there, somewhere inside the old asylum. I don’t know if I will ever see it myself. Those buildings still abandoned at the Ridges—primarily the former TB ward, a sprawling cottage at the very top of the hill where contagious patients were kept—are locked down now and policed.

Some say it was carved into the wall, the message I will never see. A patient wrote it, and it seems like it could be a message from Real Detective, from one of his pieces, the words above a gun or fist or girl: *I was never crazy.*

The scariest thing for me about the pictures from inside of the abandoned asylum has always been the paint flaking from the walls. So much of that paint is poisoned. So much of those flakes hold lead. So much of the air in those shuttered hallways is stale not with ghosts, but with chemicals.

That, finally, is what keeps people out of the abandoned TB Ward at the Ridges, what stops them from breaking in. Or at least, what gives trespassers pause. Or at least, keeps their numbers down. A high, chain link fence with razor wire encloses the building,
and every few feet there are signs. Respect for the dead, respect for the suffering, respect for history—those aren’t the right names, not to deter. The words on the signs are:

*Warning*

*Danger*

*Asbestos*

A partial list of Real’s canvases:

- the pillar of a highway bridge
- the pillar of a parking garage
- the board across a broken, basement window on West Union Street
- the wall beside the Random House Junk Shop
- brick walls
- alley walls
- train cars, some abandoned, some sleeping overnight in the rail yard outside Logan
- an abandoned convenience store
- neglected billboards
- the wall at the top of an outdoor stairwell
- fence posts
- backdoors

Notice: in the rail yard outside of Logan, the abandoned caboose.

And on the caboose: the square portrait of a gagged woman with big eyes and dark hair. A gun’s pointed at her head, only the hand and sleeve in the frame. Her eyes are pleading. She may be crying. Above and below the image, the words:

*Rail Detective*
is

*Real Detective*

A similar image, the gagged girl and the gun, was painted on an active train car—possibly used for transporting coal, based on the blackened interior—spotted in Leetsdale, Pennsylvania and later, in Hagerstown, Maryland.

The train fans who have posted the picture online lament that the artist has painted right over the reporting marks, what they use to identify and track cars.

They don’t much care for the image.

Rail Detective *is* Real Detective, a moniker the artist uses by tracks, under railroad bridges, deserted rusting yards. Here he would be *Rail*.

I say *he*, though I have no idea if the artist is male or female. Male, I assume, because Real (or Rail’s) subjects are often beautiful women in various stages of bondage. A kid, I assume at first. Who else spray-paints buildings right by the highway—such a chance of getting caught?

Driving quickly by the Logan rail yard, a few months after first seeing *Rail Detective* *is* Real Detective, I’ll do my usual glance over at the caboose—and see a man step out of the door. Step out, close the bright red door behind him, maybe lock it, start down the steps. He’s an old man with a white beard and glasses, a flannel shirt and sagging jeans. Too old to be breaking and entering, which makes me think he lives there.

I know cabooses can be lived in, were meant to be, providing shelter for train conductors with tables and chairs bolted to the floor, a desk, a cast iron stove, a flat
wooden bed. Maybe this caboose still has all its features. Maybe this man owns this wasted stretch of track.

In a few more months, I’ll glance over and see the Rail Detective canvas on the caboose, the image of the girl and the gun, all of it, has been painted over. It’s now a big, flat black square, like a censor’s bar, like a gag.

Historically, the rail detectives were a branch of the police force that began in the mid-nineteenth century. I think of hobos being rousted. I think of stowaways thrown from trains. Red lighting, is what they called it. But the crime the railroad bosses were initially concerned about, concerned enough to call for help, was internal: strikes, embezzling, crimes that might hurt their profits.

In the 1850s, Alan Pinkerton met with several Midwestern railroad presidents, and in response to their concerns, began staffing trains with police. The rail detectives’ jobs included finding employees who were stealing, and figuring out and stopping strikes. With funding from the railroad companies—and with the approval of future president Abraham Lincoln, then a lawyer for the Illinois Central Railroad—Pinkerton founded America’s first detective agency, the North-Western Police Agency, in 1855.

Real / Rail Detective may have taken this version of his name from the history of the railroad police. His work certainly has a menacing quality to it: the big black guns coming out of nowhere, the whips, the hands, the rope.

Real Detective also has a history: It was the title of one of the first detective pulp magazines, initially published in 1922, though then it was called simply Detective Tales. The magazine was sold in a few years and the title revised a few times until in 1931 it
became *Real Detective*, a chronicle of (purported) nonfiction. Around the time of its last title change, the covers of the magazine begin to change too, moving away from action shots of figures at a distance—detectives peering around doorways, arresting struggling men, reeling back to land punches, shining the yellow cones of flashlights—to full cover portraits of beautiful, vulnerable, half-naked women.

Always, the women are bare from the shoulders. They’re frequently looking over their shoulders, twisting back in surprise. One issue from July 1934 shows a woman naked to the waist, looking behind her. She has dark, curled hair and perfect makeup. Her hand is raised, as if to brush a curl from her face. Her expression looks idle, calm, reminiscent of the woman with the whip in Real Detective’s convenience store piece.

The title of this issue? “Murder Among the Nudists.”

Other titles in the series include: “Nudism Indoors: How Girls are Recruited Into the Naked Cult!” “Vice Dens of Panama: Exposed by a Hostess Who Worked in Them,” “Girl Show: Amazing Confessions of a Burlesque Actress,” “Exposing the Girl Traps of Broadway,” “The Girl Mart of the Pacific: Starving White Slaves from Yellow Vice Dens” (this features a cover picture of an especially startled-looking blonde woman with the straps of her pink dress falling down—maybe she’s surprised by the inadequacy of her outfit), and my personal favorite: “The Truth About Michigan: the Plundered State,” again with a cover picture of Surprised Blonde Girl.

The covers of *Real Detective* are illustrations, of course, life-like renderings in a rainbow of colored pencils. They remind me of a story one of my college teachers used to tell: a theater professor, long since retired. He told this story more than once in class, how he was a young man then, a teenager. He and his buddies had snuck into the girlie
show at the edge of town by the railroad tracks—these things are always by the railroad tracks—and if the women dancing on stage weren’t enough; if the beers the boys could drink, inexpensively, under age, weren’t enough; at intermission, a man had walked out in front of the curtain hawking the most rarified of treasures. For sale to the audience: one limited edition set of Marilyn Monroe pictures.

*Nude* Marilyn Monroe pictures.

My future professor and his buddies conferred. It was a lot of money, what the man was asking. The boys would not be able to drink more beers, if they bought the pictures. They would not be able to tip the dancers. They would probably have to go home immediately.

The man’s spiel continued—and here the professor paused for effect, here the true lesson of the story began to take shape. I remember the professor’s eyes grew wide and white. I remember his mouth opening to enunciate every word. This was the lesson. Remember this.

The man on stage said the naked pictures were in *color*.

The boys had just enough cash.

I don’t remember when he said they looked at them, pulled them out of their paper bag—it is always a brown paper bag—and looked. Not until they left the show, probably, left the building and snuck down a few streets, around a corner, standing with their backs against a brick warehouse, in an alley or dead-in road. Then and only then did the boys take the pictures out, the boys all trembling, gathered around.

They were *drawings*, drawings of a naked Marilyn Monroe, illustrations done in colored pencils.
Maybe Real Detective is older than I first thought, if he read the magazine from which he took his name, if he saw it as a boy. Maybe he's the old man I saw stepping down from the caboose one afternoon, going out the door as if he owned the place. Maybe he does.

“I bet if you knocked on the door of that train car you would get some answers,” my partner says one day when I’ve been talking for too long about the artist, the work, the mystery.

“Let me stop you right there,” I say. “If I knocked on the door of that train car—would I have a dog with me? Or a gun?”

Instead, I post an ad on craigslist: Seeking information on Real Detective. I say I’m a fan of the artist’s work. I say I’m just looking for insight. I’m happy to talk anonymously, I say. I don’t want to unmask anyone. I just want to know about process, influence. I just want to know if I’m right.

I post classified ads in the newspapers too.

Nobody responds.

I contact the chair of the painting department at the university. He says he’s never heard of Real Detective—“but what a fascinating project!”—and informs me that, at one time, there were more than twenty-five graffiti artists in this small, Ohio town. They had meetings—but the meetings were, of course, secret. The professor suggests I try asking the registrar of the local art museum.
But when I email the museum registrar, his reply is terse: “Unfortunately, I know nothing about Real Detective, in fact it's the first I've heard of him!” He cheerily wishes me good luck with my research and signs off.

A list of potential, mostly unsubstantiated identities for Real:

- the registrar of the art museum
- the chair of the painting department
- a college student
- a graduate student
- the old man who lives in the caboose in the rail yard
- a railroad worker
- the cashier at the comic book store
- some fourteen-year-old
- my fetch, my familiar, my shadow self
- a woman

The most famous patient from the former Athens asylum is a woman.

In December 1978, asylum resident Margaret Schilling was playing hide and seek with one of the orderlies. Or was running. Or was being punished. Or for no reason at all, found herself in one of the high tower rooms: Ward Number 20, an attic, once used as a patient infirmary, long since abandoned. Schilling was locked inside. Or locked herself inside. She called for help. Or she did not call for help. She may have been deaf and/or unable to speak.

Eventually, she took off her clothes, folded them neatly on the windowsill, lay down on the floor and died.
Of heart failure. And/or of exposure to the cold, the December night, the unheated attic, the concrete floor. More than a month later, her body was found by a maintenance worker. When she had first disappeared, staffers had searched the hospital, of course. But, for some reason, they had not searched the old attic ward.

Schilling becomes legend for what she left, what her body left behind: a chalky white stain on the concrete floor where she died. A silhouette, a stencil.

In 2008, a group of chemistry graduate students gained permission to enter Ward Number 20 and conduct experiments on the stain, trying to understand its components. Their study was published in *The Journal of Forensic Science*. Analyzing the white mark, the students found a mixture of mostly cleaning solutions. The products used to clean would have been much harsher in the late ‘70s, they deduced, acids that would have permanently marked the concrete floor.

But the chemistry students also found traces of human tissue in the stain—and this is what puzzled them: The human tissue was discovered *on top of* the cleaning solvents.

It’s not really a mystery, not this story.

People used to leave flowers, candles, stuffed animals by the stain. They used to write Schilling notes. They used to touch the stain, to stencil it with their hands—even, morbidly, to lie down on the stain, to try and feel closer to her. Most likely, this is the source of the human tissue, not Schilling at all, but trespassers hopeful for a ghost, for some kind of connection.

A partial list of phrases from Real’s pieces:
-Worship Satin

-Exclusive Report: Undercover Trap for the Renegade Gypsy Slave Cult

-Real Detective Presents: Dracula’s Bound Brides, now playing in select minds

One of my favorites is simply Secrets.

Spray-painted black on white wall, all in capital letters: Secrets, with a thick, straight black arrow pointing to a closed door (it’s locked; I’ve tried it).

Secrets inside.

Secrets reappears in another image of Real’s, a ponytailed girl whispering to a friend. A large black heart is stenciled in front of the girls: Secrets, a white word.

Another image: a twin image of a woman with a lipsticked, open mouth. In the middle of these mirror images is a compass pointing north, west, east. At the bottom of the compass, where south should be, instead in all caps: LIES.

The asylum in Athens has been known by a slew of names over the years, each name change designed perhaps to be more sensitive, more respectful, more gentle. Or maybe more distant, more professional, more removed. Names include: the Athens Hospital for the Insane, the Athens Asylum for the Insane, the Athens State Hospital, the Southeastern Ohio Mental Health Center, the Athens Mental Health Center, the Athens Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center, the Athens Mental Health and Developmental Center—and more.
The Ridges, the name that has stuck, at least for the last few decades, came about in the 1980s, the result of a naming contest open to the general public. There is no hospital, no asylum, no hint at all as to the facility’s function or history in that winning name.

How important were names to the inhabitants of the Ridges—inhabitants who were called over the years, alternately: lunatics, mad-people, crazy, sick? Many patients throughout the hospital’s history were misdiagnosed, mislabeled, thrown into a place where they did not belong and should never have been forced to stay. Veterans from the Civil War filled the Ridges at first, more would come after the First World War, all likely dealing with what we would now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Mothers would come whom we would say suffered from postpartum depression. Deaf people were sent to the asylum, epileptics, people with Down Syndrome. It was common for cars to drop off elderly relatives then speed away.

Could the right diagnosis have freed these people from a place where the most violent of patients—those criminally mentally ill—were housed on the outside of the building, in a ring surrounding the less disturbed residents?

Could the right name?

Someone has spray-painted crudely, without stencils, urgently, in blue below the heart and the Secrets girls: tell me. Someone has spray-painted next to one of Dracula’s Bound Brides: Why you no tie up de men?

People are talking to Real. I’m not. I want to be.
Someone (Real?) has spray-painted white letters in the black heart next to stencils of a bound girl and a looming, standing man: NO!

Initially, I’m not certain this word is Real’s doing at all, not a part of the original picture; someone else could have come by later and written the word, defaced the heart. But then I notice NO! in another image, spray-painted on a brick wall behind a Real piece. The same color, the same size, the same distinctive lettering of the word, the N thicker at the top then sharpened to a point at the bottom, like a blade.

I never considered Real might be woman, not seriously—until the black heart.

Until the NO! in the black heart.

Someone responds to my ads about Real, someone named Devin:

I don't really know much about Real Detective, but have been aspiring myself to find out more, [sic] I used to be an artist myself, and in interest of you're [sic] project I would be willing to tell you what I know about his art style at least, and maybe open up my connections in the underground [sic] graffiti world and see what we can find out. Theirs [sic] a myth about one artist in particular who keeps all the information she can on other artists, [sic] her name is Ask, which you may have also seen around once, [sic] if you want to try to, we can attempt to contact her and see if its [sic] not just a myth and if she knows anything about Real Detective. Reals [sic] style is very unique and I'm very interested in learning more myself. The major thing about Real that should help doll [sic] down who it might
be is the fact that S/He, uses wheat paste which isn't used frequently around here at all.¹⁰

I email Devin back, then start to research wheat paste. From a street art website called “City Noise,” I learn that the paste is made from a mixture of wheat flour and water. Basically, it’s glue: a thick, chalky substance to adhere paper, ideally, to cement.

If you put the poster up well enough the only way anyone is going to be able to take it down is by buffing it off …

If you're worried about being linked to the crime, wear gloves and carry a plastic bag with you. If you see a security guard or a police officer, put all your wheat pasting supplies in the bag. To make it even less suspicious wear some nice light-colored clothing (so that the wheat paste doesn't show up on it) and carry a Gap shopping bag. Play it off.

Remember, it's best to wheat paste with a purpose.¹¹

Looking again at some of Real’s work, I see at least half of them are actually posters, tacked up with paste: Dracula’s Bound Brides, the cow skull-headed cheerleader, the LIES compass—like flyers for some noir S & M band.

Seen at eye-level on the wall outside the Random House Junk Shop: a piece of newsprint pasted to the brick. A car is coming out of the newsprint, spray-painted black skeletons at the wheel. The license plate reads: Real Detective.

I look closer. It’s not newsprint. The paper is torn from a phonebook. The E’s.
The stain of old attic Ward Number 20, the silhouette of Margaret Schilling, I’ve only seen in pictures, but it doesn’t look like a body to me. It looks like a doll: small head and limbs, rounded hands and feet like Raggedy Ann. It looks too little to be human. Even if Schilling had curled into a ball, into the fetal position, perhaps trying to warm herself; even if she had been petite to begin with, could she really have taken up so little space? Could it really have taken such a miniscule amount of cleaning product to scrub away all trace of her?

But they never would wipe away all trace. Another thing the chemistry grad students discovered in 2008? Even after thirty years, no bleach, no solvent could dissolve that stain.

I’ve noticed this stencil, new to me: a small stencil of a woman on her back, dark hair feathering out like blood, dress yanked up above the knee to reveal a white slip, feet pointed, arm thrown across her stomach. Is she dead? Unconscious?

In one Real Detective piece, this woman lies on the gray ground, a black tree beside her, white moon above. In another image, a police car has pulled to a stop in front of the prone woman, a cop in uniform about to get out of the car… and do what?

Or is he getting back into the car?

Real uses the police car stencil again, and again the cop is getting out behind a woman. The woman stencil in this image is larger: a head and torso with dark curls and closed eyes, a blue heart worked into her hair. This stencil, in turn, reoccurs in a poster
with a different cop: the heavy, mustached one. And in this image, the cop’s big white hand stretches out to touch the girl, to grab her. She doesn’t see; she has her eyes closed.

Cops looking at women, behind women, reaching out for them …

I didn’t used to think Real’s work had much of a purpose: only to titillate, amuse, be darkly lovely and strange. I didn’t see a political agenda, not like Banksy, not like a majority of the graffiti around town, condemning war or supporting or not supporting some cause or other, graffiti like: *your self-loathing is unbecoming* or *FDA approved for a new you!*—this one written beside an image of a squirting syringe.

But the cops and women do something to me.

They make me feel nervous for the artist.

The most famous artist to come out of Athens, born in town, the daughter of professors, is Maya Lin. Lin won the contest to design the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial when she was just twenty-one, still an undergraduate at Yale. In high school in Athens, Lin was quiet and shy—and Chinese-American in a small, predominantly white town, an Ohio town of football, old brick factories, quarries, drinking. As she remembered in a 2000 interview: “there was a part of me that was like, "Oh, how many days do I have before I can get out of this town?" … I knew I didn't quite fit in.”

Years later, Lin was commissioned to come back to Athens to design Ohio University’s Bicentennial Park, a large open space near the football stadium. She left the park grassy and flat on the surface, few trees, and no monuments or sculpture. Instead, she created rectangular recesses, concrete-lined pits underground. From the air, Lin’s park is supposed to resemble a punch card, like schools used to use for standardized tests,
like Lin said she remembered from her old computer science classes. My partner thinks Bicentennial Park looks like a field of hanging chads—or perhaps a place to break your leg.

The park reminds me of graves.

Around the Ridges there are three cemeteries, the resting places of former patients as well as the remains of cadavers used in long-ago experiments by the medical school. The number of graveyards is a source of excitement and controversy, as the cemeteries of the Ridges, when plotted on a map with two other graveyards nearby, apparently make the shape of a pentagram.

Like Lin’s Park, this arrangement can really only be viewed from the air.

*Forgotten Ohio* calls the “Pentagram Cemeteries” idea “ridiculous,” noting:

> there are something like 270 graveyards in Athens County alone, which means you could connect the dots and draw a star or a pentagram anywhere, with its center anywhere. You could also write your name on the map using cemeteries, if you really wanted to, but it wouldn't mean the ghosts of the dead were sending you a message.

In 2000, the TV channel formerly known as FOX Family did a story on the Athens “Pentagram cemeteries” for a program called “World’s Scariest Places;” Athens, apparently was one (interestingly, so was the Ohio town in which I grew up: Mansfield). Frustrated by “this nonsense and [to] restore respect to the nearly 2000 former mental patients buried in the three cemeteries” an Athens branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) was created. NAMI-Athens worked to clean up the cemeteries of
the Ridges, creating nature trails around the graveyards, restoring a pond (perhaps the
twater on which the hospitals residents once boated). Most importantly, NAMI-Athens
uncovered the names of the dead.

At the Ridges, patients died of old age. They died of infections. Hundreds of the
two thousand or so interred in the cemeteries died of TB, the result of an outbreak so
severe that the cloistered TB Ward was built in the woods. Some of the patients at the
Ridges died from complications that were present upon their admittance to the asylum;
historically, many of the residents, after all, suffered not from mental illness, but from
misunderstood physical conditions such as epilepsy.

But few of the dead are named in the Ridges cemeteries. The graves are marked
by plain square stones, many tilting haphazardly. The once-white stones are stained with
lichen and rain and age. The stones are marked, mostly, only with numbers.

According to Forgotten Ohio: “If you died on the state they gave you a small
white stone with your patient number on it and nothing else.”15 NAMI-Athens claims
this was for practical, economical reasons:

The hospital probably ordered stacks of sequentially-numbered stones and,
when someone died, took the top stone in the pile, put it on the fresh grave
and recorded the burial—name and number—in the Athens Mental Health
Center Grave Record. The same procedure was used by other public
institutions such the Children's Home and the County Home.16

Not out of some shame, some barbaric need to hide were the gravestones only numbered,
but for “bureaucratic convenience.”17 Yet the directory matching the numbers of the
gravestones with the names of the deceased was not made public until 2005, when a state
bill was passed demanding the release of the information. Finally, families began to find their ancestors; to visit; to place flowers or wreaths; to place flags on the graves of veterans (there are many); to place beside or on top of or instead of the anonymous numbered gravestones, plaques with given names.

The last patient left the Ridges in 1993. The main building has been turned into office space, and on the ground floor, there’s an art gallery. They put a café in there a few years ago, and held a contest to name it. First prize was a gift certificate. The rules explicitly forbad any names that were not sensitive to the history of the mental hospital.

The winning name? The Ridges Café.

After months of silence, Devin emails again, about that elusive woman, Ask, who is supposed to have collected information—whatever that means—on all the local graffiti artists. His contacts haven’t led to anything; he still doesn’t know who she is. But he wonders if I’ve seen the recent online gallery of her work. I check it out. Pretty standard stuff: tags on the bottom of brick-colored railroad cars, *ASK* puffy and tall in pastel ink, no stencils, no wheat paste, no images at all.

Devin writes:

btw a new Detective piece just popped up in my town, parkersburg, [sic] the first I have seen here, but if my hunch is correct theirs [sic] more floating around this city now. Usually an artist does more than one piece if they travel to a different city or location.
Yet Parkersburg is a scant hour from Athens, an easy day trip. A few months later another piece shows up in Glouster, Ohio, a mere thirty minutes away. Another girl. Another gag. Another glance looking down.

Resigned, I would say. The girl in the Glouster image looks resigned, bored, bearing it—and maybe that’s one of the weirdest and most interesting things about Real’s women: They don’t look scared or particularly submissive or even sexy.

In another Real piece, a woman sits on railroad tracks, a large train engine speeding right behind her, puffing a great hunk of black smoke, the train about to run into her. Her hands have been tied behind her back, her eyes masked with a black cloth. But her legs are free. She’s sitting up. She could run (although in those heels, it might be hard). She looks up—and though I can’t see her eyes behind her blindfold, her mouth purses in a determined expression, determined and a little annoyed.

Huh, she seems to be saying. This again.

The trains I first noticed in Real’s work when the artist plastered the Graffiti Wall, a stretch of cement on Ohio University’s campus that is sanctioned for street art. The idea for the Graffiti Wall begin in the 1960s when anti-war sentiments were spray-painted all over campus. A wall was eventually commandeered for political declarations and art. Then, when a classroom building was renovated in 2002, the design included a new wall just for spray-painting. “We have a philosophy that if we don’t replace the wall, graffiti will happen elsewhere,” John Kotowski, assistant vice president for facilities, said in a 2001 edition of the alumni magazine, Ohio Today. “Now it’s contained and manageable.”20
Tamed, “manageable,” the Graffiti Wall is used mostly for advertisements these
days, fundraising, notices of upcoming sorority and fraternity events. Marriage proposals
have been painted on the Wall. Also from Ohio Today:

It takes about two gallons of paint to cover the last group’s work and
another two to add a new message, estimates Dennis Rapp, owner of a
local paint store. All-night campouts to claim the wall and keep it from
being painted over by another group become minisocials that connect
paint patrols. Unwritten rules of courtesy mean a message usually gets two
to three good days of play.²¹

Real on the Wall paints huge steam engines. The trains repeat up and down, a
double row of a dozen in bright colors: orange and green and purple and blue, like Andy
Warhol’s cans. In the middle of the Wall, the artist’s name is slapped over the top, black
lettering on white: ECTIVE is all that is visible.

Pictures of the brightly colored, Pop Art trains on the Wall were posted online on
a street art group, the pictures dated the present week. I was in town at the time. I
grabbed my car keys and headed to the Wall. But the engines were already gone,
replaced by a sorority’s message about an upcoming party: Anchor Splash.

At the end of the summer, Real turns up on the Wall again, just days after I’ve
gone by looking for the artist’s work. It’s maddening. There was nothing on the Wall,
just some signatures, some tags, a swath of white, the dregs of summer. Then, the next
morning: a row of stenciled, pasted cops, speaking sinisterly into walkie talkies, their
mouths covered. Text on the top of piece reads: POLICE EVERYWHERE, JUSTICE NOWHERE.

Or, it did read.

The next day, the day I went to look at it again, the Wall did not say this. Someone had already painted the Wall, changing Real Detective’s piece, blacking out some of the words so the message instead read POLICE + JUSTICE, the outline of the original message just visible under the paint. Worse of all, someone had spray-painted smiley faces—smiley faces?—all over the cops. Twenty-three amateur-looking, shaky and freehand smiley faces. With black dots for button noses.

So much for “two to three good days of play.”

I start to wonder about the timing. The Pop Art trains appeared on the Wall in late spring, the end of the school year—and the piece with the cops shows up in August, the week the fall semester is to begin. All summer, Real was out of town—or at least, not painting. At home? On vacation?

Then a piece turns up in a location that is decidedly far from our Ohio.

I find the image on a picture-sharing website. I’m looking, as I do every few days now, for Real. I’m scrolling through page after page of images of the old detective magazine, screen shots of some damn video game called Real Detective, whatever comes up when I type in the name.

Then I see her. This girl I recognize. This stencil I know: bound girl, armless girl, head up, chin thrusting, ‘50s-style rolled dark hair, black blindfold and big, swollen lips.
It’s one of Real’s girls.

In this image, white stickers have been painted on her chest, where her nipples might be under her black dress. *Staff Picks* the stickers read. There’s a white blur over her pelvis that might be a sticker too. There are words on the white blur—the shape and location of a uterus, I realize. I cannot read the words, the photograph is too shaky.

*New… new something? Or Never? Never Tell?*

The photographer has also captured the artist’s signature, *Real Detective* on a filthy silver mailbox beside the image—or maybe it’s an ashtray, sticky with tar. The image has an address: 36th NE and Biscayne Boulevard, rear of the Regions Building. I look it up on online and stare at the map, at the street view, clicking along. The Regions building is just an office building, something anonymous, maybe a bank. As far as I can tell, the graffiti was found on the side of the building facing the parking lot. There’s a parking garage, some sick-looking trees, trash in white piles, a railroad crossing. In Miami.

*Miami?*

36th NE and Biscayne Boulevard, the Regions building, is in Miami, Florida.

*Spring Break. Real Detective is a college kid.*

There are only a handful of us who know the name, who look for the artist’s trademarks: bondage, guns, girl, train. Real signs most pieces, but you have to search. There’s Real’s name on the license plate of the skeletons’ car; on a windowsill where the window is boarded up, the outline of a half-naked woman splashed across where the glass should be (her back to the viewer, she’s pinning up her hair). There’s a pillar in an
underground parking garage pasted with a picture of Velma, from Scooby Doo. Cartoon Detective the piece reads. I might not assume it’s Real’s work, except I recognize the font: jagged, slightly tapered letters. They look like knives, those words.

Only a few places online mention Real, a few images posted to picture-sharing sites. There’s no scholarly mention, nothing in print. No one seems to know the artist’s real name.

I found some photos of Real pieces on a college girl’s website, an art major who “keeps coming back to her one true love, DESIGN.” There are just a handful of comments after her post featuring Real, including: “trust me bro not banksy [sic] just the rail detective [sic] he gots [sic] shit in nelsinville [sic] logan and athens” and:

I have recent become intrigued by this artist and his/her work. can [sic] you share location information for the Lady & Bat? When did you take the bottom photo? I just found the location about a month or so ago, and it has been changed since you were there last. Check out my collection.

The last comment is followed by an address.

I check out the collection. Nothing I haven’t seen before. I know the locations of Real’s work by heart now: There’s the caboose. There’s the abandoned boxcar. Nothing new to me—except a very dark image of what appears to be a woman hanging by her hands. It’s almost too dark to tell, black paint blending into black walls and shadows—black hair, head down, black skirt and top, black heels, white arms going up, up, up. A note on the picture reads, This was taken inside the boxcar.

I don’t think this is sexy. I don’t think this is titillating.
Sometimes I think this is damage.

The police, the bondage, the mute or blind or faceless women make me think Real is working through something with these images, some kind of assault that happened to her (her?): violence against the body; betrayal of the cops, the ones who were supposed to make things right.

*LIES.*

*NO!*

*JUSTICE NOWHERE.*

Then sometimes I think Real is just some bored and talented twenty-year old guy who smokes pot and hates cops and maybe read too many of his grandfather’s *Real Detective* magazines. Maybe he found the name on the internet.

Maybe the name means nothing.

“It’s not you, is it? You’re not Real Detective?” my partner asks one night.

This one creeps my partner out: a wheat-pasted image of a girl sitting on the back of a chair. She’s in profile, looking away from the viewer. No eyes again; hair covers her eyes. Her hands behind her back: tied. Her ankles against the chair legs: tied. Her dress—pink, for once—hiked up. There are many details in this one, usual for Real’s work, details of the bare room she’s being held in, details of the plank ceiling and floor. The chair casts a shadow. You can see knots in the wood. On the floor at the girl’s feet is a pile of kinked rope and a document, folded open: *Orientation and Map.*

The title of the image, painted across the top, is:

*Real Detective*
Devin doesn’t write back again. We never find Ask. My comic store idea goes nowhere. I get no more responses to my ads. I’m beginning to realize I won’t get an answer. The artist doesn’t want to be found.

I’m not even sure why I’m so desperate to find Real Detective. Do I want to know more about Real’s influences and background? Do I want to tell the artist how I’ve been moved? Is it just a good story for which I want an ending?

For more than a year after I first saw Real’s work, that first gun on the pylon by the highway, I didn’t research. I was fascinated—but I didn’t even Google the name. I didn’t want to know. I didn’t want to be disappointed. Maybe it was just an ad. Maybe it was sanctioned. Maybe everyone knew about it. I wanted the story of the women and the whip and the guns to be a mystery. I wanted it to be dark, as dark as Real’s work, and as rich.

Maybe it’s simpler than that, why I’m searching for Real Detective, why I can’t let go of the case. Maybe I just want to know Real’s name.

I’ve been to the Ridges graveyards. I’ve walked along the trails, alone and with others. There are trees, valleys, scenic things. It is quiet and sad. The pond is still, stagnant, nothing moving in the water, nothing but a settled gray scum. The trails are almost always empty. No joggers, no kids, no dogs. I wonder if many people know about the trails, or of they just don’t like to come here. There are fence posts and trail
head markers. There is never any graffiti. There are those near-anonymous, numbered graves.

I wonder if Lin had been to the cemeteries, as a teenager or a lonely child. Lin is known, of course, for the Vietnam Wall. Growing up in a town full of numbers, did she realize the importance of names?

Maybe you can’t get wheat pasted pictures removed easily, not without buffing—but people are buffing, scrubbing, tearing. I look for Real images I know, and they’re gone or ruined or changed only a few months or weeks or days after they first appeared, the posters shredded like someone dragged fingernails across the canvases, slashing them, like maybe one of Real’s women—tall, long-nailed, fierce—attacked. The spray-paint is painted over. The words are edited, none more so than the police image on the Wall, its meaning utterly changed.

Real’s art is being destroyed, defaced. Does the artist actually want this? Is this eroding part of the medium, part of the temporal joy? It will last this long and no longer.

There is a kind of art in decay, a kind of beauty we know well in the Rust Belt. These are images from my childhood: the old washing machine rusting in the grass, the junker cars sprouting wildflowers, the barn collapsing slowly from the inside out like the bloated dead. I know these colors: green ground, blue sky, red rust. Always, always, vivid red rust, the color of earth, the color of love, the color of old dry blood.

I’ve been going about this all wrong. Classified ads, postings, emails—Real won’t read those.
She reads walls.

So I wait. I wait and I wait and I wait for darkness. And when I am done waiting, I will sneak out in night, in black and in gloves. I will bring along a clicking can, a plastic stencil, a bucket of paste and a bag. I will find a wall or a pillar, an alley, a door, something abandoned, something longing, something blank that wants. I will shake the can, inhale the poison, spread my letters in a thick black heart—and the word in my heart will be: please.
PART II. LIES
The Reptile King

The circus had lost their snake man.

Leonard Zhabir Muhammad, also known as King Wagadugu, also known as Charlie, died in the spring. Not from a bite from the alligator, not from a fall from a camel, not from a squeeze from the snake. Charlie died in a car accident. He was fifty-five. He was tall, thin, his bald head shining black and resplendent as he carried an alligator into the ring, making his entrance as the Reptile King. His costume was skimpy: just a red-fringed, Zebra print cape that covered his shoulders and the top of his pecs, a matching wrap skirt, beaded headband and anklet. His stomach was exposed, his long lean legs. He wore water shoes with his King Wagadugu costume.

Out of the ring, Charlie wore glasses. He led rides on the camels, Sally or Heidi. He strapped in the riders, their legs dangling over the sides of the red, padded harness perched on top of the camel like a hot air balloon basket, and guided the animal in circles. When rides were slow, he smoked.

It was here I first saw him, beside the circus tent at the Richland County, Ohio, Fair, waiting with the camel for customers who weren’t coming. I stood across the midway by the tilt-a-whirl.

Really, it was no midway, just a stretch of asphalt between the Arts and Crafts building and the Youth Hall where a double row of food trucks, French fries mostly, parked. My parents and I had come to the fair for dinner—a treat for my mom, to not have to cook—and they were off looking for pork fritters.

I had not been back to the county fair since high school. Until I came onto the grounds, saw the grounds were the same, even the rides and exhibits were the same, I had
forgotten how my friends and I used to come here every summer. We would walk around, gossiping in various groupings, until the elephant ears turned to dust in our hands. Sugar dissolved on our tongues, a gritty memory. We came in the evening to watch the sky turn all the colors of cotton candy. Then the lights clicked on, illuminating the fair in a greasy yellow glow, and it was time to ride the Ferris wheel.

We watched the ground recede, the rickety iron car taking us higher, further from earth and, we might imagine, Ohio; our parents; kids from our high school whom we were and weren’t speaking to. When each car reached the top, the operator would pause a while, the cars rocking in place like those carnival bulbs, strung on a wire, rustling in wind. Below, the operator leaned on the controls, watching, giving the passengers in the top car time to take in the view. While my friends leaned over the lock bar, I always held my breath until the wheel started moving again, our car beginning its jerky descent back to food trucks and spray-painted T-shirt stands and goldfish and games of chance.

I was afraid of heights, though I was not about to tell my friends this, afraid of falling, afraid and also certain that this view would not be the vista of my life, not my life: the fields of parked pickups and busted sedans; across the highway, the weed fields of goldenrod and grass; in the distance: the used car lots, the crumbling stadium of Mansfield Senior High, the county dog shelter, the abandoned stores.

I didn’t live here anymore, not in this town of boarded-up buildings. At the fair, most of the booths in the vendors’ tents were churches, handing out yardsticks (Measure your life by Jesus) and political propaganda. The few actual businesses that had sprung for booths were selling water heaters, plastic siding, knives. The county children’s
services gave out balloons to people I saw smoking in front of their children. Being back in this town, back at this fair, I felt a mixture of shame, entitlement and anger. I had lived in the city. I was better than this.

Charlie and I exchanged glances. He sat on the platform the riders climbed to mount the camel, swinging his legs. He seemed not impatient, not bored, just wondering, looking around at this fair. Another fair.

I took his picture.

The Zerbini Family Circus is a small outfit, and as the name implies, it is family. Patriarch Alain, a former aerialist; grown children including Julian the teenage acrobat / dog trainer / tightrope walker; and Melody the ringmistress, who is married to the clown. There’s a miniature horse that performs with the camel. There’s a chimpanzee named Chance. A few years ago, the Zerbini Family Circus started billing itself as the only circus with a performing buffalo, Tantanka, who walks up and down a tilting ramp, turns and hops on a trampoline.

There are no elephants, no tigers, no cannon, no trapeze. This is no Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, no Cole Bros., no Carson & Barnes. This circus consists of a few dozen people—primarily, related to each other.

The Zerbinis play fairs mostly, showcases, fundraisers for schools or youth groups. Admission is sometimes free at these events, and the circus makes its money through concessions (popcorn, two dollars; cotton candy, three) and souvenirs (coloring books, five dollars; plastic whistles, one). Like all circuses, the Zerbinis have a long and storied history involving immigration, accidents, an attack from an eight-hundred-pound...
tiger, a fall from the flying trapeze. It is rarely a life you join. It is mostly a life you are
born into, like the Amish or organized crime.

Not so with Charlie.

Born in Paterson, New Jersey, Charlie worked as a cook. He met Alain Zerbini in
New Jersey, and joined the circus after a friend who was offered a job said he would sign
on if Charlie came too. Charlie agreed, then the friend backed out. But Charlie had
already quit his job. He went ahead on his own, leaving New Jersey with the caravan.

At one point in my life, this would have been the dream of my life: to sneak out in
the night, born away by a wagon. Surrounded by characters, jostling with performers of
magic and muscle and heights and wire, I would lean back on a red velvet seat. The
ringmistress would take my chin in her hands, begin to paint my eyelids with glitter and
gold, while through the back window the lights of a small town—made smaller by
bankruptcies, dimmer by flight—would slip further and further behind.

But for Charlie, the circus was not anything he had dreamed about. It was not
anything he had prepared for, or wanted, or even thought about before—and it didn’t take
him that far. It didn’t even show him the world. The Zerbinis played the Midwest and
South, never venturing westward, performing on a rust circuit of backwoods and
boondocks from April to October.

Still Charlie learned quickly how to raise a tent and tear it down; how to set up
bleachers and riggings, ladders and guy wires and a ring. He learned how to live on the
road. Soon Alain taught him to perform: how to smile for a crowd, how to charm a
camel.
Charlie found he was good at it all. He was good with the animals, taking care of the two camels, five ponies, a miniature horse, two snakes, twelve dogs, and an alligator. Sally the camel gave him kisses when he came near. The dogs fell in line. He was good in the ring, wrestling the alligator, wrapping a snake around his shoulders, putting the five-foot-long python’s head in his mouth.

“I’m in the ring approximately eight minutes,” he said in a 2011 video interview conducted by Lane Talburt, an elderly circus fan and amateur circus historian. “If it’s a good day, I won’t have a problem with the alligator.”¹

Billed as King Wagadugu, African royalty, the Reptile King, Charlie from New Jersey strode into the ring in his Zebra-print, grinning despite the obvious heft of the alligator in his arms, the blinding silver of camera flashes, the screams of the children, the skimpy costume which caused goose bumps to rise over his skin. He danced with the alligator, held up a few snakes as the kids in the crowd yelled. At the end of his act, he got his hands around the alligator’s jaws, sealing them closed, then lifted the alligator up by the jaws like some kind of oversized jar. He grinned.

“I stayed because… I liked what I was doing that they showed me,” he said in the video, “and I was promised that I’d made be a star. And they didn’t lie to me.”²

I never saw Charlie perform.

I never saw his King Wagadugu act live, only on video. A smaller version of the circus always came to Richland County, one without the alligator, one without the buffalo. Charlie stayed out of the ring in Ohio, working with the ropes and the wires and the mats, working with the animals behind the tents. He stayed out of costume.
I talked with him a few times, though I am certain he would not have remembered me, and I never asked him the questions I would have liked to. I was not brave enough, I had no right to ask: Whose idea was it to present him as African, African royalty? Did it bother him, being the only black man?

It was not only the color of his skin that set him apart. Surrounded by performers in feathers and sequins and glitter and gold who trudged to their places, ran through their acts with a glazed, mechanical dullness, a weariness rooted in constant travel but more and more of the same—I once saw a performer yawn so widely her lip nearly reached her swoopy false eyelashes—Charlie grinned. He lit up, especially when the crowds came around. Charlie seemed to be having a great time, still. He seemed happy to be there; he seemed destined to be there.

Performer, roustabout, animal trainer, king.

“He do everything for me,” Alain said.\(^3\)

When Charlie died, Alain bid farewell to him on the circus’s public facebook page, calling him “my son.” Charlie had been with the circus for eleven years at that point—most of Julian Zerbini’s young life. Julian has matinee idol good looks, an impressive head of long, dark curly hair, and an equally impressive female fan base. They swoon over Julian on facebook. _Legal yet?_ But Julian had a girlfriend, a fellow performer named Darinka; Charlie might have teased him about that.

In a picture from Julian’s birthday, Charlie holds up a large, half-empty jug of amber liquid while the birthday boy and friend hoist a case of soda (Julian was just seventeen, after all). After the last show of the night, after the crowds had gone home, if
it was not a travelling day, the boys would go back to the ring and “play circus,” trying out new tricks on the trampoline or wires. Charlie would grab the mic and start singing, dancing around the ring, performing for no one. He had a great voice and an easy smile, despite a missing tooth. At night, without the glare of the spotlights and the press of the crowds, the tent looked smaller somehow, warm, almost homey.

The circus had professional pictures taken a few years ago, gorgeous, sun-drenched promo shots: Alain leading the buffalo through the long grass, Darinka in a sparkly pink bodysuit posing by the camels, an aerialist doing a backbend in a field. In Charlie’s picture, he wears a black suit, crisp white shirt and striped tie, the tailored clothes a sharp contrast to his usual dress. The python twists around his shoulders, its diamond-shaped head fitting neatly in his hand. He holds the snake out like an apple.

It’s a stunning picture. Charlie’s nephew tattooed this image on his shoulder after his uncle’s death; the Zerbinis used it to make a plaque.

The Zerbinis have been coming to northern Ohio for over sixteen years, performing two or three free shows a day at the Richland County Fair in between the tractor pulls and the country acts, the steers and rabbits and goats in the show arena, the freestyle rides of the horses from the Clearfork Colts and Fillies Club, the wandering magician and the Big Cats. Here the Junior King is crowned and the Junior Queen is crowned. Here there is a talent show I once won singing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” First place was a five-dollar check I never cashed. Here the Ferris wheel lifts
kids over the town to look down upon the town, the ride’s heart-shaped shadow looming over the *old* Ferris wheel, which, years ago, was left here to rust.

When Charlie died, it was less than a month before the circus’s first performance of the season. The Zerbinis had lost their animal trainer, their snake and alligator handler, their camel leader, their king. The show that premiered in Richland County, five months after Charlie’s death, was smaller, shorter, more sedate than in years past. Teenager Jennifer performed a balancing act, tipping her head back, resting a sword on the crown on her forehead, then climbing a ladder. In previous years, an older man (her father?) has done this act with more at stake, steadying a stacked tier of champagne goblets, balancing the sword by its tip on his palm. At the end of her new act, Jennifer turned back flips in the ring, resolutely throwing her arms out, waiting for applause that never really came. Juggler Ossy caught pins, rings, then rainbow-colored straw hats, the ringmistress getting on the mic and encouraging the audience to clap, “Come on now. Give him a hand.”

Gustavo the clown works the Wheel of Destiny now, a giant spinning hamster wheel that rotates the performer up in the air. Billed as “the circus’s daredevil,” Gustavo ran around the inside of the wheel while it was in motion, then climbed to the outer rim, stooping when the wheel reached the top of the tent, his back brushing the canvas with an audible *hush*. He stumbled on his first attempt. Julian gave the wheel a push to start it spinning, then waited below, looking worried, a black Zerbini T-shirt over his sequined outfit from the previous act.

Now that Charlie is gone, Julian seems to bear the brunt of the show, appearing in the trampoline act, showing dogs in the Zerbini Dog Pound Revue, leading the miniature
horse around and assisting with the finale. At a recent matinee, he went through four costume changes in less than an hour. He was not out of breath at the end—but neither was he smiling. No one was. Julian turned eighteen this year. He and Darinka are engaged.

This year, the year that Charlie is not there, the first year after his accident, the first after his death, the story at the Richland County Fair is swine flu: cases confirmed in Butler, Ohio, just a few miles south. The swine barn is noticeably quiet. No 4-H kids overnighting in there, sleeping bags and army cots amid the straw piles and rope stalls. No families lined up to see.

Otherwise, it’s more of the same. The circus is camped in the field by the entrance, by the DJ gazebo and lawn mowers for sale. From his perch on the camel stand, Charlie would have seen food vendors: elephant ears, French fries, Taco-In-A-Bag. He would have seen the Fun Slide. He would have seen the little carousel with only white horses, most of them rider-less and scuffed; the small tilt-a-whirl with cars in the shape of spinning rabbits; a ring toss game (Goldfish: Still Only $1); Das Fun Haus, the Oktoberfest-themed fun house; the Ferris wheel; the old Ferris wheel. He would have seen the rabbit barn. He would have seen me.

This year, the trailers of the circus are parked in a semi-circle behind the striped big top, protecting it like a half-ring of buffalos. It’s been rainy, cold for August, and the performers wear jeans and clogs, stay inside or gather on the steps of their trailers. In the doorway of an RV, Julian bounces a toddler, a girl with black pigtails and a rainbow
skirt. One of the show dogs had puppies this year, and a pile of small, spotted tumblers are sequestered in a large wire pen. The sign *Beware of Dogs* isn’t fooling anyone.

It’s been another year of storms, rain at the Richland County Fair, rain and wind back in Clearfield, hail in Stanhope. At the end of July, wind bent some tent poles nearly in half.

The Zerbinis usually clean their tent once or twice a year, the whole crew helping out then celebrating with a big BBQ. The huge tent deflated, spread flat on the ground, everyone grabs a mop and some Dawn, stands on a stripe and leans into it. You can slide down the sidewalls once they’re soaped up, thick yellow and blue stripes, slick as glass or a water park ride. Once someone slid clear into concessions.

The tent was just cleaned, after yet another storm, but already the sidewalls are blotched with mud. Mud is the main story of the circus, mud and dirty laundry. And moving on. And never being able to stay somewhere, to be content with that life. To just stay.

Maybe that is why I was drawn to Charlie. Maybe I sensed in him or thought I sensed a fellow outcast, one whose heart was also governed by restlessness. He stood out in the fair, in the crowd of homogenous Richland County, Ohio—but he also stood out in the circus. He would stand out everywhere, as sometimes I believed I would—not because of my face or skin or dress so much as my heart, how it would betray me; how I would betray this town which had sheltered me, which even, at times, impressed me with its broken beauty: a thunderstorm rolling in black and feathered above the citadel-like factories, the last dregs of sunset blazing a barn. The people maddened me with their
politics, their closed-mindedness, their lack of education—the irate and misspelled letters to the editor, the homophobic billboards, the Living Bible Wax Museum—and yet ...

Every winter, the newspaper sponsored a program called “Brighten A Christmas,” running stories of families in need, collecting presents for them. There were two community theatres, a performing arts school, a symphony and three struggling professional dance companies. Downtown Mansfield, there was a hand-carved, wooden carousel, the first to be built in the United States since the 1930s. On sunny days, the glass doors of the carousel building were thrown open, and you could hear calliope music ring through the streets from the wig store to the abandoned Reeds department store, the bank, the diner, the check cashing businesses, all the places to drink.

I hated this town.

And I would always long for it.

The circus has always struggled to gas up their caravan (it costs over a thousand to fill up all the RVs, trailers and animal trucks)—but then fuel prices worsen. The Zerbinis are harangued by animal rights protesters, alleging abuse of the chimpanzee and buffalo—neither of which perform in Richland County. The protestors follow the circus, picketing them. At the Richland County Fair, the Zerbinis post signs around the ring forbidding video recording, the ringmistress getting on the mic between acts to stress, repeatedly, that circus performances are copyrighted, creative acts that cannot be reproduced without the Zerbinis’ written permission.

After the fair, the circus will unexpectedly cancel dates in Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland and Kentucky, effectively ending their tour weeks early due to failure
to secure or afford the proper permits. The show will also fail to announce their
cancellations in advance, and so the crowds will show up, led by children galloping into
empty fields where they believe a tent will soon rise, sparkling and white-topped, like a
skyscraper might in another city. The crowds will wait, scanning the road for a caravan,
searching the mud-colored sky for a flag. Some color, some music, some laughter must
surely be coming up that highway.

But it never does.

In October 2012, one third of the circus will be laid off.

But first: August at the Richland County Fair. The air smells, as it always does,
of powdered sugar, fried dough, French fries and hay. There are pony rides this year,
along with camel rides the whole circus has pitched in to lead: whoever’s around,
whoever can manage. A new guy handles the snake now, a skinny boy with earrings and
a goatee. He lets kids pose with the python after the show, the snake’s mouth wound shut
with Scotch tape. The boy doesn’t wear a costume, just a Zerbini shirt and shorts. He’s
not king of anything.
Figure 2. Charlie the Reptile King, photograph by Alison Stine, 2010.
Lovers’ Madness

One-hundred-and-one.

Eighteen.

The first number: the age at which David Tilley will be released from jail if he serves out his full prison term in the Hocking Correctional Facility in Nelsonville, Ohio. The second: the years of his sentence—fairly light, considering the crime.

Murder.

His picture was on the front page: unwashed hair, full beard, pale and spotted skin. His eyes: colorless with canyons beneath them. His hair and beard: wild, beyond white, like a fake Santa wig with a yellowish rind. His mouth hung slightly open. The headline: *Guysville Man Arrested in Wife’s Fatal Shooting.*

That first article in *The Athens NEWS* was brief: A man, eighty-three at the time, had called the sheriff’s office to tell them his wife had been shot. He would be waiting for them on the porch, he said. In his wheelchair, his hands in the air.

The police took him peacefully to the station, though one of the couple’s dogs bit a deputy on the leg, and both of the dogs had to be restrained.

The woman was named Hope. She was forty-six-years-old. She had been married to David for over twenty years. He had shot her while she was sleeping. She had asked him to.

I first heard of lovers’ madness my first full year in New York, when the artists at St. Mark’s died.
It was 2006 when I came to St. Mark’s Church-in-the Bowery on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. My partner was on the board of the Poetry Project there, and we went for a benefit. Later, we returned at the start of 2007 for the marathon New Year’s Day reading where poets took to the stage in shifts, buoyed by potluck and the buzz of last night. It was raining then. It seemed always to be raining, every time we came to St. Mark’s: off the train, around the corner from the subway, through the little red iron gate winging off its hinges, the weedy brick walkway, the smell of mud and rust.

I was unused to New York, how the city would ruin my shoes, holes worn into the soles like cigarette burns. Everything on my body would hurt by the end of the day, would pinch, run, burn, tear. Dirt and grime would cake under my collars, rind my nails. I would cough for a month straight.

*The New York cough*, my partner’s friend called it. *That means she’s settling in.*

The sanctuary at St. Mark’s was suffocating that on New Year’s Day, all yellow light and people waiting. I hated the city; I hated the reading. My partner was reading; I had not been asked. We went outside to escape the heat and strangers, standing in the drizzle by an open door. There was a courtyard between the church and the rectory, a space of bricks and moss and overgrown ivy, leafless trees listing sideways. It was quiet, this square of solitude and age in the midst of so much bustle. I remember the paving stones beneath our shoes were cracked. I remember there was a window.

The window was lit in the little white square building to the side of the churchyard, one of the windows on the top floor. A couple lived there in the church rectory, Theresa Duncan and Jeremy Blake, though I did not know them. My partner knew of Jeremy, a friend of friends. His star was on the rise was what they said of him, a
new media artist who had designed the logo for the production company Focus Features: a blue screen crowded with shifting yellow circles. He had created several animated sequences for Paul Thomas Anderson’s 2002 film *Punch Drunk Love*, dream scenes that looked to me like stars seen without my glasses, smears of paint, colored sand. He had given my partner a CD once; it was lost; we had never listened to it.

Theresa Duncan was known for designing media for a young female audience. Her 1995 CD-ROM *Chop Suey*—awarded “CD-ROM of the Year” by *Entertainment Weekly*—was considered a revelation: a game intended for girls.

The new media artist and the game designer once organized a huge benefit to restore the crumbing façade of St. Mark’s church—but then never showed up for the party. Friends found them whispering upstairs in the dark of the rectory. Theresa and Jeremy had had a shared vision the grill was going to explode during the party and hurt Jeremy, they said. They couldn’t come down. Not right now.

The trouble between the two continued, mutated, deepened—lying, restraining orders, plagiarism, paranoia, then: In July of 2007 in the rectory apartment of St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery, Theresa consumed a mixture of Tylenol PM, Benadryl and alcohol. Baskets of loose pills were found around the apartment, on display like chocolates to be offered to guests. An empty bottle of champagne was on the floor. She had written a note, *I love all of you*. Then she had laid down on the bed.

One week later, Jeremy walked into the Atlantic Ocean. His note, left on top of his folded clothes on the beach, was as simple as his girlfriend’s, and as brief, only what could fit on a business card: *I have gone to join the lovely Theresa.*
Folie à deux means madness of two.

Means lovers’ madness.

Means mental illness can be contagious, a psychosis shared: thoughts festering, spread through a breath, a word, a whisper. In such closeness, we began to talk the same. In such closeness, we began to dream.

The phrase was coined by French psychiatrists in the nineteenth century. Early case studies include a couple who believed someone was breaking into their house and wearing down the heels of their shoes; importantly, both members of the couple believed this. Those suffering from folie à deux live together, share delusions, are usually isolated with little or no contact with other people, no one outside their circle of two.

Before retiring in 1993, David Tilley of Guysville had had a long career in academia, working in administration at several colleges over the years, including Knox College in Illinois. It was at Knox in the 1980s that David met Hope, then an undergraduate student at the college. There was a thirty-seven year age difference between David and Hope, but they began a relationship. She went onto Yale, to graduate school. She and David were married in New Haven in 1987.

David was sixty-one at the time; Hope was just twenty-three.

Hope had already distinguished herself intellectually. A member of Phi Beta Kappa in college, graduating summa cum laude, she received the Faculty Scholarship Prize at Knox, an honor bestowed upon a single student who displayed “exceptional ability both in scholastic pursuits and in at least one extra-curricular activity.”
Despite her academic gifts, it was sometimes difficult for Hope to focus. Both restless and an idealist, spirited to the point of belligerence, she was committed to a variety of social justice causes, but she seemed to have trouble seeing a task through to completion. She had a series of jobs: teaching at the college level, volunteering, tutoring. She published with David a newspaper called *Sawmill Press* (until they ran out of money), operated with David a restaurant (until they ran out of money), owned a pet supply business called Daisy Field Supply. She went for a second master’s degree, this time at Ohio University, and eventually worked in Special Education for a local school district.

Then she was fired, for reasons that are unclear, though in a 2011 interview, David theorized that Hope’s relentless crusading for underserved students "didn't play well with the authorities."²

Stories present Hope as vivacious, intelligent, charitable, loving, bright. Also: intense, distractible, desperate, hurt. She had so many dreams, ideals and causes. She began to be afraid.

The Tilleys had come to southern Ohio not to work at the universities there—Ohio University, Hocking College—but to retire. Hope wanted to live on a farm, according to David, and after years of following David around for his job, David said it was her choice where they would end up. And she chose Guysville.

An unincorporated town of a little over a thousand people along the Hocking River, Guysville is long low hills, roads crumbling into gravel. There are quilt stores, collapsing barns, farms—mostly, it’s just farms—and a single gas station. Guysville is
centered on a crossroads, where the devil might make a deal, the lonely intersection of US Route 50 and State Route 329. The banks rise high and wooded along the roads. You can buy land cheap in Guysville. You can see no one for days.

Maybe it is not so different. Maybe it is not so strange.

Once I loved someone older. I was twenty-six, just a few years older than Hope had been when she had married David.

But our wedding never happened. There were many reasons.

In the haze (fever? folie?) of our relationship, I never considered, until the end, what it might be like to be married to a man older than I was. I never considered, until the end, what we might have to deal with. I never considered, until the end, what I might give up.

Hope was afraid of driving. Of eating food. Of swallowing—a phobia called *phagophobia*, which is symptomatic of severe anxiety disorder. Her worst fear was that David would die before her, understandable given their age difference, and that she would be unable to care for herself, understandable given her many and mounting anxieties. David had had several health scares, age-related issues that had caused him to be hospitalized. He had lost his left leg at the knee due to complications from diabetes. His vision was bad. He was losing his hearing.

Hope had health issues as well, something requiring medication, the mounting cost of which was another of her worries, but David took care of her; she had done the
same for him. During his close calls with his health, he credited Hope with sticking up for him in the hospital and managing his care. They were a good team.

Power is such a part of love. Those couples I know that have made it, trade off: a move for my job, a move for yours. I’ll put you through law school if you work while I’m in school. I’ll stay home with the first child; you stay home with the second. Of the couples my partner and I knew in New York, half a dozen have divorced or broken up.

Maybe it was the city. My first summer in New York was unbearably hot, a wave that dimmed the lights of Times Square, a wave we could actually see. Yellow light shimmered in the streets, up from the unbearable grates of the subway, a mirage that warped lampposts, bent trees. It looked like one of Jeremy Blake’s designs. It looked like a glistening lie.

2007, the summer that Theresa and Jeremy died, wasn’t much better. In the heat, the tiles fell off the bathroom wall of our apartment, and cockroaches spilled out of the abyss: huge, winged things. Once, one landed in my hair.

I had a series of temporary, low-paying jobs in New York: adjunct, after-school teacher. I had a series of unexplained health problems: back aches, weight loss, hair loss. I broke my foot tripping over a piano leg. I broke my wrist when a boy tripped me. I had trouble finding my way around the city. I had few friends. When my partner and I fought, we fought over this: this life, this landscape, this getting stuck.

And then we decided to flee.
According to David, he and Hope moved around the country for his jobs, his work. It’s not clear, during the many years they were together, that Hope had meaningful work, not consistently, anyway, not as benefitting someone with two graduate degrees. She volunteered. She worked temporary jobs, but she never seemed to stay anywhere long.

Even the Daisy Field Supply business, which, according to her obituary, she ran for many years, was in trouble. Given a C- rating by the Better Business Bureau, there are a dozen complaints about the business, mostly about products paid for that never arrived. Many of the complaints are dated 2010, the year Hope died.

Just a couple of weeks before Hope’s death, a tornado hit southern Ohio.

The blue funnel cloud ripped the roof off an auto body shop, took shark-sized hunks out of the newspaper building, the very place where, in a few short weeks, phones would buzz; hands would type furious headlines, words like married, suicide, murder, madness—words that, once written, could not be taken back.

The tornado tossed trailers on their heads in the Pine-Air Villate Trailer Park, uprooted trees, smashed through the roof of Jana’s Soul Food Café in the Eclipse Company Mining Town, touched down on the soccer field of Athens High in the middle of a game. All the players and their families made it to shelter in the concession stand and locker rooms, but the playing fields suffered substantial damage, the bleachers smashed, the scoreboard ripped open, the press box mauled. Athens County, the county in which Hope and David lived, the county in which I live, was declared a disaster area.
I chose this landscape. I chose this life. I came back to Ohio, and my partner learned to love it: love the long bare roads, the muted fields, the blending of sky and earth and grass—a white, gray, green which he calls Ohio colors.

Learned to play bluegrass. Learned to bake bread. Learned the names of birds.

I wonder what it is about this place that calls to me, if it’s simple familiarity—I was raised here—or something deeper, some kind of inborn ache, a need for slowness, a need for space. I wonder why we are drawn to anything, really. My eye, my imagination, flits over the new and intact to settle on the worn and wasted. I’m craning out of car windows to look again at the condemned drive-in, movie screen rotting in long strips of gray; the salvage yard; the graffiti on the old caboose which seems to be speaking only to me.

I realized my partner knew me, truly knew me, when he gave me a ring he had found on the ground—and not even a ring really, some part flung off a washer or water heater, some fastener perfectly shaped for my finger: a tiny band, silver-hued beneath its stains.

Perhaps my past lovers’ madness, my former relationship, may be explained this way: I’ve always had a love for the light in the darkness. I’ve always searched among the ruins for the redemption: the abandoned house with a stained glass window, the cornflower in the burned-out car, the tree in the rusted Ferris wheel, blue eyes in a worn face.

I don’t know if Hope sought the same.
David said it was Hope’s idea. She was in a pain; she needed him to end it. David said, among Hope’s fears, was fear of medical professionals, fear of psychotherapy, fear of drugs, fear of getting help. David said, "She was definitely afraid of them, and really all medical things."³ David said she thought there was no help for her. David said she thought she couldn’t end her life herself. David said once he agreed to do it, what he said she wanted, peace settled over her, but, like a spell, it was short-lived: “then it became, every day, ‘Why am I still alive?’ That anger about that,” David said.⁴

David said.
David said.
David said.
David said.

In September 2010, David put a gun to Hope’s head while she was sleeping.

What is left? Hope kept journals, apparently, which perhaps give an insight into her state of mind, which perhaps ask for the ending David said she wanted. The journals were never made public.

The picture of Hope printed with her obituary is at least twenty years old. She is thin with bright dark eyes, short brown hair feathered off her face. She wears a beige blazer and a striped navy and white polyester shirt. It looks like a school portrait, maybe a picture of her senior year (college? high school?). The picture has faded to sepia, drained of life and light.
In the only recent picture I could find of Hope—which may not even be Hope at all—she has long, lank hair. She’s gained weight. She wears men’s clothes, baggy pants, a shapeless shirt, a long yellow duster coat. There’s a strange grin on her face, a hat hiding most of it. She’s holding a raccoon (dead?) by the tail. There’s a gun tucked into her waist.

In a picture of David, taken after the murder, David is in jail, the left leg of his blue prison uniform flopping out of his spindly, prison-issued wheelchair. The cloth drags empty, his leg lost years ago. The pants are too short, rolled up to expose a skinny limb on the right side, falling-down socks and a thick, black orthopedic shoe. His prison-issued glasses are crooked and brown. His hair is shorn, his beard gone. He is not smiling. He has lost weight.

Though the reporter of the 2011 piece that ran with the jailhouse photograph of David would go on to write a benevolent story, almost saccharine in its sympathy, David was reluctant to reveal details of Hope to anyone, to say anything personal, to say anything specific about her life or their life together or her mental state in the days and months and years leading up to the murder. He had confessed to the murder, he said, because he did not want to have a trial, because he did not want there to be a story.

Sorry, David.

Maybe it is not right to talk about it again. No one really knows what happened, except the dead. Hope’s mother did not want the case discussed in the papers; she called it “see[ing] [her] daughter exploited again”—and she especially did not want David
portrayed as merciful “for [doing] something that is really murder.” A link to The Athens NEWS interview on the newspaper’s public facebook page has the following, chilling comment from someone named Rose Putnam-Mayle: “You should have just left this alone.”

In a 2012 article memorializing the previous year’s crime victims in Athens County, Hope Tilley’s death is listed as “a kind of assisted suicide.”

Because there was no trial, because David confessed in closed court and was sent to prison so swiftly, because he will probably die there, we will never know. That label will never be challenged, never be tested; a doctor never consulted; friends never interviewed; Hope’s journals never produced and read; more pictures of Hope never unearthed; a fuller portrait of her years with David and their marriage—the odd years, the difference, the power—never painted.

Mercy. A mercy killing.

“[A] kind of.”

Kind.

Mercy to leave the dogs and the hills and the spiraling sky and the mounting years and the years and the pills and the nights and every morning? Kindness. Mercy. A mercy. What is mercy? Even I believed at the onset that this essay would be about mercy: an old man, the broken woman he wanted to save. But I cannot write it. Mercy, I cannot write it.
In the video a man burns. He comes out of the black night, a shadow whose back is on fire. Orange flames engulf him, burning with him as he walks. His face stays hidden, even as he comes close and turns, striding parallel across the frame, walking in slow motion in time to the music: the high, sharp guitar, the clear voice singing. I want to be alone. The flames cast a shadow, the only light.

The best musician you’ve never heard of was born in Buffalo, and grew up in Ohio and western New York. He started singing as a child in rural Elyria in northern Ohio, a place he described as a “wartime world” of chickens and country music playing on a radio at all hours. At six, he was the youngest member of his church choir. Then his family moved back to western New York, to the snowy town of Cheektowaga. He began playing the guitar as a form of physical therapy: On March 31, 1954, part of his elementary school, the Cleveland Hill School, went up in flames after a coal furnace in the boiler room exploded. The furnace was below the music room, where Jackson C. Frank, eleven-years-old, sat in music class at the time.

A gas leak caused the explosion. For weeks, students had been going home, complaining of headaches, but no one investigated the furnace. A hole had formed in its side, the janitor plugging it up with newspaper. The school building was relatively new, but the furnace heated an annex, adjacent to the main school, built as a temporary solution to an influx of new students into the district. The annex was wood.

When the explosion happened, a fireball roared up from the floor into the music room, killing fifteen of Frank’s classmates: half of his fifth-grade class. Ten children
perished at the scene, five died later from their injuries, and twenty-three more students and staff were injured. As Jeff Simon wrote in *The Buffalo News*: “I can't overstate the horror… For more than a decade, there wasn't a parent in Western New York who didn't freeze in terror—at least a little—the minute they heard those three words: Cleveland Hill fire.”

*Life* magazine ran a cover story, citing how quickly the disaster had happened. The annex had burned to the ground in just thirty-four minutes. The windows of the music room were heavy, double-paned—and locked. They were difficult to break. The children who survived jumped or were pushed.

There’s a picture in the *Life* story of volunteers waiting at the Red Cross to give blood to the victims: men in business suits and flannel work shirts, women, a sailor, people standing by the windows as there’s no place left to sit down; all the seats are full. There’s a picture of scorched sheet music lying in the snow, in the rubble of the music room, in the ashes of the annex. The music is crumbled and black on the edges. But the title of the song is still visible: *Snowfall*.

Frank was grievously, almost fatally, injured. Other children put out the flames on his back with snow, but he suffered burns on more than half his body. He spent eight months in the hospital, receiving multiple skin grafts.

For months, the many children in the burn ward read comic books, listened to donated records. Kirk Douglass visited, and there is a picture from the *Buffalo Evening News* of Frank meeting the movie star. Frank wears pajamas, a robe, his right arm wound in white bandages. More bandages are over his head, his cheekbones. Some of his hair is burned away.
Teachers visited Frank in the hospital too. One brought a guitar, hoping to cheer Frank up and encourage him to start using his hands again. It worked. Once out of the hospital, Frank bought his own guitar from Montgomery Ward, borrowing the money from his mother.

Frank met Elvis at thirteen, after his parents took the family to Graceland to try to boost Frank’s spirits. As Jim Allen wrote in a 2009 article for *Mojo: The Music Magazine*, Elvis had “followed the story of the fire in the news and sent a letter of encouragement to the convalescent Frank.”3 In Graceland, the Frank family ran into Elvis in the driveway. The superstar invited Frank and his parents inside and posed for a picture in front of a jukebox.

In the color shot, Elvis wears swimming trunks, a white towel or cape around his shoulders. He’s bare-chested, healthy, tan. Frank is a skinny boy in a blue pajama shirt, his hair so fair it looks white. He has his right arm, the arm next to Elvis, held stiffly, bent across his waist, as if it is wrapped in a bandage, which perhaps it is, holding his arm like Napoleon, holding his arm like it hurts.

He had “problems”4 with his hands according to one of his first girlfriends, Katherine Wright (née Henry). Still, he kept playing the guitar. He started performing in bands with friends: only covers, never original stuff. Mostly they did rock n’ roll, but he was always interested in older songs, Civil War tunes, battlefield and freedom songs. Frank said he was “heavily into the blues back then. We listened a lot to John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGee, and the Library of Congress collection of blues artists.”5 After high school, Frank was accepted into Gettysburg
College, which he attended for a time, thinking he might major in journalism. “It's not clear if he quit or was asked to leave,” according to Wright.

Frank first met her late one Christmas Eve at a bus stop. Wright had had a fight with her parents and ran out the door. She was eighteen-years-old. It was cold, Buffalo at Christmas. Frank was the only one there.

Wright said that Frank “kinda had an authority and a sense of being older, probably from what he'd been through. He felt somewhat apart from the normal… He was working as a copy boy at The Buffalo News.” There, they remembered him, according to photographer Joe Mombrea, as “hideously disfigured… He had a pronounced limp from skin grafts they had to take from his leg to repair his face and chest.”

In pictures, these scars are faint—but there if you are looking, if you know what to look for: the lines of raised skin on his face and hands that could be mistaken for veins; the high strange curve of the hairline at his temple that looks like early baldness, but is not. In the few color photographs that survive of Frank, his skin has a bright red tone, patchy in places. It could be just ruddiness. It could be many things. I wouldn’t call him hideous or even disfigured—but the pictures that remain of Frank are grainy, always a little blurred.

In a photograph of Frank and girlfriend Wright, Frank, seen from the chest up, looks healthy and strong. He had a football player’s build, according to friends, and in the picture, Frank is all bulk, all shoulders, his body covered by a thick flannel shirt, buttoned tight.
But something’s different about his neck. The skin seems bumpy, darker. The shadows are wrong. His face looks smooth and handsome: full lips, straight nose, until there—on the forehead. The hair doesn’t sit right. He kept it long.

When told by an interviewer that she looked beautiful in the old photograph, her hair dark and windblown, her face full, Wright replied: “I think I might have been pregnant at that point.” After meeting at the bus stop, she and Frank had spent every day together for months.

And then Frank changed.

My partner bought Frank’s album after hearing it playing in a record store. For weeks, lonesome tunes floated about our duplex. Every time one of Frank’s songs came on, I would ask, Who is this? I couldn’t remember his name, couldn’t seem to stick it in my head; I had certainly never heard it before. Frank Jackson? Jack Frank? Jackson Franklin…?

Who?

The songs always started familiar, that sweet guitar, the melody high and sad. It could have been Simon and Garfunkel, Dylan or anyone of that era: late ‘60s guitar and barstool, coffeehouse and cigarette. Maybe this is “Girl from the North Country,” I would think.

But as soon as Frank started singing, I knew it wasn’t Dylan or anyone—anything—I had ever heard. As soon as Jackson C. Frank sang, something would come over me. Something would shake me, startle me, freeze me where as I stood. His voice was like nothing else: rich and warm, a steady tone, thick as velvet and full of hurt,
simple heartbreak that wasn’t simple at all. It was a chilling voice. It was so pure, so clear, so good.

Who is this?

Frank came into money on his twenty-first birthday, a little over $100,000 in insurance money, a settlement from the Cleveland Hill fire. At the time, it was an enormous sum. Simon said Frank was just “biding his time”\textsuperscript{10} at The Buffalo News until the money came in—but Wright thought it had been a surprise, this windfall, and one Frank took full advantage of at once. He spent and spent, buying things he’d always wanted, like expensive guitars. He started collecting old handguns. Once, he pretended to kidnap Wright from the common room of her college: “he walked in with his gun and said, I am capturing this co-ed! I remember the absolute warmth and joy from the man. He was having the time of his life.”\textsuperscript{11}

Frank and his music buddy, John Kay, whom he had met at a coffeehouse in Buffalo and used to perform with (Kay would later come to fame as the lead singer of Steppenwolf), went up to Canada where Frank bought a Jaguar right out of the showroom. Desire for more fancy cars—specifically an Aston Martin—led Frank to England, according to some sources. He had read in a magazine that England had the best cars, so he used part of his settlement to fund a trip.

Wright called this the “accepted Wikipedia version of events.”\textsuperscript{12} She said he went to England for her, for love. She had left him, and was headed to England (a somewhat random choice, by her account) to get away from him.
Things always seemed to happen for Frank in March: his birth, the Cleveland Hill fire. And so in March—or possibly April—of 1965, Frank booked passage on the same ship Wright was on, the Queen Elizabeth, and headed abroad for girls or cars.

Frank also needed to get away from New York where everyone knew him, knew about the accident, knew about the money; where he was constantly being hit up for loans, asked to cover dinner. Wright said he was becoming suspicious, paranoid that all his friends were after his insurance money, even her. Once, in a middle of a conversation, he began screaming at her in public, accusing her of taking advantage of him. He slipped into dark moods. He withdrew, then went livid. She would have to talk him down from ranting, shouting fits.

The handguns and cars and guitars were just the beginning. If Frank’s song “Blues Run the Game” is to be believed, Frank more blew money on hotels, room service, booze:

Send out for whiskey, baby.
Send out for gin…
Me and room service, babe,
well, we’re living a life of sin.13

“Blues Run the Game” is about a man who just can’t get a break. He’s resigned to it, his bad luck, and follows him like a shadow. The song is simple, the melody calm and sweet. There is no bridge. It ends with Frank’s voice soaring. But simple though it may be, the song was heard. Bert Jansch said this song “influenced just about everyone
who heard it. You could say that it changed the face of the contemporary songwriting world.”

Frank wrote the song on the boat crossing over to England, the first complete song he had ever written, the melody running in his head for days until he sat in a quiet corner of the ship and set it down. He arrived in England with the finished song, a guitar—and a suitcase full of cash.

_I've got to leave her, and find another. / I've got to sing my heart's true song._

In England, Wright was detained due to lack of funds. She had no job and only a hundred dollars to her name. She was also pregnant with Frank’s child. She left the U.K. after only a short time to go back to the States and get an illegal abortion—Frank’s idea. He even suggested the doctor, a man recommended to him by his high school girlfriend.

Wright gone, the relationship over for good, Frank stayed on in London. It was a haphazard choice, but for perhaps the first and only time in his life, Jackson C. Frank was in the right place at the right time. He got a room at the Strand Palace, close to the Savoy where Dylan and Joan Baez and Buffy Sainte-Marie hung out. (During her short tenure in England, Wright was often mistaken for Sainte-Marie; both had long dark hair, dark eyes and a Native American background.) Frank found himself part of an emerging scene. He started going to coffeehouses and folk clubs in the Soho neighborhood of London, especially Les Cousins.

A club in the basement of a crumbling brick building with a Greek restaurant on the main floor and an illegal gambling club on the top, Les Cousins was nothing fancy. It had no liquor license, only one small stage, one microphone, one electrical outlet. It had
been a skiffle music club in the ‘50s, and the dim space was decorated with fishing nets hanging from the ceiling, a giant wagon wheel. The club was new to London when Frank was new, having just opened in its latest incarnation in April 1965. It was small, dank—and extremely popular, sessions lasting all night.

Frank began attending more and more of these shows where musicians approached the stage with their guitars. He started writing and performing his songs. One night, he met a woman at Les Cousins named Judith Piepe who introduced him to two aspiring folk singers staying at her apartment.

The folk singers were named Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel.

Frank is mentioned in a 1997 interview Garfunkel did with Vin Scelsa of the New York City radio station WNEW-FM (“Idiot’s Delight” is the name of the program). Frank comes up because his song “Blues Run the Game” is included on the Simon and Garfunkel boxed set Garfunkel was promoting at the time. The duo covered the song, playing it live many times, but had never released it before, and the DJ interviewing Garfunkel had never heard of Frank.

Who is this?

Garfunkel described Piepe, the woman who had brought him and Garfunkel together with Frank, as a kind of Earth Mother: “she would collect all kinds of disenfranchised people—from hookers and drug addicts—and she would let them stay at her house for awhile.” In reality, Piepe was a social worker with her own complex and fascinating story. When she died in 2003, Karl Dennis wrote her obituary:

Even her birthplace was in doubt. She was very proud that she was
a “Schlesian,” born in Silesia, then part of Prussia, now Poland, in 1920.

Yet she spoke German with a Berlin accent, and her daughter maintains she was born in the German capital. Her mother was said to be a French gypsy; not so, say others, she was a well-known Jewish intellectual and art dealer.

She said very little about her father, which was also strange, since he was Fritz Sternberg, an esteemed Marxist economist who had exchanged polemics with Trotsky and ended his days in the United States, where he became a member of Roosevelt's "kitchen cabinet" and was a respected contributor to learned journals like *The Nation*. She fell foul of the Nazis as a teenager in Berlin and was arrested for a time by the Gestapo, escaping after three months in jail just before being tried in absentia and sentenced to death for high treason.¹⁶

Piepe escaped the Nazis, married a few times, may have driven ambulances during the Spanish Civil War, gave birth to a daughter named Ariel, converted. She was a small, quick woman with wiry hair and flashing, almond-shaped eyes. In London, she lived on Cable Street across from the Shadewell tube station, and helped the homeless of Soho, operating a shelter in the basement of St Anne’s Church. She also loved music. She had first heard Paul Simon play at a dingy place called the Flamingo Club, and somehow persuaded the BBC to give him a showcase on a religious program; she went on air to introduce him herself.

Piepe and her boyfriend at the time lived around the corner from Les Cousins, and
took pity on the musicians and audience members, many of whom were just kids who had traveled up to London for the night and had nowhere to sleep. And when the music would end—usually not until after dawn—“Judith Piepe would throw her doors open for breakfast,”17 according to Folk Roots editor Ian Anderson, then a teenager and frequent Les Cousins attendee. Piepe’s boyfriend Stephen Delft, described as an ethereal lute maker, later to become her third husband, “would get up on the stage and say, “The tubes don’t start running for another hour. If anybody wants a cup of tea, come with us.””18

Al Stewart was among the “disenfranchised” staying for a time with Piepe and Delft, as were Simon and his girlfriend Kathy (immortalized in the song of the same name). Garfunkel and his wife spent their honeymoon at Piepe’s place, Piepe hiring a young guitar player from Les Cousins to serenade them in bed the first morning of their marriage. Soon Frank would join the rotating bunch crashing on Cable Street.

“Jackson was part of our lives then,” Garfunkel said in the WNEW-FM interview. “[Piepe] helped him.”


Garfunkel’s answer?

“He was an American who was living there. He was a burn victim.”19

Hideously disfigured. A burn victim. Would-be biographer Jim Abbott would later describe Frank as “like the Elephant man.”20

*My friends in the bars, / hell, they only see the scars.*
One video exists of Frank playing live. It’s twelve seconds long. He’s playing his song “Just Like Anything,” and the video has captured the chorus. He perches on a bar stool on a small, plain stage. The film is in black and white, but he wears dark pants and a shirt that looks floral, that looks purple, that looks like 1965, which it is.

Al Stewart described Frank’s manner of dressing as:

totally eccentric … I mean one day he would be in standard folk outfit of blue jeans and whatever, and one day I saw him in a business suit and a bowler hat ... He had this long, ragged yellow hair and he was wearing a pin-striped suit and a bowler hat. He might even have been carrying an umbrella ... The effect was startling.21

Lorraine Lilja, Frank’s boss when he worked at a newspaper in New York, remembered his eccentricity as well. When she first met him, he was wearing “a long, black, theatrical cape.”22

Frank was boisterous, larger than life. He often drove one of his Aston Martins (he owned a fleet, along with, for a time, a Land Rover) or a brand-new Bentley—this big, blonde American hulk hunched over the wheel. Friends remembered him driving his mother around when she made a visit to London, showing her the sights from one of those fancy little cars, a couple of expensive Martin guitars sitting up in the back. He collected the guitars, each the price of a boat trip abroad.

Frank threw his money around in London, as he had been expected to do back in New York, taking friends out to dinner and drinking, buying food or arranging shelter for struggling musicians. Wright said he felt an obligation to help young artists, but other
friends thought he didn’t like the money; he wanted to use it up, to get rid of it as soon as possible. It reminded him too much of the fire.

In the video of Frank, there are serious, listening people in rows to his right: boys with owl-eye glasses and jackets, ties and sweater vests; girls in dark dresses who look like my mom. People in a back row appear to be nodding, their heads bobbing along in time. They’ve heard this song before, it seems. They know it.

Frank doesn’t look at any them. He doesn’t look at the camera, either. Maybe he can’t. In those twelve seconds of video, he often closes his eyes. He smiles sadly, sweetly—and dare I say it—sexily after the first lyric. He sings, closes his eyes and smirks in time to his fingerling, the high sharp plucks of the guitar.

He reminds me of no one so much as Johnny Cash. Strange. It’s not something that has occurred to me all the times I have listened to Frank’s songs, but seeing Frank actually performing one, I think of the man in black. It’s the smile. It’s the low, smooth voice. It’s even the hair: dark on Cash, fair on Frank, but both men wore it slicked back. Cash’s was thinning. Frank’s hair looks sparse too, missing on the right side of his forehead, the part too high, too wide—but not from baldness. From burns.

He looks much, much older than his twenty-three years.

The grainy, twelve-second black and white video was shot at Les Cousins, filmed for a 1966 BBC documentary which also featured performances by musicians like Stewart and an interview with Piepe.
Online, the comments that follow the posted clip of Frank are (unique for the internet): entirely positive. Positive and devastated. “12 precious seconds.”\textsuperscript{23} “IT'S HIM [sic] HE'S REAL [sic] HIS HANDS ARE REAL [sic] HIS SINGING IS LIVE [sic] OH MY GODDDDDDDDD.” [sic]\textsuperscript{24} “do [sic] a Wikipedia search for Jackson C. Frank and be prepared for the tragedy!”\textsuperscript{25} says one toecutter6, though this comment is hidden, deemed “inappropriate” by too many viewers.

The tragedy: In 1965, the same year the video was shot at Les Cousins, Jackson cut his first album at a CBS recording studio in London; it would be his only one. The record was released in December—just nine months after Frank had first stepped off the boat to England, nine months after writing his first song.

\textit{Jackson C. Frank} was put out on EMI Columbia Records, the album produced by Paul Simon, who paid for the recording using his proceeds from “The Sound of Silence.” The album had ten tracks, sparse production. Some say the recording took only six hours. Most of the songs are guitar—primarily, just Frank’s—and that voice, crystal-clear and cutting. Most of the songs are about love, losing it, leaving it. But there’s also a thread of madness: the truly creepy song “My Name is Carnival,” with lyrics about a Ferris wheel in a dark meadow; the claustrophobia of “Yellow Walls,” which Wright said Frank explained was about his long stay at the hospital burn unit, staring at the wallpaper and hall lights for months.

Perhaps inevitably, that song, like many of Frank’s songs, brings up images of the Cleveland Hill fire: “Dark green windows stand ever closed.” Graves feature prominently in Frank’s work, death, sleeping, walking around at night, black birds, tears,
people (women) disappearing in the morning. And yet, many of those songs are catchy. “Here Comes the Blues” and “You Never Wanted Me,” are upbeat, despite the titles. “Just Like Anything” is downright spry.

One Frank fan from the sixties described “Just Like Anything” as the theme song for the Les Cousins crowd. They all knew it. They would get excited when he played it, their heads bobbing along in that video. Frank said once that “Just Like Anything” was just nonsense, just fun. But it doesn’t sound like fun, just playing, especially not when delivered in his voice, so earnest, so frank, almost pleading. Colin Harper wrote that “nothing about Jackson’s writing felt gratuitous,” quoting Karl Dallas’s Melody Maker review of the album: “Partly, it may be because Jackson isn’t just putting on a mask of self-pity to win sympathy. He has had a pretty tough time, and the songs are genuine communications of what it felt like.”

Frank has a straightforward delivery, singing lines like “I need to … face the grave that I have grown” the way he delivers every line of every song: with the same earnest plainness. He sings in a clear, straightforward tone. There’s almost no vibrato in his voice. The effect is stark, almost shell-shocked. He doesn’t seem to get worked up over anything, and there’s a disconnect between the dark subject matter—“I see you running and never moving”—and the simple purity of his voice. Though that voice is experienced, deep and rich, he sounds like a choir child.

It’s the voice of witness.

Along with Simon, Garfunkel and Stewart showed up to watch the recording of *Jackson C. Frank*. Under the gaze of an audience, Frank couldn’t get through a note,
insisting he be shielded from the other musicians by screens. “I can’t play,” he is reported to have said. “You’re looking at me.”

“It was probably the strangest recording session I’ve ever been to,” Stewart said. “Even when Paul would say 'OK we're ready,' often this would be followed by two or three minutes of total silence while he [Jackson] psyched himself into singing. And then this beautiful guitar and voice would emerge.”

Stewart makes his own recording debut on Frank’s album. On the song “Yellow Walls,” he’s “doodling in the back on guitar,” Frank said in a 1995 interview. “He never received proper credit for that, I'm afraid, but that's him.”

Also making her professional recording debut on that song? Sandy Denny, shaking the tambourine.

Denny and Frank dated for a time—even living together in Piepe’s apartment with Simon and Garfunkel—after meeting at Les Cousins when Denny was just a teenager. Frank was the one who convinced Denny, who had trained as a nurse at the Royal Brompton Hospital and, since nursing wasn’t working out, was headed to try art school, not to give up on music, to keep on performing, to quit school and make music her life.

But by 1967, her relationship with Frank was over. Fans at Les Cousins remember Denny playing that year and rolling their eyes; heartbroken, she insisted on performing song after song by her ex-boyfriend, Frank.

The first Frank song I remember hearing is “Kimbie,” which wasn’t Frank’s song at all, but a traditional folk tune, first set down by Bascom Lamar Lunsford.

The son of a schoolteacher, Lunsford worked as a fruit tree salesman in North
Carolina at the turn of the twentieth century. He kept hearing songs on the farms he visited, the farmers singing among the trees. Lunsford became a song catcher, dubbed “The Minstrel of the Appalachians,” collecting folk songs, ballads and lonesome mountain tunes. His version of the song Jackson would record is a called “I Wish I was a Mole in the Ground,” a mountain banjo song that Lunsford first heard in 1901. His mother requested that he learn it for her. “I went away,” Lunsford said, “and she grew sick and passed away and that was the last request she ever made of me.”

It’s hard to describe the song. The singer is in trouble, with a woman and maybe the law. In Lunsford’s version, opinions differ on the lyrics: The narrator is either a hobo afraid of being rousted from a train, or a worker afraid of the railroad boss. He sings:

I don’t like a railroad man.

No I don’t like a railroad man.

Cause a railroad man,

he'll kill you when he can,

And drink up your blood like wine.

A woman appears in Lunsford’s song (Lunsford calls her Kimpy) and she “wants a nine dollar shawl” as the narrator is “com[ing] o’er the hill with a forty dollar bill.”

But in Frank’s spare, aching cover, the lyrics unfold as follows: “She wants a nine dollar shawl—/ and I need a mackinaw.” In the same breath, he asks: “baby, where you been so long,” then answers, “I been in that state pen, / with those rough and rowdy men.” When the woman asks his whereabouts again, he repeats his answer: “I been in that state pen.” Then he sings—softer now, swallowing the words, the vowels like lonesome caves—“and I gotta go back again.”
These changes, these touches, are significant to me. Lunsford’s song is dark, sure, with the specter of the railroad man looming. But Frank’s version is more subtle, heartsick. He sings from the point of view of a drifter, an ex-con who’s messed up again, already heading back to jail, who’s leaving in the morning, and would buy his girl an expensive, trivial thing rather than take care of himself.

The lyric “I wish I was a mole in the ground” may be a wish to work as a miner, once a more profitable and safer job than working on the railroads. But in Frank’s version, this line doesn’t feel like a metaphor. Desperation snags at his voice, and it feels like he really is wishing he was an animal, was someone or something else, was capable of tearing down the mountain of misfortune looming over him.

I’ve heard Lunsford’s version often, but it’s Frank’s “Kimbie” I listen to for hours, so much so that my partner and I consider naming our first child after the song. When we learn our midwife’s granddaughter is actually named Kimbie, it feels like some kind of sign. And when our son is born, for months “Kimbie” is the only song to which he will fall asleep, maybe because he heard it so often in the womb.

I start to wonder, in Frank’s version, could he be singing to a daughter?

_A baby of the morning / was sleeping._

Around 1967, Frank married an Englishwoman, Elaine Sedgwick, a former model; after a miscarriage, their first child born to term died in infancy of Cystic Fibrosis, spiraling Frank into a depression so deep he was institutionalized.

Frank’s wife was—like all women linked with Frank—gorgeous, tall and blonde. A cousin to Edie Sedgwick, of Andy Warhol films and Factory fame, she also belonged
to a wealthy and storied family. It must have been a whirlwind courtship; as late as 1966, Frank was still living with Denny.

The marriage to Sedgwick would not last long. The couple left London to move back to the States, to Woodstock, New York. Possibly the burgeoning music festivals were an allure, or the community of musicians and artists. Possibly the town’s relative proximity to both New York City and Frank’s parents back in Buffalo was attractive. Possibly Woodstock was where Frank could get a job.

One winter afternoon he appeared on the doorstep of Lorraine Lilja, co-founder and editor of *The Woodstock Week*, one of the town’s newspapers. Lilja was a feisty, capable woman. An editor, advertising executive, and former reporter for the *Press-Republican*, she once described the 1969 Woodstock Music Festival as “four yuppies look[ing] for a project.” A newly divorced mom, she had packed up her two toddlers and headed out to Woodstock to make a new life for her own family a few years before Frank’s arrival. Maybe she saw something of herself in him.

Or maybe it was his spirit: a job applicant who had the audacity to show up on an editor’s front door, wearing not a suit, but a Dracula cape. Along with the cape, Lilja noticed: “longish blond hair that was always falling over his face. That may have been intentional, for his face bore the shiny, puckered scars of severe burns.” Lilja hired him on the spot: “and he did a good job ... It was a while before I learned of his musical talent. He gave me a record of his songs. I lost the record in a fire.”

For a short period, Frank served as the editor for *The Woodstock Week*, yet, like much with which he had the fortune or misfortune to be associated, the paper had a
tumultuous time, changing hands before being disbanded not too long after Frank assumed the helm. Still, Frank seemed to find a place for himself in Woodstock. He helped with one of the Woodstock Sound-Out festivals in 1968 (a much smaller precursor to the 1969 festival) held on a local farm, and he enjoyed living in the country. The woods and hills and isolation seem to suit him. As he described it: “life in the mountains here is serene.”

When Sedgwick became pregnant again, Frank left her behind to return to England in the summer of ’68. Frank had the idea to make money for his growing family by touring, though he had to sell one of his beloved guitars to afford the passage.

Back in London, for a while it seemed as though Frank’s career would pick up right where he had left it. Most of Frank’s friends had done well in his absence. Al Stewart helped arrange a tour for Frank, adding him to the bill on Stewart’s tour with Fairport Convention. Rising star Denny was now fronting Fairport Convention, and Frank played his first show on the tour at the Royal Festival Hall in London, opening for Joni Mitchell.

He tried to get a second album together. Three years since the first; it was time. There was still interest in Frank’s music at this point. He still had friends, connections. His performances still attracted crowds. His work was even featured in the fall of 1968 on a program on BBC Radio 1.

But much had happened to Frank in the years since his first album: poverty, broken relationships, a marriage, a miscarriage, an infant’s death. Something had shifted in him. His songs had changed as well. He tried to perform some new material on the tour, trying them out on an audience, but Stewart described Frank’s songs of this time as:
completely impenetrable. They were basically about psychological angst, played at full volume with lots of thrashing. I don't remember a single word of them, it just did not work. There was one review that said he belonged on a psychologist's couch.  

The music scene was moving away from what Frank did, anyway. The days of heartfelt folk songs from a singer on a barstool were shifting into nights of harder rock. *Jackson C. Frank* stopped selling, after never selling much to begin with. Frank and his wife moved in with her parents in London, and in 1969, Sedgwick gave birth to a daughter, Angeline, who lived.

Frank’s professional life continued to plummet. His management company dropped him. He was hospitalized again, for reasons both psychological and physical, lingering health problems related to his burns. He missed gigs. Music fans were told he was “ill.” His last show in England—a concert at St. Pancras with Roy Harper—never happened; Frank never showed. He began to beg for money from friends. Sedgwick took their child back to New York without him.

Broke and on the verge of divorce, Frank had to return to the States. As he recalled, when he left, he was “in the middle of cutting a record, which didn't survive the departure.”

Frank went back to New York and lived in Woodstock. His wife and young daughter stayed in a huge, beautiful house in the hills outside of town, at least for a time, but Frank was out on his own, according to friends, maybe staying on couches or crashing on floors.
“Gordon,” who posted these memories on Frank’s unofficial (and only) website, claimed he once drove around Woodstock in 1969 looking for his old friend Jack, not sure where or how to find him, if he even had an address. Then there was a knock on the car window; like a ghost, Frank stood there in the snow.37

He tried to make his marriage work. To make money for his family, he took a job in a leather shop. What job, what shop, and what exactly does leather mean—I don’t know. “I was lonely (as in divorced),”38 Jackson said. By 1970, his wife and child were gone. He shared a room in a boarding house on Tinker Street, run by someone called Joan, then rented a room in house owned by a man named Tom Nusbaumer. When Frank ran out of money, he slept in the living room. Finally, Nusbaumer kicked him out:

Soon, I remember this like it was yesterday, I saw him on the street during a snowstorm, his beard covered in snow and ice, he was standing up against a building trying to protect himself from the cold wind. It was so sad. I of course allowed him to return to the house and live there for free for the rest of the winter. Then I moved from Woodstock to New York City and never saw him again. But I have often wondered what happened to Jackson. Jackson was a tormented man, as, at the time, I was. I had come back from Vietnam disabled, and was bitter. Jackson and I had something in common, we had both survived a horror, but the legacy continued to give us great pain.39

Three years between albums stretched into five, then ten, then thirteen. Thirteen winters.
In 1978, after a glowing retrospective piece about Frank in *Melody Maker*, B&C Records re-released *Jackson C. Frank* with the not very inspiring title: *Jackson C Frank Again*.

On the cover of the re-release, Frank is heavier, seeming angry and vulnerable at the same time, his eyes sliding to the side. He looks rumpled, weary, used. In the picture, an illustration done in pen and ink, he has a mustache, long jagged hair. His brow is furrowed, chin in hand. He wears a bracelet that looks like a chain.

The album, like its first incarnation, did not sell.

I was born in 1978, the year of Frank’s album’s unremarkable re-release, during a blizzard that buried a semi tractor, and killed a woman as she walked, blinded by drifts, to her barn only steps away. The storm stranded my mom and me in the maternity ward for a week—the roads impassable, my dad trapped at home. My mom was lonely and bored. The hospital was starting to run out of food. Finally she called my dad and said, “Get us out of here.” The highways were buried in snow, impossible to drive, so he rented a truck with four-wheel drive, and came over the frozen, Indiana fields.

My parents were Mods. My dad had horn-rimmed glasses. My mom wore an avocado green mini to their wedding rehearsal dinner. They lived in married student housing until my mom, nineteen, finished her teaching degree. My dad escaped Vietnam because of a bad back.

My parents weren’t musical, but there were albums around the house: Simon and Garfunkel, Denny, the Kingston Trio. Peter, Paul and Mary was a big favorite. I
remember spending long afternoons as child lying on my back on our corduroy couch, holding the album *Best of Peter, Paul and Mary: Ten Years Together* above my head, staring at the pictures on the cover, the flowers and lambs and butterflies and bees.

Did my parents buy *Jackson C. Frank Again* the year I was born? If so, they didn’t keep it. Did they see it at the store, for sale alongside *Boys in the Trees* by Carly Simon, Cat Stevens’ *Back to Earth*, *Heavy Horses* by Jethro Tull, Dylan’s *Masterpieces* or *Street Legal*, Stewart’s *Time Passages*, Fairport Convention’s *Tipplers Tales*?

So many of Frank’s friends had albums out that year, such a big year for that crowd. Was his album even for sale at the store? My parents didn’t remember it. Neither of them had heard of Frank.

I bought my mom his album a few years ago, slipping it into the CD player in the kitchen as she cooked. I told her the story of his life. She looked away from the stove, holding a spoon as if she had forgotten what it was for, a faraway look in her eyes.

*Here comes long lonely. / Here comes the blues.*

It’s hard to follow what happens next to Frank.

There’s a cycle of traveling back and forth to London, of canceling gigs, of not showing up, of illness, of begging from friends, of hospitalizations, of light employment and unemployment, of homelessness—but the dates are fuzzy, inconsistent from source to source. Frank himself mixes up the dates in various interviews and writings. How can a man get his own history wrong?


This much is clear: At some point, Frank and his wife divorced. He moved back in with his parents in Buffalo. He had little to no contact with his daughter. He lost touch with his friends in London, and with the music world. For extra cash, he began selling off his record collection. He did not perform. And in 1984, while his mother was out of the house, in the hospital for open-heart surgery, Frank decided to take a bus to New York City, to try to find his old friend Paul Simon. He didn’t leave a note.

No one would hear from him for more than ten years.

Meanwhile, in 1983—or possibly earlier, or possibly later—a man named Jim Abbott was browsing at a used record store in Woodstock. He found an autographed Al Stewart album, signed *Regards to Jackson: The Blues Run the Game, Al.*

He held the record up. “Who’s Jackson?” he asked.

The guy behind the counter shrugged. “Some homeless guy. He used to come in off the street and sell records.”

Frank didn’t find Paul Simon.

His mother reported bank transactions for a few months. When they stopped—when they stopped and still she heard nothing—she assumed the worst. In the late ‘60s and early ‘70s when Frank had first dropped out of the scene, rumors had circulated around the music world that he had been in a terrible car accident or plane crash; that he was engaged in illicit, tumultuous affairs with beautiful and famous women; that he was traveling; that he was dead.
But by the 1980s, most people had forgotten about Jackson C. Frank. His former record company was not sending him royalty checks from his album (and would not for over twenty years). He had no job, no money and no connections, not anymore.

Off the bus, in the wide city, he wandered. He swore he was famous. He was somebody, signed with Columbia Records, friends with Simon and Garfunkel. He had dated Sandy Denny! They had all loved his songs!

New York City police put Jackson C. Frank in a mental institution.

There he was treated for paranoid schizophrenia, a disease which manifests itself in delusions and hallucinations, hearing things, believing things, difficulty with organized thought and writing. For ten years, Frank bounced from one state-run institution to another. Every nine months or so, he was released. Having nowhere to go, he slept out on the streets. He was disoriented from the heavy medications with which the hospitals had dosed him, drugs like Thorazine, Chlorpromazine—the first generation of antipsychotic drugs which had terrible side effects: tremors, involuntary jerks and movements, muscle stiffness. It would be another ten years before the extent of the side effects would be known and the drugs would cease to be prescribed so readily.

The side effects were eventually found to linger, worsening over time—and probably would have been especially distressing to Frank who already suffered from physical problems related to the Cleveland Hill fire, among them a persistent limp due to the skin grafts taken from his legs. Frank described the “bad reaction” he had to these medications as “a terrible thing to happen to person, an iron box that you can’t get out of.”\textsuperscript{41}
The antipsychotic medications and resulting side effects made Frank act and move strange, feel cloudy and confused—“I couldn't make head nor tail of anything,” he said of the time—and so, he was picked up by police and institutionalized again. He presented as schizophrenic; was drugged, released, picked up by police for acting strange, presented as schizophrenic; was drugged, released … and the cycle restarted all over again.

When not in the hospital, Frank survived by scavenging, picking junk up off the street and trying to sell it: bicycles, typewriters, motorcycle parts.

I would go through construction sites, dumpsters and various other things … I once got a violin that was marked '1827 Mozart'. I picked that up. They'd give me a dollar in the morning for that sort of stuff. I got some coffee and a roll, and I'd hang around for the rest of the day and maybe bum some money of the people in the street, or people that I knew would give me five bucks for a pack of cigarettes and something to eat. He had an old, Army blanket he wrapped himself in to stay warm. He did not have a guitar.

In 1984, the year Frank found himself in New York, I found myself there too. My family had moved to Middletown, a suburb north of the city. We would live there barely a year, unable to afford long-term housing, renting an ugly green house with a willow tree. My little sister and I took swimming lessons in the above-ground pool of the place across the street. We went into the city only once, when my maternal grandparents came to visit, my grandfather alarmed at the windshield cleaners, homeless men with squeegees
who descended at red lights; my dad remembering to remove the quarters from the dashboard when we stopped. We strolled through Central Park. I was yelled at for distributing my pretzel to pigeons.

Do I remember men wrapped in blankets? Sure.

Do I remember turning away from them, slipping my hand more securely into my mother’s, lifting up the collar of my quilted blue coat, looking away at something more pleasant, more sanitary, more safe? I do.

Frank’s own mentions of mental illness are elusive. He evades the topic, skating it, never naming it. He blames his illness in the ‘80s on bad medications. He also thought he was misdiagnosed: all those years, all those hospitals. Frank believed he was suffering from, as he called it, “a heartbreak” about the death of his newborn son from Cystic Fibrosis. Coupled with the estrangement of his daughter, with whom he had no contact, he was a father without children. Likely, he was also dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder.

PTSD is an intense anxiety disorder prompted by exposure to a life-threatening event. An event like a fire. It’s marked by nightmares, flashbacks, anger, insomnia, hyperawareness of danger and vigilance to the point of paranoia—all traits Frank exhibited throughout his life, according to friends.

Performer David Freeman was once in a crowd with Frank, in the audience of a Tom Paxton show:

I found myself standing next to Jackson in a very crowded room. I was struck by the severity of his scars—and suddenly he turned to me and said
that he just had to get out: NOW. It seemed to me at the time that he was claustrphobic.”

David Mercer remembered seeing Frank play at The Barge in Surrey. The venue was an actual boat anchored on the Thames River; Denny had played her first show there.

“Well Frank was a regular performer at the Folk Barge,” Mercer remembered, “the confined atmosphere below deck did not suit him … and he usually had to break off after a few songs to go up into the night air.”

Other Cleveland Hill survivors felt the impact of the fire all their lives: in illness, lingering physical complaints, and in psychological distress. One survivor became a teacher, then school principal. All the memories came back every time there was a fire drill, and he hurried his students out the door. One girl became a psychologist, an expert on fear and anxiety, yet still could not overcome her own fear of fire, stocking her home with dozens and dozens of smoke detectors.

Patricia Anne Severance was a second grader at Cleveland Hill at the time of the fire, with a brother in the sixth grade. Severance’s teacher had a daughter, Elizabeth Lies, who would perish in the fire just down the hall from her mother’s classroom. In 2006, Severance wrote about the inability of many of the Cleveland Hill survivors to talk about what had happened, and to start to recover:

I never remember talking about the fire or my feelings with my parents. They didn’t want to talk about it, like it never happened. After school resumed, I remembered lying across the kitchen chair each morning telling my mother how sick my tummy felt. Unfortunately, back then we didn’t have professional counselors to help us cope with this horrific tragedy.
We only had our parents to hold us.46

Frank’s music teacher, Melba Siebold, had survived the fire but suffered a broken back, smoke inhalation and severe burns. She, a student teacher and a choir gown salesman in the classroom at the time had broken the windows when the explosion happened, and thrown or pushed children through, Siebold only jumping through herself when she thought all the children were out. They were not, of course. She did not know if the fire department was coming. She could not hear any sirens. She thought, despite her broken back and burns, she would run to the office for help.

On the 50th anniversary of the fire, The Buffalo News interviewed Siebold. Half a century later, she continued to be haunted, asking, “I often wonder … do people think I should have done more on the occasion to have been able to save more people?”47

She would have difficulty speaking—and the scars of course—all her life.

Frank had his scars. They feature prominently in fellow musicians’ and friends’ remembrances of him, which at first puzzled me. Except for the disturbances on his hairline and the rough skin on the back of his hands, his skin appears smooth. He looks handsome. With his blonde hair and blue eyes, tan complexion and football player build, he looks, if anything, ordinarily handsome.

Then it dawns on me: in every picture of Jackson C. Frank from age eleven on, he wears long pants, long-sleeved shirts buttoned tight, turtlenecks. He is covered, covered to the neck. He is hiding.

The paranoia, the claustrophobia, the nightmares, the extent of his scarring—what else can’t be seen in the pictures? How Frank moved. How difficult it was. Even
strangers, townspeople in western New York who never said hello, knew Frank in
childhood by his walk, knew his story by his shuffle: This child was one of them, the fire
victims. They could see him coming.

Frank would later have massive weight gain from a malfunctioning thyroid, a
condition also caused by the fire. Only his voice escaped, that sweet rich tone. That
“there wasn't smoke damage,” Wright, Frank’s old girlfriend, said, was “astonishing.”

I haven't any picture

 to set before my eyes,

nothing to blame

when the blues start to rise.

All the time Frank was in and out of state-run mental institutions, his parents were
living. It is not clear why he did not contact them, or if he did, what happened.

In the notes for his album’s 2003 reissue, Frank smiles in an old photograph with
his parents. Both parents are robust, healthy-looking, maybe sixty. His mom wears a
scarf over her silver hair, her thin features and wide smile echoes of the woman who
posed behind a bandaged eleven-year old Frank and a movie star for the Buffalo Evening
News. Frank’s dad is grinning and moving out of the frame. Both parents look in
different directions, off in the distance.

Only Frank gazes straight at the lens. Placed in the center of the picture, he
appears forty, maybe younger, maybe older. It’s hard to tell. His face is heavy. His hair,
long and pale. He’s buttoned up, as usual: long sleeves, white turtleneck under his dark
sweater. The trio stand in front of a screen door with an F worked into the grate.
Eventually, Frank did write to someone for help, a friend from his days at Gettysburg College, Mark Anderson, who had become a music professor at a community college near Woodstock.

One of Anderson’s students was a man named Jim Abbott.

Abbott had first heard of Frank when he bought the remnants of Frank’s record collection at a music store in Woodstock. One afternoon in conversation with Anderson, the two men started talking about old folk singers. Abbott brought up Frank. He seemed pretty obscure, just the one album. Had Anderson ever heard of him? Anderson pulled out a letter. “‘Do you feel like helping a down-on-his-luck folk singer?’”

Frank knew he had to get out of the city; he had written to Anderson asking if maybe he had a place where Frank could crash back in Woodstock. Instead, Frank received a phone call from Abbott.

Well, I ain’t got much of value, / and all I want’s to have you.

When he came to New York to visit Frank, Abbott had only seen the singer from old pictures; specifically, Frank’s album cover from ’65. Abbott was shocked and confused by the changes in Frank. Heavily medicated with antipsychotics, Frank had additional physical ailments that had long remained untreated, like a malfunction in his parathyroid glands, a condition prompted by the fire, which led to the weight gain, flaky skin and weak bones, among other issues. The handsome, young blonde boy from 1965 now weighed nearly three-hundred pounds. He looked like an old man. He had difficulty walking down the street. As Abbott remembered: “I thought that can't possibly
be him ... I just stopped and said, 'Jackson?' and it was him. My impression was, 'Oh my God,' … He was so unkempt, disheveled."\(^{49}\)

Frank was living in state-run housing in one of the outer boroughs—Queens, say some sources; the Bronx, say others. He had a small room and little with which to fill it. “[A]ll he had to his name was a beat-up old suitcase and a broken pair of glasses. I guess his caseworker had given him a $10 guitar, but it wouldn't stay in tune.”\(^{50}\)

Jackson C. Frank was fifty-years-old.

He was waiting for Abbott to visit him again, sitting outside on a nice afternoon near the housing projects when he was shot, point-blank, in the face.

It was a random shooting, police said. Frank was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

*Kids*, some sources say.

*A drive by*, say others.

And why Frank? No reason; he was just there—but I think I can guess: He was there and he was aberrant. He was fat, he was scarred, he was old, he could hardly walk. His hair was sparse and getting sparser, his hands that had written those songs shook.

Shot by kids menacing or playing, gangs or a drive-by, a pellet gun or a BB, or buckshot or lead: The bullet made its mark. Frank was blinded, and the bullet would stay there, lodged in his left eye, for the very short rest of his life.

On various websites, Jim Abbott is described as “discovering” Frank, also “saving” him. Harper describes Abbott as Christ-like, writing “folk fan Jim Abbott
seems almost destined to have been given the responsibility of being Jackson’s redeemer on earth”\textsuperscript{51} while writer Allen calls him “the altruistic Abbott” and writes in his Moyo byline “a million thanks to Jim Abbott who aided immeasurably.”\textsuperscript{52}

It is clear that Abbott helped Frank, helped him genuinely, helped him vastly more than most strangers ever help each other, and more than anyone had helped Frank for a very long time. Abbott got Frank out of New York, out of the housing projects and state mental hospitals where Frank did not belong, off the medications and into a small apartment in Woodstock, then, when he required more help, into an assisted living facility, “the only decent place that would take him”\textsuperscript{53}. Thanks to Abbott’s intervention, Frank even started receiving small, overdue royalty checks from sales of his album.

But, as with almost all events in Frank’s life, it isn’t so simple. It isn’t so smooth. Abbott talked with Frank, he interviewed him, he listened to him play—he listened to him play new material. And Abbott decided he was going to write a book.

In 2008, someone named Jim Abbott posted on a music list serv about a book he was writing on Frank. A music blog called Naturalismo was going to publish it, he wrote. Abbott was accepting pre-orders.

Frank has a very small but devoted fan base. People read the post. People believed it. People sent money via PayPal to the email address.

Then, in November 2008, the music blog published the following:

Naturalismo has no involvement with Jim Abbott. We are keeping his words below as his final statement on the issue. Naturalismo is keeping this post in place to provide a forum to discuss strategies for resolving the
situation …

For the time being, DO NOT BUY THIS BOOK until it is absolutely clear that it has been published and being distributed through reputable retailers. That is our final word on the subject.54

Their “final word” was introducing this statement, from Abbott:

Hi. I am Jim Abbott and there are some posts on the Naturalismo site referring to a book I am writing, sort of. The posts are inferring that I was selling the book or some such [sic] and that people were bilked by myself [sic]…

Here is the deal.

I was and am writing a book about my friend Jackson. It is not finished. Someone posted a blurb somewhere saying they were me and were selling “my” book for an unknown amount of money. It was not me. My book is not finished. Apparently a couple of people sent someone the money and now are angry. I can’t blame them. It was not, however, me that posted any blurb.

I am requesting that the whole blog thing be removed because shit is coming back to me that I don’t deserve or need … I don’t have time for this nonsense. Thanks [sic] Jim Abbott (The real one)55

Many of the eighty-one comments that follow Abbott’s (the real one’s) declaration are in disbelief. As someone named Bob Howe writes:
Are you now claiming that you have never advertised the book as finished, asked for money or sent me numerous e-mails saying that your original publisher had died and that you were doing it yourself? … People like Jim Abbott who are worthless enough to steal from Jackson even after his awful life and death are scum beneath contempt.\footnote{56}

Geoffrey Blackburn writes, “i [sic] cannot believe someone would make a few pounds on the back of jackson [sic] it would be a sickening thought.”\footnote{57} Other comments are more philosophical, like this one: “big [sic] puzzle is why did this happen? never [sic] gonna be a mega bucks scam since how many have even heard of jackson c frank.”\footnote{58} [sic]

Then we get the hopeful, desperate for any new information about Frank: “Jim, Can you add another post saying if the book will be coming out with a cd for the first 1000 orders and how to order it?”\footnote{59} There is also this comment by one Rosie:

> Since the whole Jackson C. Frank disappearance and reappearance story is a fraud, I hope the book doesn’t materialize. JCF was a stage name for someone who is still alive and a legend in his own mind. He bears no relationship to the down and out “reincarnation” of JC.\footnote{60}

Perhaps her argument may be explained by her posting time: 3:16 in the morning.

In repeated comments defending himself, Jim Abbott (the real one?) insists:

> “Those who know me know that this isn’t my MO and isn’t [sic] even in my DNA.”\footnote{61}

Other posters point out the damning evidence of email addresses and PayPal receipts. Then the discussion downgrades into conspiracy theories about where the BBC Radio 1 recordings of Frank are; how one poster has all these previously unseen photos; why the only Frank website that was ever, \textit{ever} updated has disappeared; and how many
undiscovered Frank songs are out there anyway?

A few, maybe.

A handful of previously unreleased tracks appeared on the 2003 reissue of Frank’s album, many unremarkable and of poor quality—but enough to fill a whole second disc. Many of these tracks were from a 1975 recording session Frank did in Woodstock, using his own money. What’s left? In 2009, Abbott said not much: He mentions “one real treasure—a song written for Art Garfunkel … that Jackson made a demo of but that never got recorded.”

Then Abbott makes a damning statement, one that does raise some questions about his intentions regarding Frank: “That one might be the best song Jackson ever wrote, and I am keeping that one for myself.”

In early 2012, someone named Jim Abbott or posing as Jim Abbott posted on two music blogs, again promoting a book he was writing about Frank, again soliciting information and possibly cash: “I was Jack’s freidn [sic] and guardian and am trying to finish [sic] a book about him. I cannot afford to go to the UK so I have the internet to work with. Thank you.” The tendency to misspell may link the two Abbotts—his postings on Naturalismo were also misspelled—or perhaps the typos are just coincidence. One commenter named tyler summed the controversy over Abbott’s book best: “even in death, Jackson C. Frank continues to be cursed.”

For a singer whose voice is so stunning, so pure, whose guitar is so sweet, it is tragic that Frank’s songs found more of an audience when sung by other people, his
compositions often erroneously credited to those who covered them: Simon and Garfunkel, Nick Drake, Denny, Fairport Convention, Marianne Faithful. In later years, Bert Jansch would sing his songs, the Decemberists, White Antelope, Counting Crows, Soulsavers. The French group Daft Punks used his music for their 2007 experimental film, for a penultimate scene of a character on fire. Vincent Gallo utilized Frank’s music for his infamous Brown Bunny, and in 2011, filmmaker Sean Durkin prominently featured Frank’s songs “Marlene” and “Macy’s Song” in his film Martha Marcy May Marlene.

Jansch believed that Frank was instrumental in shaping the music of the 1960s, that much of “the music that came out of that period was most certainly due to him.”

Frank’s influence may be felt in Simon’s guitar picking, in Drake’s delivery, in Denny’s song structure. Frank also functioned as a muse for his talented friends, even after he had left the scene. Denny’s song “Next Time Around” is about Frank, its lyrics in code, with references to Frank’s song called “Dialogue,” among others:

> Who wrote me a dialogue set to a tune?
> Always, you told me of being alone
> Except for the stories about God and you
> And do you still live there in Buffalo?

Roy Harper’s “My Friend” was also purported to be about Frank:

> So now you tell me that you're leaving, my friend
> And I can but leave you
> Into your world blowing
> There isn't time to say goodbye …
I can hear you crying

Through the mist you stumble⁶⁸

Though both songs portray Frank in loneliness, Frank alone, at one time, not too many years previous, he was the king of the burgeoning folk scene, the one they all tried to imitate, the one they crowded in to see. As Harper wrote, “Jackson would remain, to many of those whose careers continued and grew, the star pupil who somehow never made it through graduation.”⁶⁹

He is the most famous of the Cleveland Hill survivors, most famous former citizen of his small Rust Belt town, though famous is probably not the right word. Known for a time and then forgotten. Known in a circle whose members spun off and became planets orbiting all on their own: more successful, more respected, more profitable, more together than he ever would be, than he ever could be.

_"I am a crippled singer / and it evens up the score"

Back in Woodstock, overweight, ailing and partially blind, Frank played at open mic nights with a guitar given to him by Abbott. Harper wrote that Frank’s songs of this time “have a ring of therapy about them. If anything of real musical worth happened, it was surely a bonus.”⁷⁰ while Abbott said that Frank “couldn’t sing much worth a damn, but his fingers would always seem to work.”⁷¹

Frank was still smoking heavily; they all did.

Perhaps this passes for comfort: At the end of Frank’s life, he did have music; he did have something to do, somewhere to play; he did have some money from royalty checks; he did have a place to live; he did have a guitar; he did have recognition: pieces
and interviews in *Folk Roots* and *Dirty Linen*, a 1996 reissue (the third, if you’re counting) of his album. There was even talk of a *new* album. He had hope.

Frank wrote this in 1978, but it could have been written decades later:

> I am emerging from the years of quiet in a backwards-forewards [sic] rocking motion, always the best for leaving a cocoon … Once the world was burning and now the world is old … thank you for allowing me to burn in ways I had joy and hope and control over.72

On March 3, 1999, one day after his fifty-fifth birthday, Jackson C. Frank died of natural causes.

Or heart disease. Or a heart attack. Or pneumonia.

He died in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Or in Woodstock?

There are many questions. There are many more. (How does a fifty-five-year-old man die of natural causes?)

But some the people in this story are liars. Many are forgetful, hazed by drugs or drinking or time—and many are dead. Denny died of a brain hemorrhage in ‘78. She was only thirty-one. She had started drinking heavily, crashing her car, forgetting her baby daughter in pubs. Four years earlier, Drake died of suicide; he had started taking pills. Les Cousins closed back in 1970. Jansch died, Piepe … Even Melba Siebold, Frank’s music teacher, the woman who threw children out of windows to save them, died in 2010 at St. Joseph Campus of Sisters Hospital. She had never left Cheektowaga.

And as Frank knows, the dead cannot speak to us. Only sing.
And do me a favor, God, / won’t you let Marlene come in?

In “Marlene” one of the songs recorded in the 1975 Woodstock session, but never released until 2003, Frank addresses his classmate from Cleveland Hill. Two Marlenes died in the fire, and Frank was never clear about which one he meant. Maybe both.

Marlene Dupont was a beautiful girl with high cheekbones, a sly smile. In the fifth grade class photograph taken shortly before the fire, she sits in the front row. She is long-legged, looks wiser than her ten years. Marlene Miller sits in the front as well. She has a huge smile, shining eyes and a white dress, her ankles crossed in bobby socks and gleaming saddle shoes. There’s a picture from her funeral in the Life story; Girl Scouts in uniform lead the procession down the aisle.

In “Marlene” Frank sings of the fire more clearly than in any other song. It’s almost too painful, too plainly-said, to listen to: “The ghost of her hair / it floats over there.” He sings of the blast in the present tense, as if it is still happening: “The world it explodes.” And he sings of running, of how he survived: “To fly, to fly away was the lesson.”

I’ll wake up older,
so much older, Mama.

I’ll wake up older,
and just stop all my trying.

I can’t explain why I am so drawn to Frank. It’s a combination of his voice and his story, those wrenching, exquisite songs, and how little he was compensated, respected and known for those songs. How few he got to sing. How little he is remembered.
His talent and his tragedy were both massive and intertwined. Why couldn’t he shake off the bad luck? How did he know it was coming and would never leave? When he wrote his first song, in some corner of that creaky ship to England, chasing a car or a girl, twenty-two-years-old—did he realize those lyrics would come true? Were they coming true already?

I have said there are no photographs of Frank after the fire where he is not covered up, bundled in clothes, hiding his scars. But there is one.

The last one. He holds a guitar in his hands, a cigarette in his mouth. The guitar looks cheap, the cigarette burned almost to embers. His stomach is ample in a wide, striped shirt. The shirt is short-sleeved so much of his arms can be seen: pale skin with reddish-purple marks. The scars look like veins on meat. His face is red and rough, pebbly blisters on his forehead, neck and cheeks. The picture was taken after he was shot, and his left eye is a white clenched world. He is not smiling.

There’s another shot from around the same time, a picture of Frank with Abbott. Abbott looks delighted, beaming, kind. He has his arm around Frank’s shoulder. It’s an echo of the Elvis shot, only reversed. Flash forward decades: the characters grown up, blown up, bloated, grotesque. Abbott, like Elvis, stands a head taller than Frank. Frank is on the right side, his good side, but still his arm is not around his savior (biographer? friend? exploiter?). His arm hangs down, as it did when he was a boy meeting Elvis. The redness on Frank’s face appears prominently, as does the scarring, his hurt eye drooping and white.

And Frank is not smiling, not staring into the camera at all. He looks surprised to be photographed, his mouth hanging open, his shoulders slumped. He looks as if he is
bearing a weight upon his back. He looks as if he can’t breathe.

The most haunting picture of Frank is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the first published one: that fifth grade class picture from Cheektowaga, reprinted in *Life*. Of the thirty grinning children with cowlicks and saddle shoes and freckles and lost teeth, only half would survive.

Frank is the only one from that music classroom who found a kind of fame—but a majority of the survivors distinguished themselves, many going into lives of service: teaching, social work, medicine. Perhaps this is a testament to their early experience and understanding of suffering. Perhaps this is a testament to their will, their empathy, the outpouring from the town.

Children in other classrooms were hurried out of the building and across the street to the high school. They held hands as they crunched together through the snow, many without coats, none with boots. On the walk, being pushed along past blaring fire trucks, teachers carrying children in their arms, flames being put out in the snow, some of the children vomited on the sidewalk out of fear or shock.

The high school had been warned. Someone held the door to the woodshop open, and the children filed in, shivering. Survivors remembered being sent to the high school cafeteria and fed vegetable soup while they watched black smoke drift by the windows.

Eventually the Cleveland Hill children were assembled in the auditorium, and the counting began. How many were missing? How many? How many? One of the town
ministers, Reverend Smith, went from child to child, kneeling before each one, hugging them, assuring them they were safe now, they were safe, they were safe, he promised.

How long before he realized his own daughter was not among them?

Did the fire set it all in motion for Frank—his mental illness and his imagination—or was it already there, in that smiling, unscarred boy? Would he have picked up a guitar if his hands were never maimed? Would he have sung if he was not haunted? Would his voice still have been sweet?

Who’s left in this story? Who’s left to speak? Who will speak?

I don’t know if Sedgwick lives. I don’t know if Angeline lives, still. She would be nine years older than me to the month. I found a picture online of a dark-haired woman with a heart-shaped face and her name. She reminds me of Frank. Or maybe I just want her to.

I don’t know where Frank is buried, or if there was a funeral, or if anyone came. Did anyone remember?

I am old enough to know my love will not save you. It will not change or redeem you. I cannot by holding you or wanting to or taking care of you or remembering you salvage you.

Still, if I could find a way to go back before your death, before your obscurity, before the blinding, before the homelessness, before the weight gain, before the misdiagnoses, before the medications, before the mental hospitals, before the breakdowns, before the bus trip. Before the divorce and the birth and the death and the
miscarriage and the marriage and the failed comeback and the first album and the folk clubs and the boat to England and the money and Elvis and the guitar and the fire … before the fire.

If I could go back to that picture, that cherubic fair boy in the class picture with the rosy cheeks and the short sleeves, half hidden by the child in front, your grin still visible—you have been placed next to the teacher, perhaps because of a tendency to wreak mischief, perhaps because of height, perhaps for no reason at all. You look genuinely happy, relaxed, free, with a smile, an expression, you will never make again. The Marlenes are in the front row; the furnace ticking below the floor; the snow, as always, outside falling, a cushion, a remedy, a white balm. If I could go back to that day, that morning, I would tell you—tell all of them: *Fly away.*
PART III. NOWHERE
The Apple Trees

When I got out of the car, there were children playing in the grass. It was late fall—really, almost winter, despite the white sun, and the grass looked drained. None of the spindly trees, their tops hunched like broken backs, in the distance by the hills, had leaves. In the field where the children played, in the whole valley, there was no shade. Weeds stretched past the children’s knees. I’m not sure what they played with. Not toys. Broken things.

“Where are your parents?” I asked.

The children squinted at me. “Probably drinking.”

There is a sign before Kilvert, Ohio, a sign to help you turn off the highway—otherwise, you’d miss it. There is no marker with insignias from the Kiwanis’ Club or Masons or Lions. Nothing about keeping the place beautiful by not littering. Nothing about Tree City. There’s no indication of the population, which keeps falling. There’s no date when the town was settled (it was 1850). There’s no Welcome to … There’s nothing about the historical significance of the community, or any mention of its former name, Tablertown. There’s nothing to know you’re there.

Then the orange brick church. A squat block of a building, built in 1946. A handmade sign, red and black letters on a white-painted, splintering board:

*Jesus is Lord*

*Kilvert*

*Church*
Come Unto Jesus

Behind the church is a neat, spare graveyard. Square and large, hemmed by a wire fence and a rusty gate, it looks more like a barren field than a cemetery, the grass short and dead, the ground flat. Just a scattering of graves along the right hand side, hugging the fence, though all are well-tended with carnations, angel statues, crosses, chimes and flags.

I came to Kilvert in 2009. I came as part of a graduate class, an optional field trip. It was optional; it was morning; it may have been a Monday—or perhaps for some other reason, less than a third of the class showed up. Easily we filled only two small cars. Awkwardly, we stood in front of the orange brick church and listened to a lecture about racial identity, intermarrying, genetics. I looked at the windows. Was anyone inside? Could anyone hear us?

Names on some of the graves gave a hint as to the town’s significance, its singularity: Tabler. Michael Tabler was the second son of a plantation owner in West Virginia. His father, George Tabler, the son of German immigrants, was wealthy, industrious—and a slave owner, overseeing a thousand acre plantation near Julep Bend on the Opequon Creek. And in the mid 1800s, Michael fell in love with one of his father’s slaves.

Her name was Hannah. They had children together. Michael and his growing family ran away to Ohio. Others followed, runaway slaves—then, when the Civil War

Years ago, Tablertown, the community Michael and Hannah founded in southern Ohio, was renamed Kilvert, but some of the residents still refer to it by its old name, perhaps because it’s a name that many of them share—their own last name, the name of their ancestor, the patriarch, the man who started it all.

Kilvert is isolated geographically. Perhaps it needed to be to protect the couple and their children. Far from his father, the road dips and swerves, lowering always lowering, past another hairpin turn, another hill of skinny trees, another field empty except for a muddy pony. The way stretches through a valley that often floods—the river, the Hocking River, green and mucky, swelling over its banks in the springtime, swallowing whole portions of the road, cutting off the town for days.

I know what people think of when they think, if they do at all, of Midwestern poverty: Wal-Mart. Trailer parks. Not this landscape. Those hills, were they not frost-burred, would be green. Those trees, just a few days ago, held apples heavy and ruby. Not these people.

Until we came to the community center, all I saw of the town of Kilvert were children, seemingly unattended. The landscape was spare. The signs of human life sticking out from the wildness looked like debris: overturned lawn furniture peeking up from weeds, a sagging trampoline. In the distance were low watching houses, rust-sided sheds.
Then the community center: a one-story building made of cinderblocks and corrugated iron. On the front porch sat vinyl chairs, the kind you might find in a dentist’s waiting room, arranged by color, the seats all ripped. Beside the center stood a lean-to shed, stacked cords of ripening wood. Apples rolled out on long tables.

Inside the center were women, only women.

Women came to greet us, pulling out folding chairs. Most of the women were my grandmother’s age, but a few had been young not too long ago. Like many in the Rust Belt, the women were either heavy or rail thin—pocketknife elbows, cutting cheeks. The women had glossy black hair, strands of white running through it like electrical currents, tied back with bright kerchiefs or twisted into braids; brown eyes; tea-colored skin.

Those who live in Kilvert refer to themselves as the WIN, an acronym for White Indian Negro, though this name, like most names, was bestowed by others: professors, sociologists, researchers behind desks and texts and clipboards. WIN is a distinct racial category. Because the community was so isolated, because the residents were persecuted by multiple sources, they preferred to stick close to home, in the village of their own making. They stayed—and married and intermarried.

The African American ancestry of Kilvert residents is easy enough to trace. There were two major immigrations of slaves and former slaves to the area: one during Michael Tabler’s time when runaway slaves used the networks of the Underground Railroad to escape, and one after the war when free men and women came to town, assisted by nearby Quakers who could offer them farming land for free or for cheap.
But the Native American ancestry of the WIN people is harder to identify. Cherokee, say some. Shawnee, say others. The year Tablertown was founded, the census for the county listed most of the residents as Indian, but what tribe was not specified, wasn’t thought to matter.

The women at the Kilvert community center didn’t seem surprised to see a group of half a dozen, mostly white, mostly twenty-somethings, come in the door. They seemed prepared for anyone to come through, or for no one at all.

The community center consisted of a single room, a kitchen occupying one corner. It resembled a church kitchen, one from the Congregational buildings of my childhood, cobbled and cluttered together with electrical ranges that didn’t seem to match, hoods of white and brown chipped enamel, an old fridge or two, laminate wood cupboards. Quilts were piled in another corner of the room, a stack as high as my shoulders. There were more long tables of apples, and the room had the crisp, sour smell of an orchard.

This was a place to talk, a place to pick up free clothes or blankets or dinner, a place to work on some sewing. But mostly, it was a place to be.

Once, Kilvert was bustling, a sanctuary for minorities in an otherwise fairly homogenous state. A coal mine, called the Jenkins mine, was located just up the road from Kilvert, and the only road to the entrance stretched right through town. African Americans and Native Americans, along with a large number of Irish immigrants, worked at the Jenkins coal mine, and some made their homes in Kilvert. A railroad, connected to
the B & O line, steamed through. There were saloons, hotels, a blacksmith shop, a post office. Kilvert was a “boisterous, wide-open, wild western, no-holds-barred type of town.”1 It received its new name around this time, after a Southern plantation owner with the last name of Kilvert decided coal was more prosperous than farming. He moved his slaves—apparently quite a large number—to the town to make them work in the pits underground, a different kind of hell.

Tablertown. Kilvert. A town of former slaves and Native Americans and immigrants, a town of women and children, was named after a white, slave-owning man. Twice.

Like most booms, the coal and ore boom ended. In 1867, the railroad moved on west, abandoning the lines to rust or pulling the rails up to be re-used elsewhere, somewhere more prosperous, somewhere with dreams. The trains stopped coming into Kilvert. The coal mine dried up in 1887, leaving the land scarred, a gray vein; leaving a cough, a memory of dust. Most of the white immigrants of Kilvert had moved on by then, going off to other jobs, leaving their African American and Native American neighbors—who couldn’t afford to go—behind. A tornado leveled much of the town in 1937.

What’s left of Kilvert? There isn’t a store. There isn’t a gas station or any other businesses at all; those closed. There isn’t a post office. Electricity didn’t come here until the 1950s. Natural gas lines: the late ‘60s. There was a one-room schoolhouse, built primarily to educate children ostracized from local schools because of their race, but that
closed. The community center burnt down a few years ago. It was rebuilt, but on a much smaller scale. It used to be home to sports teams, classes, 4-H meetings. Once, the community center functioned as a discount grocery store. Once, classes were held here, woodworking and crafts. Once, it served as the State Headquarters for the North American Indian Council.

But once, once, once was a long time ago. The center lost its government funding. The North American Indian Council moved on. The community center became simply a place to go, the only public space in Kilvert other than the church. It was somewhere to sit, to stay warm.

“Sit down, have something to eat,” women in the center said to me.

“No thank you,” I said, startled and embarrassed and just standing there by the door. “I’m not really hungry.”

A woman touched my arm. “No one leaves this place without being fed.”

I grew up comfortable. Our northern Ohio school distinct, Lexington, was considered the best in the county. Most of my classmates went onto college. Lexington had the reputation of being smart (All of our courses are AP courses, the vice principal said), of having it easy (we always passed our levies), of acting superior (You cross your legs like a snobby Lexington girl, someone once said to me).

The problems of Mansfield City Schools, football rivals of my smaller, more prosperous school distinct, seemed far away. Friday nights, the Mansfield City Tygers (with a y) assembled onto the patchy field of their stadium, built in 1947 right by the
highway. Eighty-one percent of the school qualified for subsidized lunches. Their school colors were orange and brown, like a living, undulating rust stain.

Lexington was primarily white; Mansfield City, primarily black. For a long time, the significance of this was lost on me.

I remember taking the SAT at Mansfield Senior High, and being shocked at the state of the building. Broken windows let in the cool fall air. There were not enough desks and the start of the test was delayed. Parts of the ceiling, water-loosened paint chips, flaked down onto my booklet during the exam. Like pencil shavings, I brushed them away.

The people of Kilvert used to celebrate their history with “Kilvert Pioneer Days,” a festival open to the public with events like a bake sale, a Chinese auction, a horseshoe throwing competition. Kings, queens, princes and princesses were crowned from among the village children, the winners anointed based on how many coins they had collected in the cans they took from door to door.

The local paper, The Athens NEWS, covered the event, writing a cheerful and folkie piece with lines like: “Corlett Marshall, 4, who wants to be a ballerina and said she enjoys watching television, is also hoping to be a princess.”² The newspaper described Kilvert as “hardly even a village anymore, but it's got more character and heart than many bigger cities … a peaceful little town.”³

Was this peaceful? The sheds and the long weeds?
Was this heart? The children played by themselves—two fathers I finally saw stepping out of a rusted truck full of trash bags. The men shared a bottle, passing it back and forth as they stood on opposite sides of the bed.

The newspaper article is dated, nearly a decade old, and I’m not sure if the reporter has been back, if many people have, if Pioneer Days even still happen.

Kilvert doesn’t make the news much anymore. In 2007, *The Columbus Dispatch* ran a small article about a headstone in the cemetery. Michael Tabler’s gravestone, from 1843, had cracked into three. A professor from the local university restored it—the granite, stronger, etched with a willow tree—and there was a ceremony to mark the unveiling. Tabler’s ancestors who had left town came back. They brought their children, “stood in a circle around the plot, joyfully singing the hymn, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, then took turns posing for pictures.”

I am struck by two things: The pictures are beautiful, and show a group of people in summer-bright clothes, church clothes, flower-printed skirts and button-down dress shirts and caps. The people are light-skinned and dark-skinned, walking down the hill to the cemetery together as if in a wedding march or a parade. This sight, this diversity, this being together, wouldn’t be that usual in the cities of Ohio, Columbus or Cleveland. But small town, rural Ohio? It might only happen on this street, on this small, unnamed street.

I also learn from the article that Michael Tabler was not romantic, forward-thinking and brave, as I had believed. As a young man, he did not defy his father and flee to make a better life, a real human life for his wife and young children. Instead, only
“After 20 years of holding his offspring in slavery, Tabler moved with Hannah and their children—five boys and a girl—to southern Ohio and freed them.” Though when Tabler died, he willed his land to his descendants, he had held them in slavery for twenty years. He had watched his children grow up as slaves.

At the Kilvert community center, a woman grinned, telling me how her granddaughter was awarded a scholarship to college after a professor had advised the girl to mention her WIN background on her application. “It means something,” the woman said. “It matters.”

It was a big deal, getting out.

Everything left Kilvert: the businesses, the railroad, the coal in the ground. The children were leaving. And this was a source of pride tinged with grief: The children and grandchildren were getting scholarships to college, going to college, graduating, getting jobs elsewhere. Jobs were only, ever elsewhere, as was almost everything.

The nonprofit group Rural Action describes Kilvert as a “food desert,” an isolated area without easy access to food, especially fresh food; where the nearest grocery store is half an hour’s drive; where there are no farmer’s markets; where there is no public transportation; where finding one’s way to a store or market isn’t easy, “just isn’t possible.”

No noise from the highway, miles away. No traffic. Besides our own, I saw only one working car in Kilvert: the ramshackle truck, pocked with rust, which pulled up to the lean-to shed next to the community center and began unloading trash bags of clothes.
Outside the center, the sky felt huge but also, shifting, like it was narrowing, closing in. Winter was near—and I felt it in Kilvert, felt the shivering approach, rolling in from the hills; the lonely nights made longer, darker. It was going to get very cold.

Most of all, what I felt in Kilvert, out in the countryside with acres of space, was *trapped.*

It was a feeling I knew, though it had not reoccurred for years, not since I had left the last city where I had lived. It was a New York feeling, born of the press of the bodies on the trains and the buildings stacked so close together they looked like kindling.

I had lived in New York for several years, and though I had lived in cities before, New York was different. It was darker. It was more hopeless. It felt inevitable, everything about the place. It was inevitable that the grocery would raise its prices the month my teaching sections were cut. It was inevitable that, the coldest night of winter, the landlord would varnish the vacant neighboring apartment’s floors, close the doors and walk away, leaving a toxic haze so thick I had to call the fire department who broke down the neighbor’s door with an ax and told me to sleep with the windows open. I awoke with snow on the sheets. It was inevitable that the trains would be late and crowded, that there would be blood on the seat. It was inevitable that someone would find me; a man would sit beside me or approach me as I walked down the street and would do something, say something, try to touch my hair, call me *bitch,* follow me. I felt hounded in the city. I always had not quite enough: breakfast or lunch, money or warm clothes or subway cards. Much of my time was spent wandering around, trying to find somewhere to be.
I had left the city to get away from that feeling, the suffocation, the claustrophobia, the press of being hunted; the feeling that I would never make it, I would never survive, I would never earn enough to live, I would never live up to the life expected of me—and here the feeling had reared again, in rural Ohio, a hamlet of nowhere, a ghost town populated by the living.

I stood out on the porch of the community center in Kilvert, surrounded by emptiness and big sky, hills of trees, and tried to breathe.

Maybe what I had been feeling all that time in the city was not about the city at all. Maybe this was what poverty felt like: the feeling of being stuck. In Kilvert, there was no easy way out of town, no easy way to anything. There were few cars in Kilvert, and certainly no subways, no buses. In New York, there were plenty—but they all cost.

I couldn’t afford to stay in the city. For a long time, I also couldn’t afford to leave.

Despite being isolated from transportation and stores and towns, despite being a “food desert,” there was food in Kilvert, and it was given to us. To me. A lunch consisting of a sandwich, a soft white roll with pink deli ham and a slice of lettuce. I don’t like lettuce. I rarely eat it, but I swallowed it all. And it was delicious. And I was hungry, as I sat in a folding chair in a circle of women.

I was one of the last to leave. A woman ran after me, and I’m ashamed to say I don’t remember her name, if I ever learned it. She held up a large bag of apples, just
picked from the orchards, those spindly trees. The women of the center were planning to press the fruit into applesauce, to can for the winter.

But this bag of food, plastic and bulging, was for me.

The woman passed it through the open window. Her hands overlapped mine, touched my fingers and held on. “You’ll come back,” the woman said. “I know you’ll be back. I have a good feeling.”

I squeezed the woman’s hand, her dry fingers. She removed her hand and waved. I rolled up the car window.

Apples spilled out of the bag and rolled onto the floor of the car, bruising already. My classmates and I would divide them up when we got back into town, filling the bottoms of our backpacks. I don’t remember if I ate a single apple, if they were delicious, crisp and full of the taste of fall—or if I let them spoil and darken, rot without ever even tasting one, afraid to try what I felt what not mine, what I did not deserve, what had been given to me in charity.
The Building

I was fifteen when the movie people came.

They came because of the Ohio State Reformatory, a prison built in my hometown of Mansfield, Ohio in 1886—and abandoned a little over a century later, thanks to a 1990 court order deploring the living conditions. An imposing Romanesque structure, designed to resemble an old-world German cathedral with towers and turrets, the Reformatory was made of gray sandstone with high green roofs. The warden’s quarters, at the front of the prison, has bay windows, a front porch with wide steps. There’s a white stone chapel at the center, dome-roofed administration buildings. Except for the two long wings of cellblocks, one on either side of the chapel, the prison looks like fancy dollhouse. The guards referred to it as “the Castle.”

The movie was set in Maine, but the Reformatory had the look: Gothic, daunting, grand—and recently emptied of inmates. It was also cheaper to film in Ohio, to ship the cast and crew and house them there, than to construct a prison in another state. Tango and Cash had been filmed at the Reformatory in the late 1980s, Sylvester Stallone and Kurt Russell firing guns around doorways and driving burning cars, Russell’s hair in a spectacular feathered mullet.

But then the cast and crew of The Shawshank Redemption came.

And it was a much bigger deal: Castle Rock Entertainment and Columbia Pictures, Morgan Freeman and Tim Robbins. Based on a novella by Stephen King called Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption, the movie is about a banker named Andy who spends two decades imprisoned, falsely convicted of the murders of his wife and her
lover. In prison, he befriends a smuggler named Red, played by Freeman, works at the prison library, is regularly beaten and abused, and helpfully uses his banking knowledge to assist guards and prisoners alike with financial matters. Eventually, he escapes, tunneling a hole through his cell wall, the escape passage hidden by a cheesecake poster of Rita Hayworth. His buddy Andy gone, Red serves out his time. Once out, he finds the money, laundered from a corrupt cell inspector, left for him under a tree by Andy, then joins his friend in sunny Mexico.

The End.

That story was coming to Mansfield. Prison scenes, of which there were many, the majority of the movie, would filmed at the Reformatory. The money scene would be filmed in a field. The tree would be a local tree. The street would be familiar streets. The park bench, the bus stop, the drugstore, the bank—we would know them all. Every glance out the window as Andy was bused to jail would be our glance: our vista, our broken little world.

The movie needed actors, lots of them. It needed extras. It needed inmates and prison guards, townspeople, jurors and audience members, passersby, storeowners, pedestrians, bus drivers, tourists and crowds. It needed people to fill in time. It needed bodies to stand and walk and cross streets and pretend to be having engrossing conversations.

I had already acted in a movie by then, a local film based on urban legends of aliens and alien hunters. Titled, unfortunately, *Men in Black*, the movie was released just
a few short years before the Will Smith blockbuster of the same name. I had to take the film off my resume because people kept asking me, “What was Will Smith like?” And: “Wait. What part did you play?”

It was a small part, listed in the credits as simply “Girl”: the main character’s daughter. In the movie, the protagonist—aka Dad—becomes more and more distant and estranged from his family as his obsession with aliens takes over. I don’t think I was ever even onscreen with the actor playing my dad. After edits, my part was reduced to a voiceover, a face to fill the picture frames beside a phone.

In the finished film, I was a voice on an answering machine, leaving more and more plaintive messages for my absent dad. The camera focused on photographs of me when my voice came on screen, close-ups of my plastic barrettes, my gapped teeth. I had recorded the voiceovers in a closet, some tiny room the producers, men with ball caps and glasses, had tried to soundproof with mattresses. “Be more sad,” they had urged me.

“We heard you on TV,” friends said at school the day after the premiere at a local movie house. It wasn’t TV, it was film, I wanted to say. I’d been too embarrassed to go. If I was to become an actor, I decided, I would be the kind who never watched myself.

My dad had recently left his work as director of the town economic development corporation. Over the years, he had led tour after tour of abandoned factories to potential developers. Mansfield Tire & Rubber Company had closed, Ohio Brass, Tappan, GM. All those smokestacks were silent. All those warehouses wide open; developers, possible new businesses, could have their pick among the echoing, stalled plants. And they chose
none. Hopeful, ever hopeful, he kept a hardhat by his briefcase. Finally, he quit, took out
loans, went in with a few friends—and bought the old Westinghouse factory himself.

Once the town’s largest employer, maker of washing machines and waffle irons
and other home appliances large and small, the Westinghouse factory in Mansfield was a
huge, seven-story building right by the railroad tracks (so close, a train passing would
shake the building like a skyscraper on a windy day). Really, it was two buildings,
connected over a two-lane road by an enclosed three-story bridge. In a few years, a semi
truck would ignore the clearance sign and hit this bridge, crushing the bottom floor.

The Westinghouse industrial complex included over a dozen outbuildings,
sprawling over forty acres of corrugated tin, brick, steel trestles, puddles of oil. Built in
the 1920s, the factory once employed more than eight-thousand people—the largest
employer in town. Its heydays were the ‘40s and ‘50s, years of post-war spending: shiny
new kitchens, fancy new toys.

Westinghouse ceased production in Mansfield in 1990, and went up on the
auction block. This huge, landmark structure—which had once produced the first fully
automatic electric cooking range, the first upright freezer, the first frost-free
refrigerator—came up for sale to the public. My dad saw something there, not just
ghosts.

He and few business associates were able to rent out some of the warehouses and
assembly lines to manufacturers, and leased the office space to companies. There was
even a ballroom on an upper level of the main building: marble floors and an elevated
stage with velvet curtains, such a contrast to the rust and steel and grease outside. The
ballroom would be rented out to local schools for functions: proms and charity auctions and sports team banquets. My own sophomore year Homecoming dance was held there, though I sat out much of the dance in the lobby, pretending I didn’t know my way around; I didn’t know the way to the restrooms or the elevator or the freight elevator. I told no one of my family’s connection, afraid they would still somehow know. *You own this place?*

What was I afraid of? Being seen as wealthy, though we were not. Buying the Building had taken everything my family had, life savings plus loans, and my dad would never really see the return on his investment. Maybe I was afraid of being seen as a destroyer, the landlord’s family, someone who had come in, someone who had taken over.

The stage in the ballroom had been used as a television studio. Here, national commercials for Westinghouse had been filmed in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Here, Westinghouse had built something called The Home of Tomorrow in 1934, including a model kitchen, to showcase its products in action. Here, backstage behind the dusty velvet curtains, was a robot.

Elektro, built in the Mansfield Westinghouse factory, was seven feet of aluminum on a steel frame. “[O]ne of the most photographed mechanical men,” Elektro was created for and displayed at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. The robot could speak a vocabulary of seven-hundred words, perform twenty seven commands, glide on rubber tire rollers, raise and lower his arms, turn his head—and smoke a cigarette. In the
blueprints for Elektro’s design, he’s smoking, a bellows in his head used to suck in the haze. His lips are thick, his nose flat, his body a bulky silver tube. He performed at the fair with Sparko the robot dog, a twenty minute show every two hours; “Sparko, with two motors, could beg, bark and wag his tail.”

It’s hard to follow Elektro’s path after the World’s Fair, and little Sparko completely disappears from history—stolen? Melted down? Like many stars, Elektro seems to fall on hard times. He was displayed, but never operated, never putting on a show, at the Palisades Theme Park in Oceanside, California. He appeared in a couple movies, including 1960’s Sex Kittens Go to College (“The Sci-Fi, Sex Comedy Sensation”3) where he starred as Thinko, the Campus Computer: When Collins College needs a new head of the Science Department, Thinko “come[s] up with Dr. Mathilda West, who has degrees in lots of things, but turns out to be disruptively attractive as well.”4 Oh, Thinko!

Some sources say Elektro was sold for scraps, but some part of him must have remained. After the Westinghouse factory closed, but before my dad took over, someone discovered the robot (or his components) backstage in the ballroom. He was eventually restored by a man named Jack Weeks, son of John Weeks, who had co-invented the robot, and now rests on display at the Mansfield Memorial Museum. The museum bills him as “The Oldest Surviving American Robot in the World.”5

The Westinghouse factory, once sold, was renamed The Mansfield Commerce Center. I wonder if it was so named because of the ease in switching all the signs.
Westinghouse’s logo was a giant stylized $W$ on a white, circular background. The new owners just turned the circles upside down. The $W$ for Westinghouse became $M$ for Mansfield.

In my family, we called the old factory simply “the Building,” and I spent much of my adolescence there. When the factory closed, when the workers left, they left most everything in their offices. Desks still had rolling wooden desk chairs. Drawers still held pencils and stamps and rubber bands. Staplers still held staples. My younger sister and I would roam through the rows and rows of abandoned offices, doors fronted with pebbled glass. We would choose adjoining offices and pretend to work, stamping yellowed folders with stamps whose ink had dried, stacking papers warped with mold. We would race each other in desk chairs. On some of the factory floors, we found wheeled carts for machine parts, and would race each other in those too.

Other times, we simply roller-skated up and down the long, cement hallways, the deserted warehouses echoing with the slide and push of our wheels. We would skate for hours in musty silence; it was like gliding on a long, narrow river. Far up in the steel rafters, pigeons nested, flying in and out of the broken windows. These are some of my happiest memories of childhood: Flying through the factory, we could skate for miles. My sister and I both had a few birthday parties at the Building, skating, playing tag with friends among the stilled conveyer belts. It was at one such party that we found the washing machine.

When the factory had closed, the workers were laid off, many whom were in their
fifties or sixties with little hope of finding other work in town, many of whom had
worked for Westinghouse for years, all their life. It was in the newspaper for a long time,
all the stories leading up to the close of the factory, the end of an era. There were
pictures of people hugging, sobbing. I felt guilty, though my family had nothing to do
with them losing their jobs. Later, I would feel guilty for finding happiness in the old
factory. What the local paper, the News Journal, once described as a “huge, humpbacked
whale of a structure…[which] reminded a lot of people of better days, of high
employment in the city” was my favorite place to play, this deserted, rusted playground
that I loved.

With permanent black markers, workers had autographed the last Westinghouse
washing machine to come down the assembly line in 1990. Then they had hugged, said
their goodbyes, turned off the lights and left. Months later, my sister and I found the
machine.

“They just left it here?” she said.

It stood in a near-empty room, one of the big and mysterious corner areas with
broken windows and skylights and a bird smell and conveyor belts, looking so strange
now that they were stilled. The washing machine was white and gleaming, brand-new
except for the black marks scrawled all over its surface like tattoos.

I wanted to keep it. I wanted to bring it home and use it. Or look at it, at least.
Stash it in my room, where I am certain it would not have fit. Someone should have
taken it. Someone should have read and remembered those names.
I worked at the Building one summer when I was in junior high, only for a week. I worked as my dad’s secretary, taking over for her while she was on vacation. I was terrible. Her phone took all the calls that came into the building (this was years before cell phones, before digital voicemail) and she, then apparently I, was responsible for connecting the callers with the parties they were trying to reach. She had shown me how to do this before she left for the sunny shores of wherever, and I had thought I had understood. But once I was alone in that office with the blinking red lights, I could not figure it out.

“Let me transfer you,” I would say, then stab at buttons repeatedly. Eventually I gave up and just sat still for a few minutes. “I’m sorry, he’s unavailable,” I would say to the caller once I decided enough time had passed.

More than once they caught me. “I was just talking to him a second ago. I know he’s in there.”

“He must have just stepped out,” I said.

I did at least remember to ask if the callers wanted to leave messages, which I wrote on pink paper, the While You Were Out notepads that had been left in abandoned desks, many of the pages with mold or mouse bites at the top. I tacked the sheets to the bulletin board in the lobby.

I was harangued by some of the callers. I was asked out on dates. I was thirteen. When I asked if I could take a message, one caller said, “You sure can. Tell him I’ll call him tomorrow, and I would much rather talk to you than him any day, sweetheart.”

“Okay, I’ll tell him,” I said and hung up.
After the secretary thing didn’t pan out, I worked as the Building’s elevator operator for a while. The elevator was confusing, apparently. You could push the wrong button and end up in a subbasement of the factory, a deserted stretch of roller rink. I was stationed by the bank of buttons to help.

I had a stool and a book. I dressed up for the job in a skirt and Mary Janes, my favorite white plastic headband.

Once a woman said to me, “What are you?”

I believe she must have been trying to ascertain my age, what I was doing there in the elevator, if it was even legal, me spending all summer day in the hot, steel box of the elevator (fake wood paneling, greasy red carpeting, expired inspection certificate in smashed frame). But I sat up a little straighter on my stool and said, “I am an actress.”

Another time I was running the elevator when a deliveryman came inside. He was out of breath, sweating, upset. He told me the floor and then slumped against the back of the elevator, shaking his head and swearing. The elevator rocked with his movement. He grew more and more agitated as we rose, and I just watched the numbers. Finally, the ding. We arrived at his floor, and I held the door open for him with my paperback.

When the doors closed after him, I wondered if I should tell my dad, if I should quit this job too, at least for the day. I had just decided to do that, when the doors dinged again, and opened, and the angry deliveryman back got on.

This time, he noticed me. “How old are you? Ten?”
The doors slid closed. I was alone with this man and I was terrified. But I was also a little annoyed. *Ten?*

“I’m thirteen,” I said.

“You’re going to be a pretty girl someday—but you’ve got to take care of yourself. All right?”

“All right,” I said, as the doors opened onto the lobby again, and perhaps relieved that he was leaving without incident, perhaps feeling a little safe, I said to his back, “You bet I will!”

In 1992, two years after the death of Westinghouse Mansfield, *The Shawshank Redemption* filmed at the Building. The crew used the old Reformatory for many shots, both exterior and interior: the guard towers, the fancy entranceway with its checkered tile floor, admittance rooms, the warden’s office, even a locker room. But there was a problem about some key scenes: At the Reformatory, the massive, six tiers-tall blocks of cells faced *out*, faced walls or windows.

The architects didn’t want the prisoners communicating with each other, which seems especially cruel, especially isolating, even though the Reformatory was never meant to be such a place. It was never intended for maximum security. Called an intermediate prison, it was built to hold first time offenders, especially those deemed too old for juvenile hall, but too young or too green for the horrors and hard knocks of the state pen: petty crooks, pickpockets, a twelve year-old arsonist.
Still, the Reformatory’s history is not without horrors. In 1948, two intimates, released early from the Reformatory for good behavior, killed a tavern owner in nearby Columbus, then returned to the Reformatory for revenge. When they couldn’t find the guard or warden they wanted, they kidnapped the superintendent of the prison farm, his wife and the couple’s twenty year-old daughter. All three were murdered in a nearby cornfield. The crime spree—robbing, running, threatening—ended two weeks later with one of the parolees, dubbed the “Mad Dog Killers,” dead in a shootout with police. The second Mad Dog would be executed for murder.

For the movie, for the storyline, the prison cells needed to face in, needed to look at each other over an aisle. The characters needed to be able to talk to each in their cells. And because the cells in the Reformatory didn’t do this, for a time there was talk of the movie picking up stakes and heading to Tennessee where there was another prison, apparently, one with better cellblocks.

In the story as my dad tells it, he stepped in. He and his partners didn’t own the second large warehouse on the Westinghouse campus, the one to the far side of the railroad tracks, a warehouse which was larger, taller. There was space inside to build—and build high. But the owner wasn’t thrilled about having a movie crew come in. They would make a mess, he said. The space would be impossible to rent afterward. My dad talked him into it (think of the publicity!), and The Shawshank Redemption moved in.

The crew built a set inside the factory: a new, three-story wall of cells—facing in. The space was huge, giant steel girders arching over the ceiling like buttresses on a
cathedral. The soundstage fit. It seemed to belong there, like the Building—this busted, broken, abandoned space in Ohio—had been waiting for Hollywood all this time.

My mother and siblings and I used to go walk the set after filming had finished for the day. It was cool inside the cellblock, and quiet, almost peaceful. We strolled down the aisle. Light filtered from the skylights and the high, broken windows, blazing a path. Years later, when I was living in San Francisco, my family came for a visit, and we did the Alcatraz tour. I had been wandering around the main cellblock of the prison for an hour when I finally realized why it seemed so familiar, so much like home: the Building, the movie set.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Tim Robbins’ character escapes from prison by squeezing through a tunnel he has dug with a spoon. The filmmakers built this escape tunnel at the Building, making it open on one side so they could film Andy inching through. My little brother, who was about five at the time, crawled through the tunnel one afternoon. He liked tight spaces. He could often be found at our house hiding in the small area between the toilet and the wall in the downstairs bathroom, or squeezing in the cabinet under the sink in a space my mother had cleared out for him, placing a pillow, his blanket and a few books inside.

What I remember most about these walks, my family’s walks through the movie set at the Building, was the light. Everything seemed golden. It was always evening, late afternoon. Though the walls were fake, one-sided, it felt like something was waiting behind them. A story was about to happen. All that was needed were some lights, a camera to click on, film to roll. I could have been a part of it, if I wasn’t so stubborn.
So many people from town, kids from school, actors from the community theater, friends, local politicians teachers and cops, were in *The Shawshank Redemption*, it felt like the movie was a census of Mansfield, casting everyone. It felt like a production of Wilder’s *Our Town*, but with expensive scenery. At one point, the movie was so desperate for extras, if you showed up dressed even vaguely in period costume—wore a skirt if you were female, a cap if you were male—you could be in a crowd scene. There were ads in the papers for extras, every single day. Everyone was talking about the movie, and I got sick of it. My dad met Morgan Freeman, Tim Robbins (who complained about Mansfield in an interview, calling it radio wasteland once you drove over that hill and the Cleveland stations disappeared), had lunch with the producers regularly.

Acting had been my dream, my private thing that my family and school and town didn’t really participate in, let alone understand (*We saw you on TV*)—and now it was everywhere. Everyone got the bug. I wanted to matter; I didn’t want to be an extra, and I especially didn’t want to be an extra simply because there was a movie in my town.

Of course a movie would never come to my town again, not like that.

*Air Force One*, the 1996 action film with Harrison Ford, shot a few scenes at the Reformatory (Ford never came to Mansfield). The group Godsmack filmed a music video there. Marilyn Manson was photographed at the Reformatory for a 1996 *Details* spread, and there was hope that this too would lead to a video at the old prison, but nothing ever panned out. On the website for the Reformatory, “Film Requests” is still
highlighted prominently, as is film tourism on the Mansfield / Richland County Convention and Business Bureau.

The sites are referring specifically to the “Shawshank Trail,” a series of the fourteen local spots seen in the film, including the prison, a park bench downtown, various meadows, and an old, lightning-damaged oak tree. It’s a self-guided tour. You drive your car. “Follow the path of Hollywood!”

Surprisingly, people do it. A lot of people. The Shawshank Redemption, a film released two decades ago, still supplies Mansfield with much, if not all, of its tourism. The Reformatory survives, is maintained and continues to be updated, thanks to paying tourists. National Public Radio even did a story on Mansfield and the movie a few years ago, calling the Trail “Mansfield’s Shawshank industry.”

NPR Correspondent Cory Tuner had somber words for the town:

Mansfield has fallen on hard times. Westinghouse, the Tappan Stove Co., Ohio Brass, and Mansfield Tire and Rubber have all closed plants in Mansfield since America's heavy manufacturing boom went bust. The latest casualty: the local General Motors plant … All in a city of fewer than 50,000. 7

Interestingly, the majority of the comments on the story when it was posted to NPR’s site are in defense of Mansfield. NPR listeners take offense to the Rust Belt moniker, with comments such as: “labeling Mansfield “rust belt” totally misses the beauty of the locale and its people,” 8 and “I am very disturbed at the reference to “rust belt” [sic] Mansfield
and most all of mid-Ohio are extremely beautiful, bucolic, and altogether look like one state-wide movie set … No rust anywhere in these golden fields.”

Perhaps these listeners haven’t taken Route 30 into town, when the fields along the highway gave away to warehouses bronzed in rust, clogged and capped smokestacks, the brownfield where one of AK Steel’s plants used to sit before it was bulldozed and sold for off scrap—and in the near distance beside the railroad tracks, the “humpbacked whale” structure of the Building.

The premiere of The Shawshank Redemption was held in Mansfield—the Ohio premiere, anyway. I can’t remember if any of the movie stars came. Maybe Morgan Freeman. Maybe the producers showed up only to disappear again in long black cars. They showed the film at the Renaissance, the big 1928 movie theater downtown, which in recent years has been known as the home of the Miss Ohio pageant (and in the 1970s, was known for showing Deep Throat). Gasps and applause when a close-up shot lingered for a few seconds on the face of Doug, a local guy, a friend of my family’s. He played a prison guard in Shawshank. In the film, he aims a gun at the yard.

After the credits rolled to a standing ovation, they trucked the audience out to the Reformatory in gray prison trucks for the after-party. At the Castle, the dressed-up crowd was fed hard, stale bread, served up on a thin metal tray. Water was served in tin mugs, pale soup. My parents attended the premiere, and the food choices were not understood, my dad said. It did not go over well, the hard bread and watery soup. This was a big deal,
the premiere, the after-party. It was supposed to be Hollywood. There was supposed to be shrimp.

The movie didn’t do well, either, at least not at first, barely recouping its budget from the box office takes, but it found a life on video (it was video then). It found a cult following. Mansfield finally found something to sell: the memory, the making of, the experience. We would manufacture again, make dreams—but not even our own dreams, dreams of a Hollywood fiction.

My dad sold his share in the Building. That semi truck hit the bridge. A woman was killed by a train on the tracks right in front of one of my dad’s former co-workers as she tried to protect her stalled car. The co-worker screamed for her to get out of the way, forget the car; he ran—but he could not reach her in time.

New owners tore part of the Building down, the warehouse that had housed the Shawshank cellblock. The New Journal said it was time; that building was an eyesore, a reminder of the manufacturing history that Mansfield had lost, the jobs that were lost, that kind of life that was lost for us forever. I’m not sure if the paper remembers, if very many people remember, that a good portion of the movie was filmed at the Building.

All the pieces of the soundstage are gone, except for a section of the escape tunnel my little brother once snuck through. It’s housed at the Reformatory now, part of the “Hollywood Tour.” On the tour, guides dress in prison gray.
Do I regret not being in the movie, not being an extra: a face in a crowd, a blur in the background, a teenager captured forever on film, if only for a scene, if only mostly unseen? I do. I regret it when I hear the twentieth anniversary of the film approaches; a campaign has been launched to try to get Morgan Freeman, the most sympathetic of the movie stars, back to town. I regret it when I hear the tree from the movie was hit by lightning and hurt by wind a few years ago, and now, despite the many who make pilgrimages to see it, who have tattoos of it, who crawl under fences and onto private property to glimpse where Andy buried his treasure for Red, it’s unclear whether the tree can be saved. A piece of the tree, a jagged bit of trunk, is on display at the prison, in a locked glass class.

Mansfield continues to make some money off the movie. The Reformatory is still open for tours, especially around Halloween when they offer “ghost tours.” It’s been featured on ghost hunter reality shows, more than once (there are a lot of ghosts). You can get married in the main block, which I am told is quite nice: the large entranceway with its chandelier, the black and white tiled floor. Every spring, they hold a fashion show at the Reformatory. “Glamour in the Slammer.” It always sells out.
Swimming Dreams

My high school didn’t have a swim team. We didn’t have a pool. We had a few hundred students in a single-story building just up the hill from the junior high, which was just up the hill from the elementary. A few miles away were the factories (GM, AK Steel), the memory of factories (Westinghouse, Armco Steel), and farmland. I had a classmate who drove his tractor the last day of senior year, which took him two hours; I remember passing him on the road, then seeing his big John Deere parked in the lot amid the little humps of station wagons and mini vans. We had a biblically-successful boys basketball team who had come from behind, the underdogs, to win a state championship. The road to the high school was officially renamed ‘89 Championship Drive in their honor. Our mascot was the Minuteman. The girls’ teams were called the Lady Minutemen. We didn’t have a swim team.

Still, I swam, mostly at various public pools, every summer day of my childhood. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, we would leave after breakfast, bags packed with towels, coconut oil, my mother’s novels. We would stay at the pool until late afternoon, having eaten lunch there, hot dogs or hamburgers, pale half-done French fries in a paper tray.

Only in the car ride home would exhaustion hit. I would feel the sun then, prickling my arms and the back of my neck. There is nothing quite like the exertion of
swimming, a kind of peaceful burn, my muscles loosening as I leaned into the seat, the fabric damp from my suit.

What was swimming about then?

Cooling off, primarily. Ohio was a long fever dream.

Swimming also occupied us, keeping my little sister and me safe, busy and in motion. We speed-walked around the blue perimeter; flung our bodies from the diving board; crossed the length of water; pulled ourselves, streaming, out of the pool like gymnasts, arms trembling from the strain (no ladder for us)—and did it all again and again. We often fell asleep on the drive back.

When we were older, we rode our bikes to the pool. The pedals felt hard and weird against our bare feet, like Crunch bars. For the cycling trip home, my hair wet and heavy, drying into snakes, I didn’t bother putting on my shorts. I stood up on the pedals when we coasted down hills, wearing only my Smurfette swimsuit. Our towels slung around our necks, we were champions.

We also swam a lot in ponds; specifically, my grandfather’s pond in the goat pasture, the water so dark and dank, my mother eventually made us wear life vests because who knew what was in there? We couldn’t touch bottom, a gulp of leaf matter and mud. We didn’t want to (we had seen *Jaws*). Fish circled the nests where their eggs lay in the shallows, in Dixie Cup-shaped depressions in the sand. Every now and then far out in the pond, a bigger fish would leap, disturbing the black water, so smooth and still it looked like glass, a mirror spotted with age. I used to terrify myself on purpose by pretending to spot a large gray shape in the depths, then turning my back on it and
sprinting through the water. I had to make it to the dock before the creature grabbed my leg.

There were other holes, other gashes in the earth. My grandfather had a pond not big enough for wading—really it was a mud puddle made by his tractor’s wheels dipping, repeatedly, into dirt. But a crawfish lived there in the dark, and every visit, I had a ritual where I would go poke it with a stick. I lay on the ground on my stomach, tipped the stick in the pool. The crawfish came out of his hole, grabbed the stick, gripped it, wrestled with it, tugged and held on. We shook for a while. Then one of us released first and went on with our life.

There were also the quarries. All through the farmland, the fields were sold for gravel. Companies dug them up, hauled the stones away for driveways or gardens for some other town, some other life where people had need for such things. Here, we needed money for the ripping up of pastures, the flattening of hills. Gravel companies would stay a year in our fields, maybe more, gouging. When they packed up to go, they filled what was left, pits in the ground, with water.

Often these quarry ponds were deep, excavators scoring the earth far into the hillsides, scrapping the bases to get at the stones. The ponds were wide with high cliff banks, smooth as chins. The water was still, crystal-clear, no source running down from the mountains, no mud mucking up the blue.

But beneath the surface was a landmine, the quarry ponds often cluttered with rusted wire, fences, barrels, a broken-off drill bit, tools—whatever the quarry crews had
left. Left and drowned. People would throw trash into quarry ponds, as they would
down hills, big stuff, stuff that cost money for the trash trucks to pick up, stuff that would
rust: washing machines, car parts, steel drums, tires. These could snag on you, hold you
down. These ponds were not for swimming.

I still can’t watch the scene in the film *Breaking Away* where the boys swim in the
quarry (a limestone quarry not far from where my dad went to school in Bloomington),
and one boy climbs into an old refrigerator down in the depths. The refrigerator has no
back, he can swim out easily and does, but even the water, even the air bubbles rising on
the surface of black water, seems me to a warning.

In this world of quarries, of cow ponds and creeks, the child of James Wright’s
poem “The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio” has never seen a public
swimming pool: “A long gouge in the ground, / That the fierce husbands/ Had filled with
concrete” (6-8). To us in the Rust Belt, in another drought year, Wright’s poem sounds
achingly familiar:

When people don’t have quite enough to eat
In August, and the river,
That is supposed to be some holiness,
Starts dying,
They swim in the earth. (16-20)

Pits dug in the ground—the speaker, despite his youth, has seen those, of course.
Those are graves. But he makes the leap, the child jumping into this strange, new pit
filled with shining water: “suddenly I flung myself into the water. / All I had on was a jockstrap my brother stole / From a miserable football team” (35-37). Swimming is always a leap: of trustfulness—this water will hold you, it is deep enough, it is warm—and also, of imagination, what you dream about once you are in there. When you swim you leave the earth behind.

Is she real then or imagined, the little girl, the stranger, who materializes like an angel beyond his shoulder, her “face thin and haunted” (44) to tell him “Take care now, / Be patient, and live” (45-46)? The child rises from the pool, holding her memory—“I have loved you all this time” (47)—to carry with him, out of the water, out of that life.

I discovered Wright in college, my freshman year, my first time away from home. I read his work for a course on contemporary American poetry, something I hadn’t known, until this class, existed. I hadn’t realized that poets could be living, that people still wrote those kinds of things. This knowledge would change me, if not save me.

Wright mentions my hometown in his poem “Stages on a Journey Westward.” With the lines: “I began in Ohio. / I still dream of home. / Near Mansfield” (1-3), he mentions the town by name. I was stunned. In my dorm, I sat up on my lower bunk where I was reading (still the lower bunk for me), banging my head on the wire mattress frame.

I read it again. Mansfield.

Then I underlined our town’s name.
All the stupid things we did when we were younger: jump off railroad bridges, play in half-constructed houses, run through the ghost factories, swim in the dark. All the stupid things we dreamed.

I dreamed mostly about leaving, about taking on a city I didn’t know then I would barely survive. I didn’t know then that this was my home. Even if I were never to live in Ohio again it would always be part of me: this landscape, half rural, half industrial and all ruined, all collapsing things; and also, this willfulness, a stubborn streak to push on, to strive despite everything.

The view from the Clearfork Reservoir, another yawning absence of earth, another flooded grave, was a watercolor-worthy scene, and so, in high school we used to go watch the sun sink over the water, my two closest friends and I. Here, in a parked car, my best friend told me was gay. (He had come out to our other friend at the county fair, on the Ferris wheel as the ride made its crest.) Here, we cried the summer after high school. I can still see my friend’s face looking at me through the window, his car parked as I drove away in mine for the last time. I remember his skin flushed, the tears and the light from the sunset enflaming his face to a color that could only be rain and steel and age, that could only be rust, what ran in our veins, a broken river I would yearn for all of my life.

In the silence of water, I used to dream I was a creature, a mermaid or fish. I used to evade sharks. Lately, in the pool of my parents’ house, I tend to imagine I am back in
that pond in the goat pasture, the dark cold water, racing my cousins. We learn that skill early, in towns like Mansfield or Martins Ferry: to dream ourselves away.

At the pool, we had to go early so my mother could snag a chair, and my sister and I could be among the first ones in the water. That seemed important: to disturb the calm, to make a sound, make a splash, be first. Often, we arrived before the pool had even opened, and waited at the fence, towels across our shoulders, our fingers gripping the chain links. When the lifeguards finally unlocked the gate, we would throw our towels, wiggle out of shorts or shoes while still in motion, walk as fast as humanly possible—No Running!—to stand at the edge of the pool. All that water, all that waiting. Our toes curled around concrete. Our knees shook from being still. Finally, a lifeguard blew the whistle.

And we leapt.
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