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The Red Suitcase

The Red Suitcase was on top of the burn pile. It was that square make-up kit kind from the 60's so it balanced easily. Charles and my nephew Eric stuck it there because they knew I was having a problem knowing what to do with it. It was Mom's. This summer Charles and I flew to North Dakota to clear out Mom and Dad's house. I knew it was coming, this task. Mom had died six years ago, Dad this April. While my last visit with Dad was after my brother Bill's burial last year, details of those rooms and objects were as familiar as when I last lived there thirty years ago. I knew without looking what was at the bottom of every drawer. Without touching, I could hear the heavy thunk sound of each light switch. The Red Suitcase came out from the back laundry room when Mom and Dad would take a winter trip or go to a cattle sale. I'd see it again when Mom had 'had enough' of my brothers and me, or Dad, or just that tiny town... She'd stomp through the house with the Red Suitcase and out the door into her lime green convertible

Cadillac then drive to the lake cottage for the weekend. Or at least she'd threaten to. I kept my eye on that suitcase; it was the temperature of that house. I believe families have one major theme, and that one is enough. Abandonment, boredom, anger, maybe religion or work, or something as subtle as longing becomes the umbrella we tiptoe under. And that one person holds the power to weight the theme in their favor. I also believe naming it is hard to put a finger on. That's why poems are written about love and missing, trust and forgiving. That's why I keep looking back over my shoulder to identify that place, the people, and the stories that might embody my own theme in progress. I'm still not sure of the main theme within that house Mom and Dad built in 1947, but I am sure that the Red Suitcase became a central symbol for me. I noticed and silently watched its movement from the back room to the bedroom, out the door and into the car. While it always returned, it was an object of tension, of my wanting something to be



different, wanting calm, availability, wanting more. More something. ■ The Red Suitcase was an easy target for Eric propped on top of the burn pile. It jumped against the sky after he shot it with the .38 Special we'd discovered in the coat closet. Then we quietly and quickly torched the pile that held much of what we carried out of that house. We burned anything personal that could go up in flames instead of becoming fuel for someone else's home-story. A pile of one family's life, facts of being alive, artifacts of one generation's story heated our skin and stung our eyes. I couldn't find any remnants of the suitcase among the smoldering ashes, but now finally, I know where it is.

waking up



Early last year, as I was thumbing through a Time magazine, I came across a clever advertisement for a credit card. It was a survey of random facts about life and, jokingly, I filled it out. It asked questions about childhood aspirations and a dream profession. It even asked about my feelings towards my morning alarm clock (which, to this day, is still very unappreciated). Then it asked something I did not expect: What was your proudest moment? Initially, I thought that I was too young to have a proudest moment and that, simple things like filing my taxes and completing a FAFSA application are epic accomplishments for me. I reflected on how even crawling out of bed in the morning for a 9:00 class is a small triumph.

Then I had my answer. In the cheap ink of a bic pen, I answered: waking up. No one can tell you how to grieve. There isn't a manual, there isn't a time limit, and it is different for everyone. In 2003, after being in a coma for just over a week, my father died of a brain aneurism. It was as if everything came to an abrupt halt and went into an immediate and ironic hibernation. A

month prior, I had enrolled in Berklee College of Music, but that spring was initiated with a two-year hiatus from waking life. It was May. I was 19. ■ Lacking health and life insurance, my mother and I found ourselves \$70,000 in debt, this not including the amounting surgeon, ambulance, and funeral home fees. With our lives packed into boxes and stuffed in storage, the two of us moved in with a family friend and attempted to some how reconstruct our lives. It was during this time that I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which entailed temporary memory loss and a constant battle with insomnia. When sleep finally did come, it was almost impossible to rise and greet the world. My alarm clock was not fully respected for all the work it did, its obnoxious beeping being a persistent reminder that there was a world outside myself from which I was continuously hiding. Exhaustion became overwhelming, and heartbreakingly, I made the decision to leave Berklee. Even the violin, a long life passion of mine, seemed to be something to hide from. ■ I wish I had a day and a time I could celebrate every

year that marked the reassertion of a happy sleep and an even happier consciousness. I'm not even sure if it was a gradual decline of sadness, but I can say that it was in the morning, after two years of haze, that I started my day without dwelling on the years previous. I didn't think about all that I had lost, or even about the little girl I used to be. I was just happy to be in the morning sun. ■ Rising out of bed can still be a trial, but now for different reasons, like staying up late because of a Graphic Design project that's due in the fast approaching A.M. And I have even been rediscovering my love of music, even if it has to compete harshly with the allure the perfect serifed typeface. ■ There is a quiet and ironic joy to the concept of being asleep and being awake. When my father died, it was spring-time outside the walls of the ICU in Boston. Everything green was coming to life after a long winter's sleep, as if to reaffirm that there was something to believe in. Even though my father was lost to his coma dream, I believe in waking up.

gone to Florida

There is a picture on my fridge I look to for comfort when I'm frazzled by my hectic life. In it, two older ladies sit in lawn chairs on a beach in Florida. One holds a cheap nylon baseball cap and a drink. The other wears sunglasses and a large flowered bathing suit/skirt combo. They are both smiling. They are having fun. I believe, someday, these ladies will be me and my best friend Kate. ■ I have known Kate for just over fifteen years, since we were both young moms. She was there at the beginning of my adult life, during my "back to the land" days. The summer our firstborn children were two, Kate and her- husband lived on my family's land in a converted school bus. ■ Kate is a free spirit. She has an exuberant, fun-loving personality that is contagious. I tend to be more introverted. In those early days, Kate helped me break out of my shell. In a way, she gave me confidence to be me. She was my savior. ■ Back then, my life was freer. Though I had a baby and a partner, it didn't feel much like responsibility. We



did a lot of hanging out, but things weren't easy. We lived in abject poverty and in retrospect, absolute chaos. My family lived in a sixteen by sixteen foot cabin without electricity or running water. We read, cooked, and lived by candlelight. ■ We also had every imaginable beast, from an ornery donkey that bit and kicked, to generations of goats and geese and ducks and sheep and chickens and the dogs that ate the chickens and the rats that ate the feed. Not to mention the rabbits that ate the phone cord and shit on the floor, and the cats that were afraid of the rats and the canaries we set free. We didn't have a clue how to take care of it all. Insects ravaged our crops, our cheese molded, our beer tasted bad. It was a mess. ■ But through it all there was Kate; Kate helping me laugh at the absurdities in our lives; Kate being there when things got tough. I remember my son's third birthday party. I realized the yard smelled like urine and the cat had licked the icing off the cake. Kate didn't mind. There

wasn't much we could do about the yard, but she helped scrape off the bad parts of the cake and re-iced it before anyone noticed. Those memories help me now, in a life, full of responsibilities and lacking in free time. When things get to be too much, when I'm juggling jobs and school and kids, I try to find humor in my situation. ■ Kate and I live in different towns now. We can't see each other every day, but we can call each other for support when we are down. We can think about the day when we will find ourselves on the beach, in Florida, free of responsibilities, being ourselves and having fun. This I believe.

Going Home

When I traveled to Colorado last year, I was exposed to much of our country's landscape, and a lot of the people that inhabit its little nooks and crannies. This contact with our nation makes me feel proud to be alive, everyday. An exposure that has left me feeling naked and infantile toward this huge world we live in, but that's okay. Being sociable is very important to my character; I am comfortable surrounding myself around anyone I don't know, and that is because of the confidence that close friends have inspired. As I meet new people in life, I will always be thinking of them and the wonderful times from the past, and the roots that have kept me on the ground when stormy weather arrives. I believe there is value in working to remain close all those friends who continue to shape who I am now. ■ I grew up in a tranquil little town called Barrington, fifteen minutes south of Providence, on the East Bay of Rhode Island. It is a place where youth never seems to relinquish the idea of living in the present

moment. A town where the water meets the land and creates beautiful beaches, a community where friends and family give you a wave when you pass by. This is a place that evokes a warm spirit, and truly defines the word neighbor. This is the place that I have formed friendships to last a lifetime. The community consists of about ten of my peers and their families, and even though we have gone our separate ways, I stay in touch with all of them, sometimes weekly via e-mail or phone. Or better yet, have the opportunity to visit them wherever they are. If I look back at all the years we all spent together, I could literally drift off into a nostalgic, daylong dream that only we share. I believe there is a certain emotional dedication I have to those memories. ■ In my lifetime, I have had the pleasure of meeting plenty of wonderful people from all across the United States. I believe that each one of these interactions, has overtime, shaped my personality in such a way, as to make my life, uniquely my own. Many of these specif-

ic experiences are lost forever though, when you think about it. How many of those people do you actually stay close to? It is interesting to note, that nowadays our culture is becoming more individualized, and everyone is worried about himself or herself. It seems as though there is a new trend in our society, where people have become more distant from their neighbors, and more distant from those people from the past. I believe that there is substantial value in staying close to longtime friends. I believe that my roots back home have stretched and grown to create a solid, core foundation that will sustain life for me, a life full of gratifying experience.



Why should I want to be like my parents? Is it just what I grew up on, so that is all I know, or is it that you can't escape the fate of the old saying, "like father like son". Maybe we are all just damned to keep reliving the past of our families. Who knows. My mother wants me to grow up and have kids. This reminder of what she wants is always in the back of my head, haunting me. She wants this event to happen more than I do, and it's all because she is bored with her life. Mom is an ex-hippie, roughly fifty five years in age, standing almost 5 feet tall. She has a degree in fiber arts, runs her own business. First, it was a company called Quilts & Things, that she had for about 13 years, but after getting burnt out, she looked toward something else. She developed an admiration for collectable teddy bears, and it wasn't long till she was making them herself and selling them at shows. Two years ago, she started to develop arthritis, so now she can't make anything with



her hands anymore. She works as a interior designer now, she seems happy with the job. Yet, I think something changed when she couldn't create something for herself. Sure, she helps people pick out color schemes, but they aren't totally hers, so it starts to become just a job to her. Now she has a lot more time to sit around and just watch T.V. She has become an avid watcher of the show Charmed, you know, that fantasy show with witch craft and such, thats about 12 years old now. ■ Since she has a lot more time on her hands, this also means she has a lot more time to call me up when ever she gets bored. She is always mentioning on the phone...

"It would be nice to have some grand children around," or,

"Are you sure you're not gay?" ■ Who's to say I even want to get married and have children now or ever? I only just turned twenty one less than a year ago. Why would you want to bring a life into this already over -populated world. Just to watch them

grow up and have the same problems you went though? I wouldn't want to put that burden on anyone. ■ I can't seem to outweigh my plan for life over what my mother thinks my life should be. Shouldn't I pursue my dreams, and not those of my parents or anyone else? Yet, it's hard to focus on your dreams when you have a voice of someone so close to you in the back of your head, causing you to obsess over something you shouldn't even care about at this time in your life anyway. ■ What is obsession? Is it that constant thought of something you want? Or something you want and will just never be able to acheive? Or maybe it is simply not being able to say to yourself, "NO!". ■ This is why I believe... In Free Will

on the orthodox Conventuality of Science



I'd like to recount, to the best of my memory, a conversation I had with a friend of mine in elementary school.

"Who is God?" I asked.

"I think he is a big old man, and he has a beard," said my friend.

"Oh," this had satisfied my curiosity. But my friend, ready to show off his vast wealth of knowledge continued, "He lives in the sky and he can do anything." This piqued my interest again.

"Like flying?"

"Yea I guess so, and he can kill people with lightning". Amazing. I wanted to know more, and so it was up to my parents (who knew everything there was to know, I was sure) to fill me in on the whole story. Sadly my sense of wonder became hindered as the more I learned about God, the less sense it all made.

"Why can't I see Him?"

"Well, you have to believe in Him"

"And then I can talk to Him?"

"No, but you can pray to Him. That's like

Conventuality of Science

talking. You just won't hear Him talk back. Well, not in words anyway". ■ My attention span wasn't prepared for this and for the time being I wrote off God as something that grown ups do. Something I needed not concern myself with. I had plenty to keep me occupied. I continued to pass many hours digging for dinosaur bones in my back yard. Special precautions had to be taken every night to ward off ghosts who might kill me in my sleep. I built a flying machine out of cardboard and scotch tape. And any ride on the subway was spent peering out into the darkness in hopes of catching a glimpse of the Ninja Turtles in their subterranean habitat. These were exciting times. ■ As a child it was easy to imagine beyond the bounds of reason and fact. Now it is surprisingly difficult. Just as I realize that searching for pirate treasure at the beach is a bit of a waste of time, I don't spend my earnings on Lottery tickets. Surely a safe bet, but really not very exciting. I begrudgingly watched how as my childhood fictions slipped

away with age, that those who had learned to love God remained so inclined. I think of my grandfather's faith in his church and the comfort it brought him in his last years and I think how that must have been nice. Yet it would be dishonest of me to jump into religion now because it wouldn't be sincere. It wouldn't be sincere because I cannot get past "You just have to have faith". That is why I believe in Bigfoot, and aliens, and giant squids and Alligators in the sewers. I know it's silly and a little ridiculous. And yet the inkling of possibility exists and it is one that I am allowed to question and explore. The magic of a belief for me is the steadfast (and often futile) search for validation. I believe that pursuit can be just as rewarding and enlightening as unquestioning faith. ■ And so I check the SETI website every day. I bring a camera on camping trips... just in case. And when I visit my parents in New York and I happen to catch a subway, I go ahead and take a peek out the window.

Black Spiral Bound Sketchbook

The matriarchal, silver haired woman flipped through the pages of my sketchbook.

"Where do you get your ideas?" she asked, still scrutinizing the page in front of her. "I start without any preconceived ideas or plan, but simply create directly onto paper with ink."

"What happens when you make a mistake?" She asked. Reflexively, I answered,

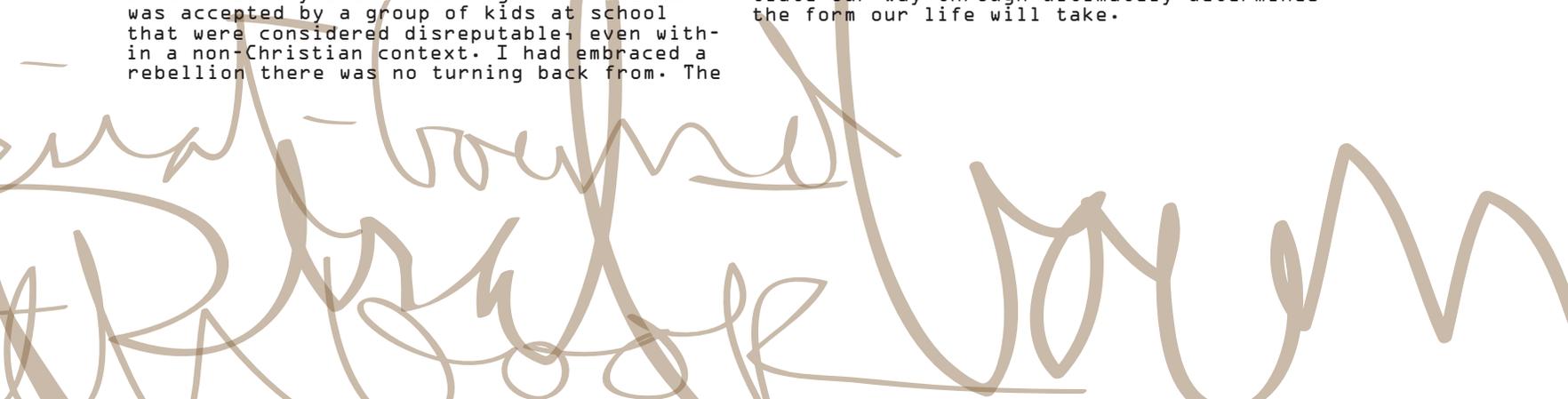
"I don't make mistakes, every line opens another possibility to reshape the next, which ultimately shapes the piece as a whole." ■ I have always drawn. My mother tells me I used to insist she act as judge in impromptu art contests I would declare against my artistically inferior playmates. Despite this, my sister had the distinction of being the artist of the family. I had always envied her. My jealousy burned the brightest, though, when her art teacher sent home a note saying she was to keep a sketch journal in a black spiral bound sketchbook. ■ This caused quite a stir in my household because my father worked in the local paper-mill. One of the few perks of working for the mill was an abundance of free paper. Not only did we kids enjoy the luxury of an endless supply of drawing paper, but we also had a four foot diameter



Sketchbook

roll of brown, unbleached toilet paper that lasted six years. ■ I was stricken with an irrepressible envy of her sketchbook. I lusted after the multitude of pristine white pages bound within the glossy black cardboard cover rippled to give the appearance of leather. I pleaded with my parents to buy me one. Despite their inability to see the benefit over loose sheets of paper, they relented. My stacks of black spiral bound sketchbooks read like volumes in an historical encyclopedia of my life. There are some that span many months and some whose pages were filled within a matter of weeks. My relationship with my sketchbook peaked in my early teen years. I had been raised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. As I reached adolescence, however, other Witnesses began to withdraw from me. My father's alcoholism and my mother's outspoken criticism of accepted dogma earned my family the scarlet letter of "bad association." This isolation caused me to retreat into my sketchbooks. ■ At the age of fifteen the love affair with my sketchbook began to wane. I was accepted by a group of kids at school that were considered disreputable, even within a non-Christian context. I had embraced a rebellion there was no turning back from. The

Jehovah's Witness Elders began the process to disfellowship me. In addition, my relationship with my father had deteriorated to the point that I moved two hours away, to Bar Harbor, Maine just days after my seventeenth birthday. ■ There I rediscovered my sketchbook. The world I discovered in Bar Harbor was a vibrant community of psychedelic drug use. I began experimenting with hallucinogens. While tripping, I discovered a fascinating universe within the pages of my sketchbook. My drawings began to coalesce. Whole pages filled with multitudes of images shaped from one line. I used the geometry of that line to define the next image. My drawings gained notoriety amongst my peers. What I once used to escape the pain of being rejected now granted me acceptance. ■ As the years passed, I continued to draw. Eventually, I moved to Portland and applied to art school. When I think back now what I said at my acceptance interview, I am struck by the gravity of it. It made me realize that every situation we negotiate our way through ultimately determines the form our life will take.



lilly white dog

I remember the very first time I had done something really wrong. I was four. I was shopping along with my mother and older sister Jessi, who was of the very close age of five. I remember the age perfectly. The three of us were going to Ames for some reason or another. I was so excited when we had made our way through to the toy section of the department store. Jess and I immediately darted for the toys. I was in heaven. I kept walking very indecisively up and down the aisles all googly-eyed and happy. I broke away from mom and Jess and found myself a few aisles down. That's where I saw "it". The toy I had to have. It was a fluffy little white stuffed dog with a first place blue ribbon attached to its collar. I wanted to hold it really, really bad. So I took it off the shelf. It came right out of the box with a few twists of its bands. Wow! It fit so perfectly into the palms of my little hands. I sat down right there in the aisle and began to play. Awhile had passed and my mother and sister had made their way into the aisle. Jess looked at me with that older sister envy. She knew we weren't supposed to be getting anything and was jealous of the fact that I might be trying to. Mom just looked at me, nodded with a smile and said,

"Carly, what are you doing on the floor?"

I looked up at her with my big blue eyes and curly blonde hair and said,

"Can I keep it mommy? It's just what I always wanted." Of course she said no, and I continued to play and nag her with one too many "can I's." I knew this because she quickly became irritated. This was about the time she wanted to "blow dodge". So I took it upon my big girl self and came to the very adult decision of sticking the little toy into my vest pocket. It wasn't long after piling into the back of mom's '84 Bronze Subaru that I tried to discretely play with the damn dog. What was I thinking? Oh that's right, I was four. Anyway, it didn't take long for Jess to catch on to the criminal act happening beside her. She instantly clued mom in shouting,

"Mom, Carly took the white dog!"

"Sha-up you tattler tail," I whispered.

"You're gonna get me in trouble!" And sure enough trouble I was in.

"Carly! What did you do?" My eyes grew big.

"You're gonna bring that back. We don't take things we didn't pay for Carly." My face paralyzed with fear. Mom then brought me just outside Ames's entrance. Jess stayed in the



car and mom then informs me that I had to bring back the dog to the cashier lady. I was petrified. I was scared and kept telling mom, I can't do it. I thought something really bad was going to happen to me inside there. But mom just kept telling me that I had to do what was right. Some how I made my little body walk up to that lady and told her I took it and proceeded to give her the dog. To my amazement a sweet thank you was said in exchange. Mom wasn't far behind me at this point and brought me back to the car. I was still jittery and my face you could tell was not that of a happy little girl, but right there in the fire lane of Ames's parking lot, mom hugged me and said proudly,

"You did the right thing Carly." ■ And it is just that...doing the right thing, in which I believe. ■ The experience made me the young lady I am today. Even though I am far from perfect, it is from those mistakes growing up that I have genuinely grown and aspired to be better. Plus, it all worked out in the end. That fluffy little white stuffed dog with a first place blue ribbon attached to its collar made its way under my tree that Christmas.

Halloween

When I think about my childhood, I often think about that one night; the one where candy is so easy to come by that it's tough to not eat too much, that night when you can create your own identity and hide behind it. It's when the entire community buys into a single game, a game that centers on the children. As a kid, we would drive fifteen minutes to my Grandparent's house to trick or treat. I would get there and hide my identity from my grandmother who would answer the door then act surprised when I took off my mask. Then we would be invited in and get all the left over candy because we always went there last. While sitting there looking over all my candy, I would hear the doorbell ring and run out to see. As I opened the door, my grandfather would leap out from behind the porch wearing his monster mask and this time I would act like I was the scared one. ■ The thing is, my Grandfather has never stopped going trick or treating. When I was thirteen I got ridiculed by other kids for trick or treating. I

would proudly state, "my Grandfather still goes, so I will too." They replied, "He only goes because you do," but the truth is he went for another reason. ■ He is always energetic. He's like a child in a 78 year old body. I remember growing up, we would always have water gunfights or play other war games. He is the type of guy who sat at the kid's table at family gatherings. I think Halloween reminds him of his own childhood, a childhood that he never left behind. ■ In the last few years his trick or treating route has become smaller, first when his brother died, he stopped going to his neighborhood. Then he stopped going all together when my Grandmother needed him to stay at home to hand out candy. My Grandfather has to do a lot of things for my Grandmother since she got sick. It is obviously tough for him and he seems to have lost a lot of energy as well. He has become more serious. The fact that he doesn't go trick or treating doesn't seem as important as the

other things that are happening. It's a reminder to me of the sad truth of the time. ■ I believe in the remembrance and the celebration of youth. I believe in being childish at any age. I believe that games and playing are important to all people of all ages. My Grandfather taught me to not care what people thought, just have fun doing your own thing. This year I will go trick or treating since I believe in Halloween.



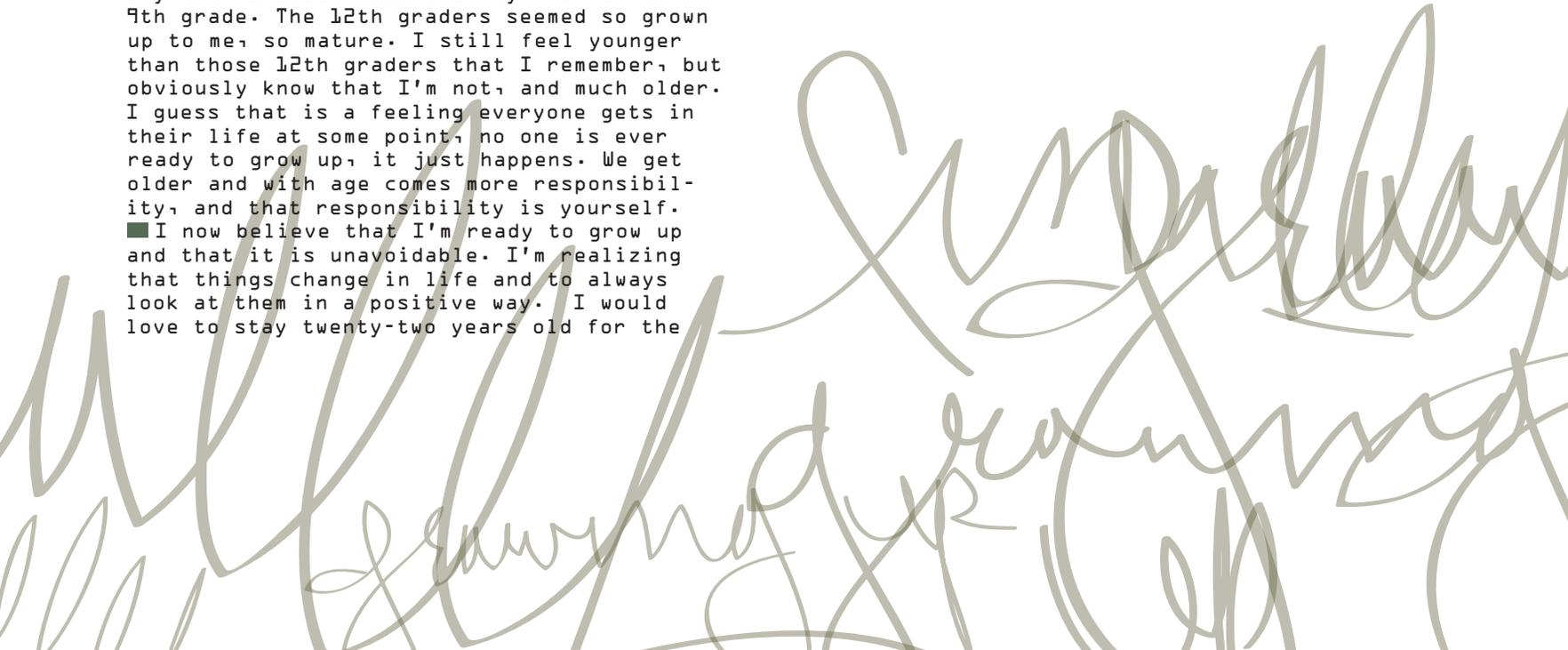
finally growing up

I believe that I'm not eleven years old anymore. I don't go running around with bare feet and skinned up knees through the 100 acres of woods my family owns back home in Barrington, New Hampshire, the town where I was born. I don't go riding my bike to friends houses down the street, because they don't live there anymore, and neither do I. We've moved away, lost contact, went to school, or only talk on the telephone or online now. I believe that I've grown up and that I don't live at home anymore. I don't have my mom to wake me up in the morning for school and to make me dinner before I go to bed, now only when I make the trip back to New Hampshire to see her, or if she comes to visit me in Maine, which doesn't happen very often anymore. ■ I live on my own now, taking care of myself, in a somewhat new city. My two alarm clocks wake me up in the morning, one that sits next to my bed on the dresser and a cell phone that sits atop the lower clock, both set 4 minutes apart to make sure that I don't sleep in. My sister Karli



lives four states away from me, and has for some time. She is older than me, has graduated from college and is starting her own life, and I know that she is just as nervous and scared about growing up as me. I remember walking the mile home from the school bus stop everyday after school with her, that seems so long ago that we were doing that, its scary to think that we aren't kids anymore, I still feel the way when I was in 9th grade. The 12th graders seemed so grown up to me, so mature. I still feel younger than those 12th graders that I remember, but obviously know that I'm not, and much older. I guess that is a feeling everyone gets in their life at some point, no one is ever ready to grow up, it just happens. We get older and with age comes more responsibility, and that responsibility is yourself. ■ I now believe that I'm ready to grow up and that it is unavoidable. I'm realizing that things change in life and to always look at them in a positive way. I would love to stay twenty-two years old for the

rest of my life, the age I am now, but know that I can't. I'm anxious for the adventures to come, the meeting of new friends and the building of a career in the design world, and the possibility of getting married and being able to wake up next to someone else every morning. ■ I believe that I'm finally growing up.



having both

Just one mile east was the Interstate; one mile west was the trestle. ■ My town St. Charles sat comfortably between the two. I found comfort in having both places accessible to me as an adolescent growing up in small town Iowa. ■ When I turned fourteen I insisted that my father teach me how to ride the red three-wheeler. The one that he would only use to ride up to the One Stop to get his two-liter of Pepsi. He patiently watched as I tried to pull start. I would get in close and then explode pulling with all my might. It would gently rumble and then die out. After a few failed attempts he'd show me how again. Sporting a red sparkled helmet and a five ft. pole with a bright orange flag I would be on my way. ■ I would go out past the park where the gravel roads began. I liked to watch as my tires spit out little particles that formed miles of dust clouds behind me. I'd travel past fields of towering corn deeper into the country. With my little red three-wheeler I'd slowly creep my way down a small, unmarked road with a



wall of trees on either side. Low branches would slap and scrape against my skin until I reached the trestle. ■ The trestle had long since fallen into the river and now was just cement blocks on either side of the banks. I would listen as the water gurgled past it. It was here that I read, wrote, listened to my ipod, sun bathed, went skinny-dipping, and climbed trees. I loved it. ■ A few years later when I turned seventeen my father purchased a maroon 1993 ford Taurus for me. He patiently sat beside me as I test drove it pressing on the gas too much; then abruptly braking. He spoke firmly, but with love as he coached me through it. After some practice he was no longer in my passenger seat. With my seatbelt on and a shiny new plastic picture I.D. I was on my way. ■ I'd take my car east this time, towards the interstate. It was an easy thirty miles before the Des Moines skyline was in site. My car would push up on the bridge and I would glide into one-way streets and stoplights. Java Joes, a small coffee shop, was my destination. Here

intellects read Bukowski or Miller and drank coffee. The smoke outside smelt sweet. I met people that talked of various films I had not seen or heard of, books that I MUST read, and music that sounded inspiring. I fell in love with the excitement and passion; the characters that came and went. This place became the new trestle, a new place to explore and a place to create. ■ When college came I decided to continue with this new, found appreciation for the city and move to Boston to study art. It was here when I discovered the importance of having both a trestle and a city. As I began to soak up all the information being taught at school and the culture of city life seeped into my way of living I realized that I needed a place to breathe. I needed to unwind and be alone. I needed the dirt roads and canopy of trees, the gurgling water and the complete sense of being free. I believe in the country, I believe in the city, but what I really believe is having both.

"It's fun, I enjoy it"

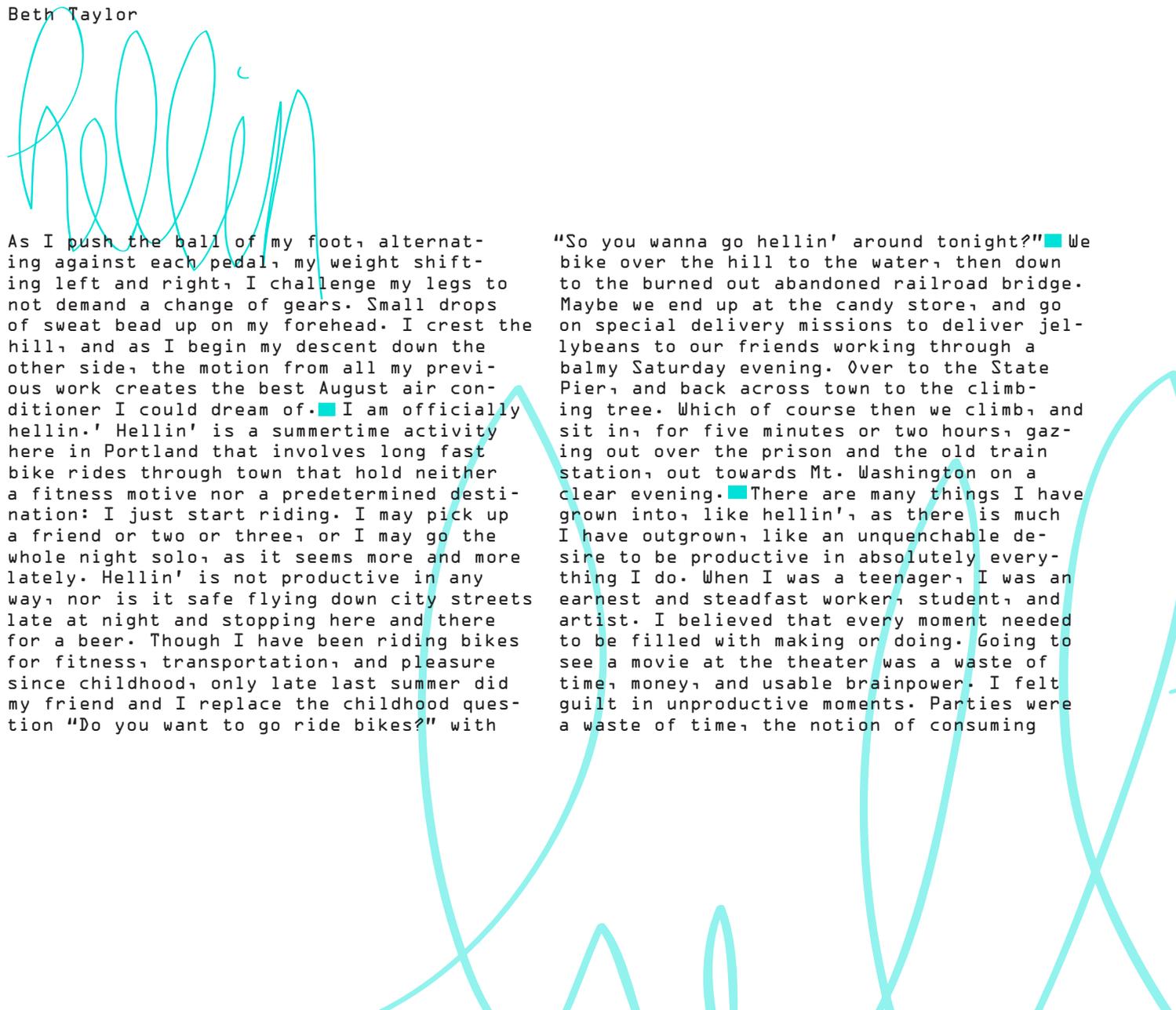


When I was younger, maybe like eight or nine, I got my first BMX bike. It was a Schwinn Predator, but that doesn't really matter. I had been riding my sister's old bike as a BMX up until this point, and after breaking the fork on it, my parents hooked me up with a new bike, one that was appropriate for a budding rider. At this time, I was riding because I had a blast every time I got on my bike; I thought it was the coolest thing on earth. Around late '95, I got my first BMX magazine. It was a BMX PLUS! magazine, if I remember correctly the December 1995 issue. I read that issue backwards and forwards, and I was blown away at the idea that there were people who were really good at BMX. The concept that there were pros had never crossed my mind up until that point. I had only known BMX as that thing that kids did on hand me down twenty-inch bikes. I saw all the latest bikes and parts. I saw riders like Mat Hoffman and Mike Escamilla in full color photos doing tricks I had never dreamed of. I became obsessed

Well I got

overnight and just ate up anything BMX related that I could get my hands on. ■ Somewhere along the way I got the idea that I could be a pro if I only rode enough and pushed my riding skills. So that's what I did, I rode practically every day and started getting some tricks down. When I was in Junior High, I started riding every weekend at an indoor skatepark in Portsmouth, NH. The place bugged me out at first, because I had never ridden ramps before. I eventually got used to it, and my riding progressed ten-fold. I learned how to ride quarter-pipes, box jumps and grind-boxes. I was like, "Maybe I really will be a pro someday!" ■ This whole time, I was just in love with BMX, but it was getting lonely; there wasn't anyone left in town that rode anymore and in order to ride anything decent, I had to get my parents to give me a ride in the car to the nearest skatepark or university campus. I kind of shifted my interest to skating, and while I got pretty good at that, my BMX skills kind of got stale. My future as a

BMX pro kind of faded away. I don't know if it ever really bothered me, though; I still had fun riding, and nothing was really different, right? I hadn't lost anything, but through the fizzling of my dreams, I gained the perspective that you can still have a good time doing something, even if you're not that great at it. I've been called a perfectionist, and I guess I'd have to agree. I have a hard time enjoying anything that I can't do well, but somehow I always seem to love riding around town, doing the same tricks I've done for the past five years and maybe a new one every now and again. I feel like I did when I was ten, and it lets me shake off the world for a little while. This is why I believe that you don't have to be the best at something to really enjoy doing it.



As I push the ball of my foot, alternating against each pedal, my weight shifting left and right, I challenge my legs to not demand a change of gears. Small drops of sweat bead up on my forehead. I crest the hill, and as I begin my descent down the other side, the motion from all my previous work creates the best August air conditioner I could dream of. ■ I am officially hellin'. Hellin' is a summertime activity here in Portland that involves long fast bike rides through town that hold neither a fitness motive nor a predetermined destination: I just start riding. I may pick up a friend or two or three, or I may go the whole night solo, as it seems more and more lately. Hellin' is not productive in any way, nor is it safe flying down city streets late at night and stopping here and there for a beer. Though I have been riding bikes for fitness, transportation, and pleasure since childhood, only late last summer did my friend and I replace the childhood question "Do you want to go ride bikes?" with

"So you wanna go hellin' around tonight?" ■ We bike over the hill to the water, then down to the burned out abandoned railroad bridge. Maybe we end up at the candy store, and go on special delivery missions to deliver jellybeans to our friends working through a balmy Saturday evening. Over to the State Pier, and back across town to the climbing tree. Which of course then we climb, and sit in, for five minutes or two hours, gazing out over the prison and the old train station, out towards Mt. Washington on a clear evening. ■ There are many things I have grown into, like hellin', as there is much I have outgrown, like an unquenchable desire to be productive in absolutely everything I do. When I was a teenager, I was an earnest and steadfast worker, student, and artist. I believed that every moment needed to be filled with making or doing. Going to see a movie at the theater was a waste of time, money, and usable brainpower. I felt guilt in unproductive moments. Parties were a waste of time, the notion of consuming



something that would impair my ability to create was abhorable, and summer days were mere material for constructing projects I could not fit into my over-stuffed teenage schooldays. ■ I am moving towards settling down. I own a home, I care for two cats, and I grew my first flower garden this summer. I am very nearly an adult. But racing city buses on bike across town remains a ritual of my daily life. I find an equal amount of value and fulfillment in experiencing life through hellin' as I do in making or helping. I feel lucky to have purged my system of die-hard seriousness, and I have learned to value experience as much as the fruits of my labors. I believe that freedom, playfulness, and rigor for life ride alongside my insatiable need to be productive. ■ I believe in hellin', now and forever.

This book was designed in 2007 by myself, Lee Lohrmann, as a project for Senior Design Studio class. The essays are all written by members of this class in the format of the "This I Believe" essays produced by National Public Radio. The images used are my own photography, with the exception of the photo used with Margo's essay, taken by Margo. The type is set in OCR A Standard, medium, and the handwriting is my own.

