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Grace, Grace, By the Side of the Road

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Why I Write

I have always loved to talk. My mom says I was an early talker. Perhaps this came about because of my participation in a study on human development at a local university. (I was an infant, so I can't remember anything about it, and no Google search has yet provided me with any details about the study, but my mom told me about it in a comment too casual and fleeting to be an untruth.) As a child, I spoke freely and didn't seem to know fear or propriety in my stories to strangers at the park down the road or the YMCA we visited out of town.

At nineteen I can no longer approach a stranger unabashed, and anytime I hear "presentation" from the lips of a professor, I feel the bottom of my stomach sail away from my body, leaving a tumultuous coil of anxiety in its stead. Somewhere between preschool and college, with no clear "why" or "when" known to me, I lost that courage for shameless speech. But I have never lost the need to speak.

If you know me well, you know I can talk for hours. There is always a thought, observation, or anecdote waiting to be shared. Riding in the backseat of my dad's 2000 Toyota 4Runner on the way home from church camp every summer, my continuous chatter was often met by a fond chorus of "Slow down!" and "Take a breath!"

About a year into dating, my fiancé turned to me and said, "You know, one night, when we were lying on the couch, I fell asleep while you were talking and when I woke up forty minutes later you were still talking." I hadn't noticed.

Last night, I called my parents just before dinner (mine, not theirs). I had prefaced with "It'll be short! I just want to update you on two things!" Two turned quickly into three or four, and an hour later I hung up because the Dining Commons was closing and soon I wouldn't be able to eat.

I speak because there is something inside me that cannot be silent. There are too many thoughts pawing at the seams to be contained and isolated within me.

* * *

I have always loved to read—if "always" was determined by the amount of time I have been capable of reading. Even before then, I loved the experience of reading. One of the greatest influences on my life has been literature, from the smallest tale to the oldest epic. My childhood was inextricably shaped by books. From bedside stories to car-ride audiobooks, these narratives define my formative memories.

My parents are not bookish people. My mom likes a good story, and as I have aged I have more readily noticed the quiet stack of murder mysteries beside her bed, but these are not the books of my childhood.

My dad said once that the first time he read a book cover to cover was in college, and it's not a task he repeated frequently after that. He has often remarked with a sheepish grin, "I'm not

that good of a reader,” as if his perceived slowness or lack of inflection somehow made an evening in bed with a book any less cherished by his child. I can assure you: they did not.

He told plenty of personal stories, of the mischief, and adventure, and imagination of his own youth. Sometimes he even made up a few “Once Upon a Time”s. More often though, he read. Small, silly books: *The Napping House*, *Where’s Whitney*, and *Guess How Much I Love You*. Books of rhyme and wit and puzzles—our beloved *I Spy*, which we poured over on the bedroom floor with flashlights to illuminate the dark corners of the pages.

My dad eventually read me bigger, more complex books: *The Hardy Boys* (a handful of worn copies from his childhood), *Anne of Green Gables* (favorites of his), *Nancy Drew* (her chapters taught me Roman numerals), and best of all, C. S. Lewis’ classic *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Even when I grew out of these bedtime stories, the skilled voices of Edward Herrmann, Jennifer Wiltsie, and Cherry Jones kept me company through many long car rides and late nights awake in bed. The first drawer of my nightstand was, for years, filled with CDs of audiobooks. And when an iPod nano at eight allowed me to take these stories with me even while away, I fell asleep most nights to the sound of a story being read to me.

It seems inevitable that these tales would have lost their power had they not been founded upon my dad’s wonderful gift: his attention, time, and dedication to read with me all those many nights which invited me toward characters, settings, and plots that would mold my heart and mind, and make me want to write.

Long after I’d grown too old to be read to, I still read insatiably. A chapter book under the spotlight of a clip-on book lamp. A textbook gripped during free period in school. A computer catalog peered at over the rim a bowl of cereal. There was nothing I wouldn’t give a shot.

This too somehow has waned. My precious and once formidable lover has taken leave of me, someday I trust to return. Arduous assignments and dreary authors have scared him off, but still, his influence lingers. I read because there is a certain appetite that no other consumption can fulfill.

* * *

I have always loved to write. A love of all communication and a love of one of its forms—written words—stirred a need within me. On pieces of printer paper, covered in crayon drawings, I wrote my first poems and stories in grade school. They were about flowers that danced, journeys into the ocean depths, and a little china doll who sat on a mantel with her little china dog.

This writing said something about me, it said something about my relationship with the world around me. Writing is where the “other” and the “me” meet.

I write to remember that meeting. I write to memorialize the sky after our first kiss. I write to honor the nights spent crying alone on cold floors. I write to cement the look of kind

eyes and the strength of caring hands. If I do not write, I risk forgetting this moment. If I do not write, what assurance is there that I experienced it?

I write to tackle and to embrace, to crown and to dethrone.

My freshman year of college I wrote a tremendous and powerful sentence at the direction of a therapist. A little blue sticky note held my greatest fear, the biggest threat I had to offer myself. I wrote to know what that was, and I wrote to remove its power. Writing it was painful, and sharing it was terrifying, but also freeing—now, close to graduating, I remember the feeling of those words, but I don't even know their exact form.

* * *

Poems and lines have often found their way onto the backs of my notecards and the margins of pages. In high school I wrote several times for a friend: a shared joy on a Wednesday afternoon, a gift when she changed schools, an encouragement and a thank you when she joined the Air Force and I was the one who had moved away. I wrote to love her and to hearten her.

I write as an outpouring of a vessel not fit to contain the feelings and impressions bubbling under my tongue and clambering in my chest, only offered a chance at solace once they have been provided a glimpse at daylight, a chance at new air, the opportunity to meet the minds of those they love.

There is no moment unoccupied by words. There is always some kind of speaking or listening going on—life is built upon this exchange, whether it occurs internally or externally, audibly or not. Every act and thought occurs within the frame of dialogue, it is all communal conversation. With words, I tell myself and the world how to understand and see me. With words, I tell the world and myself how to understand and see it. If I do not have words, I fear I am empty and alone. Without words, I am lost for meaning in life, in myself.

If I did not speak, how would I know who I am? If I did not read, how would I know what the world was? If I did not write, how would I know how those two searches may be married?

I speak because I am full, I read because I am hungry, I write because I am both.

The Earliest Secret

My first memory is a swirling sphere of tumultuous blue, smaller than the circle your pointer finger makes when it curls into your thumb. It is a secret, cool, smooth, and not-too-heavy: a marble sitting on my tongue.

As a kid, I loved putting things in my mouth. The compulsion never led to wrinkly sucked thumbs or even a great attachment to a pacifier, but I offered the slobber treatment to many of my blankets and plastic toys. Even into grade school, I found fine amusement in the rough fabric ends of jacket zippers and the cotton corners of polo collars.

But this marble, here in my mouth, is earlier, and slipperier.

Windows on the far wall of the Children's Discovery Center daycare provide the only light in the room, which is quiet and empty. Perhaps everyone else has gone outside and I have been forgotten. Miss Angie had just told us very specifically *not* to put marbles in our mouths—we could choke. This is silly, I know well enough not to swallow a marble... I just want to know what it is like, to feel the sleek surface press against my tongue and the roof of my mouth. Miss Angie is grown up and has no one keeping her from putting marbles in her mouth.

And so, though forgotten and alone, I face the corner, knowing that rebellion should always be hidden.

My mouth hollows, my lips pucker—I savor defiance. It's more uncomfortable than I thought it would be, and I'm trying to keep it from scraping against my teeth when, with a jolt, the marble slides. Hitting the back of my throat. Feeling larger than it had before. It makes its way quickly down my esophagus, dropping with all the weight of panic and regret, deep into the pit of my stomach.

This is the bitter taste of knowledge.

I am afraid, as anyone is afraid when things go wrong. And I am afraid, as anyone is afraid when they have been warned that their actions could make things go wrong. Red-faced with shame and fear, I tell no one. Not friends, not teachers, not parents.

Years later, I imagine the marble is still there, sitting cold in the bottom of my gut, an invisible testament to my guilt. In the hiding, I had deceived myself about its innocence. That marble: my first memory, a sin concealed so long ago, that sphere, shining with promise.

I am Eve, eating what is forbidden at the start of history, and this time keeping it secret.

The Great, Green Lake

On the eastern side of the state, 25 minutes from the Ohio border, is the southernmost lighthouse in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan.

The building, rectangular and red, sits comfortably behind a beach swallowed up more by weighty concrete pier than rough sand.

Luna Pier Beach is perfect for packed lunches eaten in late afternoons after roaming aisles of penned cows, caged rabbits, and cross-stitched snowscapes at the county fair.

It's a quiet beach in a small town, it should be lucky to be on a lake—unfortunately, Erie is the wrong one.

The Great Lakes literally form my home, shaping the well-known contours of the mitten. Superior, Huron, and Michigan are recognized for their scenery, their depth, their blue waters.

Their southern counterparts, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, both accumulate pollution and run-off of their own, as well as from the overflow of the other lakes, but Erie still draws the short straw.

Deeper and therefore colder, Lake Ontario keeps its algae count low; yet some years, aerial pictures of Erie reveal swirls of brilliant green bleeding from the banks like watercolors.

I can only remember actually swimming at Luna Pier once, with my father and brother on a summer day in middle school.

When we emerged from the water, our arms and legs were green. And, when I removed my bathing suit, little dots of spongy algae had passed through the material and coated my stomach.

unpassioned winter

squish.

squish.

squish.

sodden earth.

grey sky.

chill that seeps through coat seams.

february

has not come bitterly

this year.

instead, he

has stuck with apathy,

his wind listless,

his climate indifferent.

today the ground is soft;

yesterday it was solid concrete.

dead and

flattened grass lies

trampled in muddy fields.

this year

february has no

crispy white covering

to offer this sorry soil,

his uninterest

a useless balm

to the cracked palms

of winter.

absence—a haibun

The class is loud around us.

It is the midway break for our three-hour-long high school course of combined literature, religion, and history. This is a place of laughter and coffee, of homemade Turkish-Delight, inside jokes, and carefully chosen gifts for our well-loved teacher.

The class is loud around us.

We three stand alone. The noise gives my friend courage to speak quietness into our hearts. She was absent last Wednesday, she had been in the hospital. She was almost not here today, absent forever.

We have seen the scars on her arms for months now; at sixteen I didn't know it could get scarier than that.

I am silent.

I am glad our companion is not. She has the words of love for our friend that I cannot free from the clamp of stillness in my chest. I can barely hold her gaze, eyes stuck on her name printed next to mine on the cubbies in the back corner of the room.

The shelf, narrow and
packed with binders and books, looms
over me like guilt

A Breakup in Two Parts

My first relationship officially ended via a phone call in my bedroom. It really is my fault that we went out that way, the summer before my senior year of high school. With my face sandwiched between my phone and mattress, I was surprised by the small number of tears collecting on my blue chevron quilt. I had known in every piece of me where this conversation would go, and while I still stifled deep breaths and sobs caught within me at the words: “I just don’t know how I feel about you anymore,” afterward, I mostly felt numb.

Somehow, I thought that telling him I couldn’t see him, even though he wanted to talk about something important, meant that I wouldn’t get broken up with that day. I’m still glad I didn’t have to watch his lips form those words, and I know it was a crude way to protect myself, but I like to think I saved us both the added hurt of seeing our lack of passion and not just hearing it.

When the stillness of my empty room grew to be too much, I walked down the hall and lay down beside my mom reading in bed. We barely talked, and I barely cried, but I let her hold me.

It turns out, I had used up most of my tears the week before, over a near mirror image of that phone call, only this one wasn’t my fault. In the foreshocks of this breakup, I was alone in a strange bathroom in North Carolina. At 12:00 am, my younger brother and cousins were finally sleeping on the other side of the wall, and my grandparents had long since turned in for the night in the upper half of the vacation condo. I felt displaced and detached, floating amidst the cream-colored laminate flooring and walls and countertop.

All summer Austin and I had been growing more and more distant. I had been away for nearly the past month, spending time with family, traveling, and sleeping in stuffy camp cabins, and now, ten hours out of reach, he had called to talk about it. I knew what that call meant, and I knew it was probably for the best—but I was newly seventeen, and this boy had been my first date and my first kiss. Just the day before I had bought a little carved bear for his mom at a tourist shop.

“It’s been a hard summer,” my voice was shaky in the receiver. “Let’s keep trying.”

Perched on the bathroom counter, knees curled to my chest, I cried then, long and hard.

I did like this boy. I liked his smile and the hand he put on my back. I liked his old, old dog and fat black cat. I liked it when his dad told jokes and his mom shared her blanket with me during lacrosse games in early April.

And I was on vacation, and I was the oldest grandchild, and my mom was far away, “I love you.” I was scared, hoping these words were enough to make a part two for this conversation unneeded.

* * *

For years I spent a week every summer on a road trip with my grandparents and cousins. We always visited historical sites, museums, and national parks. As the oldest child and a

naturally mothering one at that, I was a head-counter, a hand-holder, and a giver of piggy-back-rides. I helped with laundry, squabbles, and bruises. I adored it.

I always stayed up later than the rest of the kids, so it wasn't strange when I finally emerged from the bathroom to four sleeping faces. The next day, we stopped by a narrow river on our drive home from dinner. Large rocks cascaded down to shallow but swiftly flowing water. Beneath our bare feet the stone was smooth and warm. I wanted to climb and explore as much as the others, but I couldn't avoid attaching a warning to the adventure: "Be really careful guys, I don't want anyone slipping and falling in." There had, I was sure, been enough tears shed the night before.

The children listened dutifully, no one losing their footing and smiles all around. In the end, it was I that came crashing down. On the moss-slick stones partway through the river, my feet went sliding in opposite directions. I was lucky I didn't bash my teeth in or break my nose, able instead to catch myself on all fours with a rock dividing me in two. Abrasion and impact stung my hands and feet and the adrenaline of near-collision, shaped like fear, filled spaces newly scraped out.

My vision was all water. But my skin and whole front side were wet with mountain spring cold, not the bodily heat of tears/weeping. The shock of my lost balance had come and gone. It had all been washed away, and I did not cry.

Grace, Grace, By the Side of the Road

I.

It wasn't until 1921 that surnames became mandatory in Finland.

For almost seven hundred years Finland belonged to Sweden; for a century after that, the people were Russian.

It was four years after independence when the Finnish decided that these names mattered legally.

In the East, names had long been hereditary, coming from fathers or farms.

The West had also been shaped by farmland but the people took names that transformed and changed as they moved from homestead to homestead.

When surnames became law one hundred years ago, my great great great grandfather took Tienvieri, a name of the West, an identity of place, meaning simply "by the side of the road."

II.

My given name is Hannah—

the name of Samuel's mother,
of the Disney Channel pop singer,
and of every sixth girl in my church
and youth group
and Christian school.

Hannah means grace—

the elegance and
poise of a ballerina
hiding bruised
and bloodied toes,
the careful civility
of your first boyfriend,
who brought flowers
to dinner with your parents—

the unmerited kindness of God.

I don't know
if my parents knew anything more
than the music of the name
and the prayers of the barren woman
accused by the priest of

drunkenness.

They simply named me Grace.

III.

Grace, that's my middle name.

In Greek mythology there are three: Aglaea, Euphrosyne, and Thalia. These Graces, minor goddesses also called "Charities," were known for singing and dancing before the gods. They were called Splendor, Mirth, and Good Cheer, or Shining, Joy, and Blooming. I wonder which is the one I am missing. Most days I feel lucky to have one out of the three.

When I was in high school I had two best friends named Hannah. Collectively, I suppose we were three Graces, although the only time we were ever all together was my sixteenth birthday party at the bowling alley.

Once, Hannah Elise wrote a letter to each of her friends, reflecting on the meanings of our names. To me, she said:

I have always liked this name. obviously,
i have the same name, but you are grace grace.
my mom, when something bad happens, like a
scraped knee (me, five years old), she always says
grace grace, which i have always thought was really cool

Grace, Grace. Was that the wordless prayer of the childless woman? The plea of a parent encountering damage and distress? Did lips make different sounds for the same petition when a Finnish farmer met a poor yield?

Often grace seems far away, like something grand and abstract that must be begged for, not a mundane offering, not something easily passed by.

Maybe my parents did know what they were doing; after all, most people consider one dose of grace a miracle.

To Love the Midwest

I love this place.

I am driving south on I-69 in early December as the sun nears the horizon.

The snow is patchy in the ditch to my left. Above me, the sky stretches as far as I can see, until it gets to the edge and curls over. Like the parachute in gym class. Like the tucked in corner of a bedsheet.

From a birds-eye view, I bet the entire landscape looks patchy. Little clumps of trees are scattered across tracks of farmland, broken by country roads and neighborless houses and miniature towns. The now brown fields are freckled with curiously blue/green ponds waiting for summer beside the expressway.

This is the Midwest, filled to the brim with unwholeness.

My stomach murmurs and I glance at the passenger seat. Before I left home my mom sliced me half of an apple. It yellows in a plastic fold-top bag, sitting next to an untouched sleeve of saltines. The back of my head is crowded by a list of things I need to get done once I reach my destination; an ever-dwindling timer counts down until their deadlines. We were sent home from college for finals this year—semester over and simultaneously unresolved.

A text message from a grandmother requesting more Christmas items interrupts the directions on my phone screen.

I still have research to do so I can write my final paper.

I have revisions to complete before I can turn in my portfolio.

Lately, it's hard to feel like things are ever finished. It was the middle of a three-day slow snow storm when I left Michigan and here, this side west of Ohio, the white flakes are almost melted away. I clench my jaw and adjust my grip on the steering wheel, picking up the bag of apples and placing it in the cupholder between the seats.

To love the Midwest you have to be able to love the incomplete and the unfulfilled.

You have to love the patchiness. You have to love the emptiness of the trees in the winter and the way their dark limbs sprawl against the vast expanse of clouds, exaggerating the soft purples and golden yellows and deep blues. You have to love that the tallest thing you can see for miles around is a wind turbine. You have to love the brittle spiked grass that fills the median. You have to love the shabby horse standing lonely on a hill not far from the road.

Drive

If I put my keys in the ignition,
twisted them to the right
in that 2012 white Honda Accord—

If I heard the engine turn
once,
twice,
struggling to awake from its two-week cold slumber—

If I pulled out of this place,
past the parking lot,
past the stop sign,
past the empty field—

Would you know whether I turned left or right?
Would you know that I had gone?
Would you know where I was going?

I would drive into the hills,
with the music too loud
and the scenery so beautiful it hurts.

my heart always manages to feel
a little mended
by solitary back country roads
with homes few and far between

Surely someone must live in these houses—
the one with the saggy roof,
the one with the horses in the front yard,
the one with the trees that grow right up to the road—

There are cars in the driveway and lights in the windows
that say: “someone lives here, and I know them.”

But I don't know them
and they don't know me.

Might that be the comfort?

The empty car knows me,
and the backroads don't,
and no one has a pretense of knowing a stranger.

Old Habits—A Semester at Home in 2020

A pencil-drawn schedule taped to the door:
weekdays given twelve hour slots
with red scribbles marking filled time.

“Live conferencing”
they whisper,
“please don’t knock.”

The room is dim
with two side-table
lamps and
a window the sun only enters
from eleven to four each day.

What does come through the window
at any time they please,
are dog barks,
honking car horns,
the drone of neighboring lawn mowers,
and the thrum of distant music.

My head hurts.

The girl who lives here
did not talk to friends
outside of school hours—
sixteen-year-old Saturdays spent
largely in shut-door quiet.

That girl makes
my stomach twist and
my throat tighten;
 this is the room she lives in.

When I lie down
on those blue and white sheets
under that blue and white quilt
she crawls into my body.
This room doesn’t know me now
unless I look like her.

A pencil-drawn schedule
teaches me to leave her here,
quiet as a memory,

behind the door with
red scribbles spread across each day.

A Body, Broken

“Your body, it’s broken,” the doctor says in the pediatric cardiologist’s office. Except he doesn’t say it that way. Instead, his words sound like, “You have autonomic dysfunction.”

I am sixteen and I am sitting next to my mom in the tiny exam room at Toledo Hospital. Across from us the doctor is smiling kindly, leaning forward on his wheely-stool with no back. Hanging from his name tag is a small figure of Brutus, the mascot of the Ohio State Buckeyes. I am a Michigan fan.

His words mean: “Your autonomic nervous system doesn’t work right.”

Broadly speaking, the autonomic nervous system is the part of the body that controls unconscious or involuntary actions. It’s in charge of the things in your body that work “automatically,” like heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration.

The autonomic nervous system is made up of two main parts: the parasympathetic and the sympathetic nervous systems. In a really basic way, the sympathetic system turns things up, making them move faster and harder, and the parasympathetic works the other way, slowing things down.

Our bodies are meant to function with these two partners in balance. When the two don’t work together, odd things happen.

“I have had infant patients with higher blood pressure than you,” my cardiologist tells me, laughing good-naturedly during one visit. Despite this, my resting heart beats unusually fast for a college athlete, and I feel sweaty even in a chilly room. Every morning I swallow half of a tiny white pill that lowers my heart rate—it also causes my blood pressure to drop further, so, to take care of that, a second orange bottle soon rattles beside the first one on my kitchen counter.

It takes two years to hear those words from this doctor, a short man with big hands and a friendly voice. My search is shorter than the average patient, who waits six years while moving from doctor to doctor, traveling up to 100 miles to be offered some answers.

Sometimes I feel like I’m the oldest patient to ever sit in that pediatrics waiting room. Before every appointment, I fill out a questionnaire while a young mother coos at her child in the baby carrier, and a five-year-old jiggles the colorful wooden puzzle on the wall. I try not to look like I find the animated show on the TV somewhat entertaining.

My mom pats my leg, chiding gently, “Focus.” I have five pages of questions to answer before we see the doctor, and I never finish them by the time the nurse calls us back to take my blood pressure and heart rate. But my friendly doctor is friendly with everyone, and my mom clicks her tongue and checks her watch while I finish the pages as we wait in the exam room, listening to his chatter with other patients through the thin hospital walls.

When I tell you that I have dysautonomia I’m not actually being that specific. This is my diagnosis, but that term is a pretty big umbrella that covers a lot of issues. Most of my symptoms fall under the condition POTS or Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome—basically, it means

that a change in posture sends my heart off to the races. The thing about a syndrome is that it isn't really an exact thing, it's just a name for a group of common symptoms that can have a number of causes, sometimes unknown.

My most obvious symptom is shortness of breath triggered by activity. It's kind of hard to miss the inordinate puffs from rushing across campus and throwing on a face mask to arrive late to a teaching class on the second floor, or the deep gasps as I lie sprawled on the grass at track practice.

I have learned to bite my cheek and focus on myself; I can't help that I still sound out of shape after 8 months of conditioning. You might wonder why the running sport was the one I decided to stick with for 7 years. The easy answer is also the cliché one, which is to say that I fell in love with it. Plus, at the start, I didn't know it would be an issue.

*

The eighth-grade winter before my first track season I finished the last basketball game I would ever play with a strange tightness in my chest and difficulty catching my breath. We were a small team and I usually played through the whole game with few breaks. I remember thinking my experience that day was peculiar, but I had no reason to bring it up at the very end of our season.

When the weather got warm and my friends encouraged me to join the track and field team for fun, I figured why not. Moments of completely lost breath and near hyperventilation were admittedly a bit terrifying, but I just chalked it up to acclimation to a new, and much more challenging, sport. I didn't know what was to come, and when I found out, I wasn't going to give up something I loved to a diagnosis.

Sometimes I wanted to cry during practice, lying face down with my chest gripped by pain and my back aching from heaving breaths. I couldn't push myself as fast or as long as other athletes; my head hung between my knees as my vision spun and my mind slowed with fatigue. But that is not all there is to track and field and dysautonomia. I had teammates who respected my space and cheered me on. My signature thumbs-up signified gratitude from a runner with no energy to smile. I could always count on "good-jobs" and "keep-it-ups."

In high school, a boy would run extra with me when he finished early. In college, an upperclassman looked me in the eye on a blazing September afternoon. "I know you can do one more," she promised. POTS has taught me a lot about knowing myself and track has played a big role in knowing when I need to push, and when I need to rest. I am grateful that I *can* run and jump and compete; many in my position cannot.

*

The impact of dysautonomia on a person's life can vary immensely. There are people like me, who, for the most part, experience very little daily disruption. There are others who struggle with frequent fainting episodes and consistent impediments. There are still more who require the

use of mobility aids and the condition impairs their ability to complete everyday tasks. Twenty-five percent of POTS patients are considered disabled and are unable to work.

Methods for addressing dysautonomia vary. After each appointment, I am handed a printed After Visit Summary several pages long with, at the very top, a list of at least five instructions in what my cardiologist calls the “Dysautonomia Game Plan.” Medication can be an important part of treatment, but it is never the whole thing. Because a lot of symptoms stem from the issues of blood pressure and heart rate, especially with posture change, many times lifestyle changes aim at improving these conditions.

- Compression stockings are tight socks that help to keep blood from pooling in the legs.
- Raising the head of the bed is useful to conserve blood volume.
- Salt and water are also valuable collaborators in improving blood pressure.
- Salty snacks help keep water in the cells to improve rigidity in blood vessels.
- Water is good.

Water means fewer headaches, less dizziness, less nausea, less fatigue. So water comes with me everywhere I go. It sits by my head in the space between my mattress and my bed frame. It is cradled in the corner of the couch as I do homework. It leans against the pew by my feet during church. After so much time carrying water bottles around with me constantly, I’ve become pretty particular about them.

If you see me, there’s a good chance my current bluey-green bottle is somewhere nearby. This Contigo is the style that I’ve landed on as my favorite. It’s plastic, which does scuff—but metal is not so great when you’re clumsy, and it’s loud if you drop it or when you set it down.

This one has a button that covers and uncovers a spout, perfect for drinking at any angle. I’ve found that bottles with straws and certain types of mouth-pieces leak far more often than other kinds. They are also more likely to break and start making a squeaky sucking noise when you drink. Bottles with no mouth-pieces are good because they’re the least likely to have product failure, but again, if you’re clumsy like me you may often find the front of your shirt doused from an ill-coordinated drink.

The best bottles are small enough to fit in car cupholders and the pockets on the sides of backpacks. My bluey-green Contigo bottle checks all of these boxes. And the moveable loop at the top is perfect for carrying with just my fingers when my hands are full.

These didn’t use to be things that mattered to me. There was a time that I didn’t have to track medications and water consumption and sodium levels. There was a time that I didn’t have to investigate the label of every drink and protein bar to make sure there is no caffeine to leech water from my blood vessels.

*

But still, despite all this water-drinking and label-checking, there are some days that you just feel bad for no particular reason at all. While I was in high school, I woke up one morning so

dizzy that I threw up and, feeling mostly better afterward, I wiped my mouth and carried about my day. No one would've known if my mom hadn't posted about it on Facebook.

I think this is part of why it took a little bit of time for the doctors to begin looking in the right direction. Back in the early days, my pediatrician, my mom, and I were discussing the next steps in our investigation. I had already had a stress test and a pulmonary function test and been given an inhaler and the diagnosis "asthma." When that didn't work we tried to add on a lung steroid. My mom and I were back to tell the doctor that it hadn't changed anything.

It was during this visit that I mentioned off-handedly that I was lightheaded and dizzy almost every morning, literally walking blind from my bedroom to the bathroom because my vision left me for a minute when I got up. My pediatrician looked at me incredulously. I shrugged, everyone talks about feeling off-balance after standing up too fast, how was I supposed to know that for most people this didn't happen *every* time they stood up?

Besides, I knew the way down the hall—I didn't need to see it. For better or for worse, that's usually how I deal with things; if I can't change it, I might as well push through it. With this mindset I may have never turned to a doctor at all.

It was my gym teacher my freshman year of high school that pushed me to start looking for answers. He pulled me aside during class and said he noticed I was breathing unusually hard and getting pretty fatigued. He told me I should see a doctor and after several weeks was emailing my mom about it too.

His persistence led to this: me lying on my side in a hospital gown that opens in the front. Earlier that day I had an x-ray on my chest. Now, the probe of an ultrasound machine glides around my sternum and ribs and collarbone. Across from me, on the wall of the dark room, a small sideways screen plays *Finding Nemo*.

My mom sits outside. She is there for the bloodwork and the appointment we eventually make to see my first cardiologist (specialists have long waiting lists!). My mom is there to insist on a second opinion when this doctor offers a diagnosis that doesn't seem quite right. She is there when I hear those words from the cardiologist. Those words that carry the comfort of answers and the bite of brokenness.

It led me to this: the first summer of dating my college boyfriend when I almost throw up in his face. We are hammocking late at night while he is visiting from out of state. Eventually, we decide to pack up and tuck in for bed.

The two of us clamber out and begin to put everything away. But I can feel nausea churning in my gut, and when he leans in to kiss me I push him away. I haven't even managed an apology before I'm vomiting into the grass under the deck. I am mortified but he remains unfazed. "Don't worry about it," he says. "You go clean up inside, I'll take care of everything out here."

I'm too dizzy to sleep for a while after that and scared that I'll wake up and miss a bucket in our crowded bunk room. My boyfriend lies next to me on the hardwood floor in the kitchen

as I sip Sprite and nibble on a hamburger bun, willing my head to stop spinning. My grandma walks in on us, very early in the morning. She barely seems to notice, in her sleep daze and haste for the bathroom door just past our heads. I'm sure I would have found it funnier if I hadn't felt so sick.

*

Dysautonomia is an invisible illness. Sometimes you can see a wheelchair or service dog, but many times there is no way to tell what someone may be experiencing.

I have learned over the years that it is ok to stop and say no to things; explanations are not prerequisites to health. Although I'm still working on it, it's important to listen to your needs and care for yourself.

One Sunday after lunch, about a year or two into my diagnosis, my grandpa, in the awkward kindness of the uninformed, turned to me and asked, "So when will you get better?" I sat quietly on his rough green couch for a moment, wishing it could give me a better answer than the one I had: "I won't."

That's the *chronic* part of chronic illness. I can manage my symptoms really well and grow old enough to not feel the effects as severely, but it will never truly go away. When I tell you that my body is broken, I'm not asking you to fix me. There is no fixing this, but you're welcome to sit beside me, or lie on the floor with me.

This is the human body, imperfect, flawed. This is my body, broken.

Just as I Did

I sit criss-cross on the speckled carpet wondering faintly if you own a vacuum—my room at school would have gone the year without such a cleaning if my roommate had not bothered.

You have two cats now; they are cute but largely avoid me. They give me an excuse for laundry when I return home to a cat allergic mother with clothes that stink of the weed you smoke.

I remember the first time I noticed this new skunky interest through your open car door in the church parking lot. The smell hung around, an unwanted guest in my nose for the rest of the night.

When I go home this afternoon my mom asks how you are—I tell her that you moved out of your parents' house. You have an apartment, and a roommate. You are learning to cut hair.

I do not tell her that your roommate is your boyfriend.

I remember the summer you spent on the coast in South Carolina with your aunt. You were away from home, really, for the first time. I called you in tears after my first breakup.

When you came back you told me of how you lost your virginity.

I loved you then, just as I did on quiet autumn mornings when we had stayed up, fueled by video games and movies, until the sun peeked into your room to chide us into sleep.

I love you now, just as I did at Youth Group on dark Wednesday evenings when we hugged each other tight—a fierce reminder of comfort and compassion amid high school woes.

We have the same name. First and middle. A coincidence that would be bizarre if it had not been the second most popular girl's name in 2000 and 1999 and 1998.

But we were never really the same. And I leave your apartment wondering what that means. How do I love you, when I do not know you? What does love look like now that we are grown up and living on our own?

To my little brother
Three pairs of your shoes
block Mom's path
to the washing machine.

I used to take your shoes,
the old ones that
you had gotten too big for—

you have far outgrown me now.

Your heavy Vans
are my shoes for
getting the mail
or taking out the trash.

The last pair you gave me,
worn and black,
sit at the back of my closet.

My feet are too small
to find a home
within them,

and I
 don't know
 what to do
with that old pair.

Mom doesn't know
what to do
with your shoes either.

They knock loudly
against the floor
when she tosses them aside
with a sigh as thick
as their white soles.

Loudly,
 like the pounding
on your door
that is needed to rouse you
from your room
to join us
at the kitchen table for dinner.

Wholly Toledo

Inhabitants and guests alike don't often have many nice things to say about the Midwest. What you might hear in defense are descriptions of rolling hills of thick wood or waving fields of golden grain or vibrant sunsets or picturesque pastures. You might even hear about homely small towns or impressive skyscrapers in the intermittent population centers. What you don't hear about so often is the swamp.

The top corner of Northwest Ohio is flat. Not flat for an expanse of farmland, nor for a deep forest, nor for a lively city, but flat somehow for a half-truth of all of these, swirled around and smushed against the flat land in a patternless and unwoven mix so that there is no grandeur in any of it. In the 1800s this area was known as The Great Black Swamp. The wetlands stretched some 1,500 miles from the tip of Lake Erie to the easternmost edges of Indiana.

The sludge impeded settlement and brought disease; an 1808 map declared the land "not worth a farthing." Despite this assertion, the soggy strip north of the Swamp's heart was highly sought after. In the west, the earth was fertile and promising, and, although nearly unnavigable at the time, the east provided a crucial connection to trade on the Lake and the subsequent Erie Canal. When Michigan appealed for statehood in 1835, their request included what is now called The Toledo Strip.

In response, the state of Ohio passed legislation to the contrary and a year-long conflict followed. After one stabbing and a halting of armies at The Great Black Swamp, The Toledo War ended in the cession of the area to Ohio and the granting of the Upper Peninsula to the newly named state of Michigan.

When the area was drained in the second half of the nineteenth century, the receding waters took with them the mosquitos and their malaria. The land became passable, habitable, and farmable. The soil was rich for cultivation and agriculture began to consume profitable patches, assimilating this newly made solid ground into the homogenous idea of the Midwest. Despite this opportunity, the access to waterways and railroads was too lucrative a temptation to ignore.

Within forty years Toledo, Ohio, had burst from the swamp into a swelling industrial center, its commerce rivaled only by Chicago. In its early days, Toledo was nicknamed "Frogtown," a vestige still clinging to the city today through sparse tourist paraphernalia and random concrete statues spread throughout the city. By the 1900s, Edward Drummond Libbey had relocated his New England Glass Company to the Midwest, giving Toledo a new alias and an eventual strong legacy of glass manufacturing: "Glass City."

This is where I was born at the turn of the century, in a land that couldn't figure out if it was meant for frogs, or farms, or factories. Ten minutes from the sporadic soybean fields and horse stables near my house is a five-lane major roadway, with stores and restaurants and banks stretching for miles. Continuing just ten more minutes south, you encounter 30-story buildings, a 10,000 seat stadium, and the river. The Maumee River is thin and usually brown. There are small attempts to use the waterfront, but businesses and events have been few and far between.

The river in downtown Toledo is usually brown, but in my senior year of high school, the water turned green. Every year, from July to October, algae blooms in the far west corner of Lake Erie. As rain falls, the land seems to remember that the line between soil and water was once more blurred. The run-off drags with it fertilizer and manure from the farm fields and poisons the lake with nutrients. Algae flourishes in the warm, shallow waters, and the shores are lined with dead fish and green slime.

Twice when I was in high school these annual growths reached toxic levels. Lake Erie is the water source for the city of Toledo. In 2014 there was a crisis: for three days, 500,000 people were prohibited from drinking the water or using it to wash dishes or brush their teeth. The thing that nourished and cleaned the city was a poison to it.

In my teenage years, there was a kind of sardonic, vengeful pride in the grime. Like many Midwestern towns, Toledo has become ignored by the popular imagination and forgotten by industry. After several national recessions, the area has struggled to get back on its feet. As high schoolers, we joked that the only thing that put Toledo on the map was its rank as the 3rd largest hot spot for human trafficking in the United States. At thirteen, I knew you should avoid going downtown, and to never go to the bathroom at the mall by yourself.

It feels wild then, to hear of the city's other nickname: Holy Toledo. There's no certainty on where this moniker came from. The popular theory ties the title to the high number of churches in the area. Driving down Collingwood Boulevard, you pass tall apartment buildings and old brick homes, but also the vaulted ceilings of a Roman cathedral and dozens of other churches and temples. Cutting right through what was once the wealthiest area in town, the road now signals the beginning of the journey downtown and divides the land between two large hospitals.

Healthcare services provide the second highest number of jobs in Toledo. Once plagued by mosquitoes and their diseases, conscious now of foul water, the city runs on sickness, yet it endures because of those who seek to heal. And, after a pandemic rocking every corner of the globe and grinding many industries to a halt, the need for such healers feels particularly notable.

In December of 2018, I came home for the first time since my freshman year at college had started, and discovered that a weed had been growing from a crack in a traffic island. It had survived hot months and city maintenance workers. It grew all autumn, surpassing the curb in an impressive bid for a height nearing four feet. When it got too cold the leaves shriveled and browned, but still, the weed stood.

That's how I first remember seeing the plant, though I had certainly driven past it nearly a hundred times over the summer months. The intersection of Secor and Alexis is a busy crossroads—the first traffic light on the Ohio side of the main road leading to Michigan. Two drugstores face each other on one side of this thoroughfare, and, on the other, a Mediterranean restaurant at the end of a small strip sits opposite a derelict flooring shop with unusually manicured landscaping.

Among the bustle of thousands of commuters and across from the luscious green shrubbery, the weed grew, unnoticed. On a Sunday afternoon, a family spotted the sad sprout and stopped to adorn it with tinsel. Just days later, ornaments, lights, a tree skirt, and a toy train had joined the decorations. By the next week, Christmas trappings had spilled out onto the street. The traffic pole was decked in wrapping paper, wreaths, and paper snowflakes. Candles and notes and dead potted plants piled up on the pavement. People dressed up as Santa Claus and elves and waved at passersby.

There's a picture of the little Christmas weed in my camera roll. The sky and the streets are grey and the view is obscured by raindrops on the car window. You can no longer see the weed beneath the holiday cheer. A five-foot-tall, stuffed magenta frog wearing an NFL t-shirt and a smile is tied to the traffic pole. In the background a wooden cross peaks between boxes of socks, shoes, scarves, and nonperishable foods deposited, unprompted, on the street corner.

Diptych: Growth

I. When a Tree Chokes

Last summer the tree in front of my parents' house died. It remained standing for a year after, narrow and tall, reaching above the peak of the second story and piercing the sky. When my parents chose the Bradford Pear tree to adorn our lawn roughly eighteen years ago, they were told it wouldn't grow more than fifteen feet.

I have to question if the person who said that was deceptive or just ignorant. These trees are pretty common around us, many extending into the air twenty feet or more. We have two mismatched twins planted near the road growing at least that high. They boast delicate white flowers in the spring that fall like May-snow on windy days. Up and down streets in our area of southeast-Michigan-northwest-Ohio these trees announce spring with their crisp blossoms and pungent aromas—if you miss the groundhog, you can tell the season is changing when the neighborhood is permeated by the smell of shrimp from the small blooms.

That spring, our tree was sparse. My mom called it sickly when its leaves turned red and brown in July. Months later, during a phone call home from college, my dad told me someone had given him a diagnosis. While doing other work on the yard, the man took one look at the feeble foliage and proclaimed death.

Did you know trees could kill themselves? Usually, it's overwatering a houseplant, improper soil, an infestation of insects, or even the competing canopy of another tree blocking out the sun that does one in. It turns out, unknowing self-sabotage is a fate all creatures are capable of.

Essentially, this tree strangled itself. Sometime in its youth, the trunk split, and too many branches began to sprout at that junction. As it grew larger, more weight began to press on the parts of the plant responsible for transferring nutrients, compressing the pathways until life was pinched off. The pear tree that seemed to thrive and advance further than it was ever meant to, was, in the end, only climbing closer to death.

By late spring, the tree was cut down, limbs stripped off, stump torn out. I wasn't there when it happened—was out of state studying literature, and writing, and sociology. When I returned, my home looked different, exposed. I hardly recognized the unveiled windows or the explosion of daylilies after rain that flourished in the once shaded corner.

II. Lament for Climbing Maples

This summer they ripped out the tree in front of the house my grandparents sold. My dad's parents lived in the big house five minutes away for nineteen years, and by the time I was twenty-one the maple tree next to the garage was round and full and beautiful. It was the kind of tree you see on postcards and picture books. Its leaves were bright, bright red in October—the image of fall. "Such a gorgeous tree," my mom would say, loading us into the van. Its branches stretched overhead, shadows tickling the grass on the other side of the driveway.

And those branches were perfect. The bark was smooth but not slippery, just right for gripping hands and bare feet. The bottom branch, low and sturdy, was one I had to jump to grab at six and

which hung almost down to my forehead at fifteen. I used to boost little cousins up to that branch, shoulders working like stepping stools and arms like guardrails.

That tree wanted to be climbed; it seemed to me like it had shaped itself just so. At the trunk, each branch was slender but strong, shooting out at perfect angles for wedged feet. After Sunday lunch I would scamper up into the leaves, hiding as a protest to our departure. As I grew I ventured higher, tucking myself into crooks and curves on sunny afternoons after school, book in hand. It was a sacred, colorful retreat in the sky, secured from the world by wood and wind.

They cut it down because it had done what trees do: it had grown tall, and broad, and solid—not knowing that these are qualities to be punished. Its great branches dropped leaves on the opposite side of the yard now and served as intricate pathways for squirrels scurrying across the roof. But the brilliant fall spectacle and hearty green of summer apparently obstructed the view of the dusty brick siding.

I can't help but feel that I am in some way responsible for this growth. On some of those days spent high up, among the leaves, I would litter the ground beneath me with sticks. Certain years I would find branch after branch barren in late summer. Covered in small, smooth, black spots, they were dry and easy to break off. I would carefully climb up and down, balancing on shaky boughs, removing these dead limbs; I snapped them with gentle hands or used a hearty twig to knock off the ones out of my reach.

It was December when my fiancé and I drove away from the house that had not yet been sold and the tree that had not yet been removed. Now, I wish I would have climbed that tree one last time, but there was snow on the ground and I didn't know it would be the last. There was snow on the ground and adults do not climb decorative trees in front yards. There were no leaves to hide in, so instead, I cried in the car.

Before my grandparents moved away I walked slowly around their house, taking pictures of the brown of my grandfather's sandals against the white tile by the garage door, and the hard press of the metal bed frame into the crunchy carpet in the spare bedroom, and the sleepy trickle of light onto the big rocking chair in front of the tube tv in the office at the back of the house. I didn't think to take a picture of the maple tree.

I avoided driving by the house for the entire summer. When I finally had to stop by to pick up some mail the bank had sent to the wrong address, I saw the freshly painted shutters and the naked heart of the house through the big dining room window, unsheltered by leaves. The new owner's lawn looks empty and somber and so unlike the one I loved.

Afterword

The duty of any artist, of any storyteller or essayist or poet, is to give attention. As I have traveled further into my experience as a writer, I have, by both natural impulse and intentional direction, striven to attend to this calling with honesty, curiosity, and gentleness. In his essay on Midwestern writers, Scott Russell Sanders explains that “any landscape is made up of particulars” and “writers who imagine the land with the most authority honor the details” (“Imagining the Midwest” 35). Here, Sanders is reflecting on the enhanced credibility of writers who express the particular characteristics of their geographic surroundings with integrity and specificity, but this focus and precision of language in the retelling do not only apply to physical descriptions of place. Our social environment, the fabric of our inner lives, and the course of our personal histories make up landscapes of their own.

Author Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, in her book *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, likewise says, “[l]ike a true account of character, a true account of process requires a reckoning of particulars” (52). While Sanders’s comment expresses concerns more concentrated on the material qualities of skilled writing, McEntyre shares her thought as an element of spiritual practice. As a Christian writer, I endeavor to write well—that is, to both produce material that meets a standard of excellence, and also to inhabit the labor of writing with honor. I wish to bring my work “before the altar of God” and say with Pat Conroy, “Lord, this is how I found the world you made” (“Letter”). In my course of turning to the task of writing with earnestness over the past three years, I have attempted to encourage a holistic practice of sustained attention to particulars both internally and externally. This is critical for a deeper understanding of my faith and is, I am learning, the only way I know how to meaningfully inhabit my life.

In the fourth century, St. Augustine prayed, “Grant, Lord, that I may know myself that I may know thee.” An inward bent of self-evaluation and knowledge is a matter of spiritual discipline lived out through my writing. My writing is an effort to hold my surroundings, experiences, and being up to the light and to search them under a microscope through the concentrated focus of the mediums that I employ. Writing, in practice, is often a key tool of discovery. The Indo-European roots of “write” convey ideas of carving, tearing, engraving, or even incising. The word points back to an earlier time, in which writing often implied the painstaking work of etching lines into a solid surface. In many ways, like Michaelangelo’s assessment of a sculptor’s role, the efforts of a writer revolve around encountering a hunk of stone that is the emotion, image, or story, and chipping away to unveil the statue waiting within. It is painful, it involves digging and scratching and cutting, but we look back and can say, “So that was what was inside all along.” As I toil and uncover, I have been influenced by a number of both contemporary and historic poets and essayists. I seek to appreciate their art, learn from their craft, and use their positions to orient myself within the greater tradition of literature and creative writing.

Through my poetry and nonfiction essays here, I have worked to unearth and explore the relationships between the self and place, others, and the past. In this venture, I see the marks of English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy. I admire Hardy’s courage and curiosity as he pushed the conventions of form while still seeking meaning and structure. Hardy’s forthright subject matter and grounded perspective and language in his war poems are also notable and display an intentionality and resolve I wish to emulate. Additionally, I see my work as being in the style of Hardy in that Hardy’s work is often clearly shaped by place and relationships. This is especially

apparent in Hardy's famous "Poems of 1912-13." Written after the death of his wife, many of these poems reflect a clear wrestling with the complicated relationship Hardy had with his wife and explore the distant and recent past. Often, the collection achieves these by turning to the physical environment and expressing the connection of the people or experiences to the land. When it comes to writing about the land, there are few contemporary poets more skilled than Mary Oliver.

Mary Oliver's work exhibits an extraordinary quality of observation. Her poetry is full of vivid, but grounded imagery, centered most often on the natural world. Oliver's writing features intent descriptions of animals, weather, water, earth, and plants. In poems like "The Fish," she also explores her own interactions with these subjects. In these ways, Oliver serves as a notable model for me. Although the subject matter and styles of language often differ, I deeply respect her ability to vividly describe her environment and the deferential awe with which she handles the subjects of her work. In my own writing, I see a similar quality of focus and narratives grounded in tangible experiences. This is also a characteristic of John Leax, another contemporary American poet.

John Leax's voice is certainly different from Mary Oliver's. His poetry is plain-spoken and often comes across as more expository than image-driven like Oliver's work. Despite this, his poetry displays the crafted skill of directed consideration and examination. I hope to echo Leax's confidence in his style, attending to his experiences with a courage and accuracy that does not force flowery language. The importance of history, family, and place is also apparent in Leax's work and his concerns are themes that are reflected in my own work and which feature prominently in the work of Scott Russell Sanders.

Scott Russell Sanders is a novelist and essayist seriously invested in conversations regarding place, family, and identity. Works like his essay "Buckeye" have been foundational in my creative writing at a collegiate level. Like my own work, Sanders's writing often involves attempts to comprehend the complicated nature of his location and his relationships, and to create revelation by investigating disparities. His essays are conciliatory and exploratory, traits I pursue in my own work. Possibly Sanders's greatest impact on me is his intentionality with his writing. He is forthcoming in his purposes for writing and moves forward with determined clarity. This is not to say that he knows exactly what will happen when he sits down to write, but he never appears to engage in the act with anything but reverence.

As I contemplate these influences in my writing, the common focus of my work, and the reasons behind why I write, it has been instructive to consider the larger tradition of Midwestern writing. In "Imagining the Midwest," an account of the history of Midwestern writing, Sanders evaluates the literature of the Midwest as having begun "as the story of arrivals and departures" but having "evolved into a literature of loss" (49). He recalls that many writers raised in the Midwest who later write of the land often do so from the viewpoint of a train, car, boat, or wagon (37). By the end of his essay, Sanders rejects this experience and argues for the creation of Midwestern work that comes from those that occupy the land as a present and future home. I see myself as one entering the quiet but powerful tradition of Midwestern writers, one whose work is marked by sincerity, authenticity, and composure. But I desire to be a part of a new tradition of Midwestern writers, not as one who writes of a home since deserted, but as one who dwells in the land and loves it by beholding it with integrity.

The Midwest is sometimes called the "heartland." Growing up I hardly felt like I was at the heart of anything. When I'm asked where I'm from I've come to respond with something

along the lines of “northwest Ohio, southeast Michigan area.” My street address concludes with the initials “MI,” I prefer maize and blue to grey and red, and vacation is a weekend at the lake, not a trip to the ocean. Somehow though, if I just say I’m from Michigan I feel like I’m lying. Living right on the border between Michigan and Ohio, between rural and urban, I could hardly reconcile the monotony of the popular picture of the Midwest with the striking contrast I encountered on a daily basis.

This dissimilarity has partly driven me in the writing of this collection. To be honest, I am often enough motivated by a fierce, almost desperately defensive need to combat the common perceptions of ordinary life situated in Middle America. Through attention and art-making we are empowered to bestow value, and I hope, in my work, to make known the value of the sullied, or obscured, or overlooked. It is hard work, both interpersonally and in execution, but I take such joy in gritting my teeth and digging my nails into the irreversibly fused beauty and ugliness.

When I began creating this collection I was determined to produce work that did not add to Sanders’s “literature of loss.” I didn’t think anyone needed my help in constructing a less than wholesome view of the Midwest. Instead, I wanted to inspire others to love my home as I did. Despite this, I didn’t write any one piece with the intention to present a false or exclusively favorable image of the land or my experiences here. I simply wanted to create something that honored the area for what it is, and I trusted that writing what was true, sharing with as much accuracy as possible, would induce the same kind of love in my readers that my lived experience had in me. It wasn’t until revising the collection as a whole that I realized, in one way or another, loss is inseparably woven into my life in the Midwest.

This loss hasn’t overcome my love for the people and places that have shaped me and rooted themselves within the fibers of my identity. Instead, I have seen that writing that truly accounts for imperfection is an act of love. My acceptance of the real ugliness of my world does not deny its loveliness, but is a means by which I can extend grace. Such a holistic acknowledgement embraces life that is mundane and contaminated; this is my love for the Midwest—I cannot ask it to be what it is not.

In contrasting the superficial love for an unknown “heavenly country” to the challenging emotions that the tangible reality which the “country of here below” presents, philosopher Simone Weil states, “[i]t is this country that God has given us to love. He has willed that it should be difficult, yet possible to love it” (“Forms of Implicit Love”). The Midwest is not easy to love, it is full of greyness, brokenness, and sickness, but it is not just these things. My Midwest has not been the flat, colorless expanse of same sky, same field, same people so commonly attributed to it—it has been full of particulars.

To understand what these differences mean, to reconcile the ugliness and beauty in my reality and the reality of those who live here, I have had to write. This is how I have found the world the Lord has made: imperfect, full of loss and brokenness, yet also love, hope, grace. There is quiet dignity in the water, and trees, and people of my Midwest. In an argument against censorship, Conroy states, “The world of literature has everything in it, and it refuses to leave anything out” (“Letter”). As I complete this collection, my first notable mark in the glorious history of literature, I refuse to ignore the difficult for the easy or to shun the light for the sake of the dark. *Grace, Grace, By the Side of the Road* is one humble attempt to hold these truths simultaneously, to understand myself and my world, and to open the door for both to be seen with the truth and love for which I strain.

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