

Dear Neil

by

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Hannah Grace Filley has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in English.

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Katrina Roberts

Whitman College  
May 08, 2019

*“Healing is a small and ordinary and very burnt thing.”*  
*—Cheryl Strayed*

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*LETTING the RIVER BE*

A truth of you runs in me quick, constant. A river.  
That you were sad and life was hard.  
That I am sad and life is hard.  
That all you or anybody wants is to be heard  
against rushing water  
in the darkest part of night. That all you or anybody wants  
is a knowing friend to wade across with,  
an outstretched hand dry and waiting on the other side.  
I am an aloneness knowing you left and are everleaving  
even as I recall you. Blurring brother like river rocks dropped,  
skipped. Disarray along dark water, a few more ripples today,  
eversomuch the mudier with image come and gone.  
Thoughts, writing—words false in the water of you,  
filling up this space, slipping into shapes like heart, eyes, hands.  
I wonder how it is these waves trick light along them,  
show me the face that is mine and also yours. You, my brother.  
You, my very first knowing friend.  
You, who never meant to leave, and who I find,  
sitting in shallow sand, the sun on your face,  
tracing pebbles in the palms of your hands. I see you,  
light glinting off of slick rocks.  
You, letting the river be with me,  
watching it from the bank.

*EVERINCARNATED*

Fire on the sidewalk lights up the almost-evening.  
If only one moment and the moment I notice, it's gone.  
Flame of a candle twirls, winks, wrinkles.  
Smoke leaking between loose fingers. Did we—  
did we just see that? Wildfire catching the cul de sac:  
red fox. Flickering. Did we—was that— ?  
Trim the wick. Drain the wax. Break the glass. Thick shards finding cold hands,  
red tail skimming our periphery, sand running inside hourglass whispers *we are so finite*  
and I know that fox must have been my brother.  
Sneaky creature scampering orange through thick dusk.  
Fox paws padding pale pavement on an ordinary evening.  
Blinks burning up our viewfinder, the sun sinking  
uncertain, unseen. The image in the black backs  
of our eyelids. I see my brother's quick smile  
in the smoke-shadow of a lost fox, skin around his eyes  
crinkling, laughing sweetly at the day,  
which has come to its end, again,  
and the coming and going of another makes me wonder  
which fox will be brother  
come rising of tomorrow's sun.

## *MOST LOVELY DREAMING*

Once, during dinner, when I was about eight years old, my mom asked me to get the mayo and bring it to the table. I stood, walked out the front door, down the driveway, all the way to the mailbox. I brought back a stack of bills, advertisements, placed them on the table, sat down. I looked up to my four most familiar faces, smiling, somewhat shamefully, hands over their mouths hiding laughter. I think it was my dad, who finally asked. *Hannah, what do you call the stuff that goes inside the mailbox?* Mayo, obviously. It took a couple of minutes for me to comprehend my own error, minutes which included my dad spelling each word on the back of a napkin for me. We had so much that day. Me, my expanded vocabulary; my family, an excellent embarrassing story. How, completely, ordinary. What we did not know, of course, was that in that stack of envelopes, placed on the table, were letters upon letters upon letters that, at the time, we couldn't see. Letters from our future selves, desperately pleading to share this or that regret, wisdom. I sent one, in particular, over and over again. *Savor this laughter*, it read, *this is the stuff of my most lovely dreaming*.

*THIS YELLOW HOUSE*

Brother's is the face you'll see first thing in the entryway—  
brother on the piano, brother at the table, brother in the bathroom,  
brother on the walls and on the walls and on the walls—and  
brother laughing on a folding chair at his own funeral—  
laughing, because he sees himself, *absolutely everywhere*. He sees his  
smile and almost-smiles, his  
Mom-stop-with-the-pictures-for-christ's-sake-smile.  
He is everywhere and  
we cannot see him  
at home in our house-museum  
where  
brother is thin metal strands of snare drum  
    in the basement  
and brother is stacked pieces of sympathy paper lining mantle  
    in the living room  
and brother is plastic-bag-bundle of salvaged camping gear  
    underneath his bed  
and brother  
is one missed step  
in some       horrifying       climbing accident  
and  
brother  
wishes he could help,  
watching us take down photos at the funeral,  
put them up again in a yellow house  
where I thank my mother  
and I thank my mother  
for never listening  
when we asked her  
to stop taking pictures.

## WINTER

Brother, in shorts, even through this snowing.  
Remember, forget, return.  
Brother in snow-stained sneakers.  
Brother never wearing boots.  
Remember, forget, return.  
Brother and brand new snowboard flying down each run, fearless, unblinking—  
Remember, forget, return.  
Brother, miraculously un-injured, biking to school in the snow.  
Remember, forget, return.  
Brother, biking to school in the snow, in shorts, still not wearing boots.  
Remember, forget, return.  
Once, at the park across from our house, long before the playground was built,  
we made a snow fort with Dad.  
Family and our many layers of jacket inside icy-white-wonder-dome, all five of us.  
Remember, forget, return.  
Snow days. Swishy overall pants, powdered cocoa, rage-shoveling the driveway.  
Time-honored Coloradan coping mechanisms.  
Remember, forget, return.  
Arrival of sunshine melting our snow-shelter in spring.  
Remember, forget, return.  
Random accidents on otherwise ordinary days.  
Thanking warmth for its return to our winter skin.  
What wishes would we write down,  
light on fire, release their ashes with the wind?  
Or: anything lasts, so long as we are brave enough  
to imagine missing it.  
Or: always the sun, so long as we won't look quite at it,  
the certainty of another chance to notice  
what might not return tomorrow,  
two sisters holding brother's hands,  
green flecks underneath the ice.

## *DINNER BELL*

Clink of dishes, sink, stove, cupboard. Where shall we sit? Table. Sofa. Floor. Bed. TV on or TV off? Let's ask the ghosts. Happy and bumbling around, pulling out our chairs for us, polishing Nana's silver, filling the dog's water bowl. So helpful, our ghosts. Two years after the last dinner with my brother the idea occurs to us that, instead of staring at its emptiness, we could move the fifth chair out of the dining room. This makes me worry for the ghosts, who usually bump and grumble over which of them gets the spare seat come dinnertime. Family members materializing near the kitchen each evening, at exactly 6pm, and, out of habit, returning to the table. My mother, once, jokingly rang a dinner bell for us, back when my brother was still alive, an antique cow bell, kept around as decoration. It was Swiss, like my grandmother, and, like my grandmother, this bell was eternally and emphatically loud. We laughed, and we laughed, and we laughed. It had worked so well, all three of my mother's children emerging from their rooms, ears covered by hands, eyebrows stiff in angsty confusion. Now? A ghost sprinkles paprika into my soup as us living-folk occupy the four remaining chairs. Chew, swallow, clean. We are somehow needing to eat again, and again, and this confuses our ghosts, who I have never seen eat. Fifth chair someplace in the basement, our ghosts have gotten very good at hovering. They dote on mother, daughters, father—dusting obscure corners of the dining room with feather brooms, stacking and shuffling plates. I hear their whispers, though, even when they retreat into the walls. *Scufflecreaks* *snatch*. *Shhhhhh*. *When was the last time she laughed?*

*ODE to his SHOE COLLECTION*

Running shoes. All over the house.  
Closets, entryways, my brother's entire room, nylon and mesh carpeting  
the floors of our house in ridiculous reds, blues, yellows, neon greens.  
Did you know the brighter the color the faster your feet? Flashing through dusty  
Colorado roads, cut grass, carved trails, disappearing riverbanks, wherever.  
Cycles of shiny and new, used and muddy, too soft, replaced, new again.  
Running feet, so easy to catch sight of in the wilderness.  
My brother was supposed to be a runner, maybe.  
My brother and all of his idols, burning up the track somewhere in Eugene,  
pacing the lush trails in and around the Willamette, looping and curving,  
striking the earth, trading out pairs of shoes right along with the miles on them.  
I wonder if my brother ever imagined being chased.  
I wonder if these men who came before him, the ones we never got to meet,  
were archivists, curators, shoe-enthusiasts—like my brother.  
I wonder why my brother quit track in high school,  
even after state records, championships, so many precious seconds shaved.  
I wonder why I never asked him when I had the chance.  
I wonder about the races won, lost.  
I wonder who his roommate would have been at Oregon,  
if he would have come home for Thanksgiving.  
Cycles of shiny and new, used and muddy, too soft, replaced, new again.  
After all, green was always his favorite color,  
like the running shirt I snuck from his closet—  
where we still keep all his damn shoes—  
long after his dreams became dusted edges of beveled track medals,  
long after his clothes stopped being his.

## *THE WORLD is RUNNING*

If my brother could have visited me when I went away to college, out on the eastern edge of Washington, we would have forgotten—in the mess of new faces, junk food, pale yellow hills and early morning workouts—to drink at my favorite bar, the Green, together. *Next time*, he'll say. Growing list of our to-dos. Things have been better lately, now that both of us are of age. More to do together, more in common. Ie: tequila. I text him in the weeks after his departure that I have a new recipe to share. Seltzer,  $\frac{1}{8}$  of a lime, mint, frozen limeade. Shake. Pour. No booze until our training is over, of course. Him, his match. Me, my tournament. Winning a permanent fixture on our bucket lists. Fierce opponents, personal records, numbered bibs plastered on walls in memorial. The annual 10K back home is good cross training for his new love of boxing, actually. If he could visit me, he would tell me all about how the world is running, quite literally, out of agave. We would mourn the possibility of tequila becoming seasonal. We search the menu for anything else, cider, maybe, something sweet. 2 oz. vodka,  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz lime juice, 6 oz. ginger beer. All the lists we cherish. All this left to love before we die.

*NEW MATH*

Lists quotes ideas reminders. Reminders in red ink on yellow squares.  
Call mom back. Laundry. Cash check. Your  
brother died. Oh, right. Application. Rent.  
*How many siblings do you have?* Two, kind of... Depends. Total or  
alive? Count again. Paste numbers on little notes till all the walls are  
yellow. Number of years between us number of years since I  
last saw him living number of times you've had to meet  
somebody new choose between lying and half-telling this  
sort-of truth. Listen to this listen to someone else talk about  
their brother and hope they don't ask you  
about yours. Oh, right. I don't have one. Not really. Not anymore.

## *UNTITLED*

I feel the loose space  
between wool socks and unlined, too-big snow boots; then  
forgive the cold I find there.  
Snow on the ground and still it's raining.  
I am walking, always walking. Trying to notice  
how this body feels; here, exactly where I am. I do not last long,  
quick to imagine fingers warm and mittenless, mind turning slush to trail dust. It is  
summer and we no longer know the harsh in-between-season that only seem to remind  
that time is passing. Start again.

I feel the tight quick underneath my fingernails if I squeeze my fists hard enough.  
I feel the most sensitive parts of me, protected. I am walking, always walking, wondering  
if the body I have here is walking someplace else, too, right this instant, alongside my  
brother. We are somewhere in all those Colorado peaks, discussing our most recent love  
affairs, the ever-relevant topic of our quirky and endlessly loving parents and what it was  
to be raised by them. I'm not sure time passes, here, in this world of conversations that  
wouldn't be the same with anybody else. The pair of us, absent from aging, still just  
hiding in shallow isles of pine and path the way we did when we were kids.  
Start again.

Today, I felt the loose spaces between my feet and the melting ice below me. I released  
my dreaming into the shallow black and white packs of snow as I would release myself to  
sleeping. I forgive my imagination for always wanting elsewhere. I see myself,  
unprotected. I let this woman grow older than her older brother. I watch her reaching out  
to touch his hand.

## SWINGSET

Hands holding tight to metal tethers,  
feet tracing steady lines against soft gravel,  
slight wind sifting neck hairs in the cold.

the countless times we have come here,  
to this swingset, together, to think and  
sometimes speak. Our sacred place. The park

with new little bodies scampering  
around, here to replace the children

I am thinking about the millions  
of tiny rocks beneath us, and:

1. I would like to ask him what his thoughts are on feeling particularly like gravel.
2. I would like to know where he stands on the end of the world; the meaning of life.
3. I would like to know what excuse he has for missing so many years of my life.
4. I would like to ask him where the hell he has been.
5. I would like to ask him what it feels like to be nothing, to be earth, to be particular.

Hands release linked metal and I stand,  
sticky playground texture everon my palms.  
I don't look over, don't need to see  
the other empty swing. I swear, really, we have  
the best talks out here. Losing track of time,  
running, eventually, out of light. Sometimes  
I have to urge it out of him, but,  
he really does give the best advice.  
We just have so much to catch up on,  
these days, my brother and I.

He is thinking about a woman  
he may someday marry, or maybe  
his recent car trouble, or maybe

across from our childhood home,  
the same as it ever was,

we used to be. Odd, how not facing someone  
can make it that much easier to speak.



## *DRIVEWAY*

Basketball hits pavement near my window and I am fifteen years younger. Tiny and trying to balance the ball in between outstretched fingertips. Tonight is one of those tired nights spent lazing around in the fading orange of an unremarkable summer day. Older brother invites kid sister to the cul de sac while mom washes dishes. Hoop at the end of our drive, h-o-r-s-e on the uneven asphalt, keeping score. Brother would win and I would cry, a ritual. Me, chronically sore loser. My phone buzzes and as I return to my beyond-school-age-body, the one that somehow became an adult, I feel the rounds of muscles in my legs stretched along the bed, firm and loose inside the comfort of my favorite running pants. I feel my legs wanting to return to the pavement outside, back to the house where him and I had kept up our habits together—push-ups in the cool of the basement, timing ourselves running loops we designed around the neighborhood. I was sure that he was going to be an elite athlete. Him, my very first teammate, favorite coach. Neil, the man who taught me how to run, who cannot know how strong I have become. How fast.

*THIN METAL*

Today, I spent two hours assembling a shoe rack I bought for \$19.99.  
It has radically reimagined the entryway of my house.  
More clean, more organized.  
I am staring at the cheap angles of thin metal this morning,  
and I am cut into hollow ribbons,  
my unpolished edges  
trying to write,  
and I realize  
he is in this, too;  
my desire to make neat,  
make nice. Trying to assemble the pieces  
into something useful,  
uncomplicated. Tidy. Edited.  
Easier to remember that way.  
I'm better about this, now,  
letting the pieces that do not align together remain  
unchanged, unwieldy. I want to tell him he can stay here and he can  
stay here and he can stay here and he can  
leave his shoes absolutely everywhere

all  
over  
the  
house

## UNBIRTHDAY

I think I'm going to fall in love today. I fall in love and I fall in love and my lover is one my brother will never meet. Miffed by bright pink greeting cards and *the absurdity of getting only one single day to be obscene about love*, said lover suggests we make our own unvalentine's day on the 13th. I jokingly call him Alice, he corrects me, *Mad Hater, nice try*. (Note: recent research suggests it was actually the white rabbit; I must remember to win that argument later) *To me? To you! A verrrrry merry unbirthday.... For me? For YOU! Now blow the candle out my dear and make your wish come true...* Him and his many references, us and our everyday holidays. Happy unbirthdays, here, learning to love the unexceptional. I tell this man it makes me think of my brother, that an unbirthday is exactly what his feels like now. The kind of day that almost means something, almost cause for tea, or cake. Marking the space between now and the last true birthday, of which I do not remember, but presumably I sent him a card.

## LAUGH TRACK

Once, my brother's friend pushed me. I was in kindergarten, and, one day, had the audacity to sit in the very back of the grimey yellow school bus, which, apparently, was reserved for only fifth-grade kids. So, my brother's friend pushed me off my seat and told me to go sit up front. My brother, who saw it all, simply laughed. He did not help me up, he did not apologize. He did not punch his friend in the face. So, I choked on my own stifled tears the whole ride home, as angry at my brother as I had ever been in my very short and very small life. Later, I collapsed into a pile of sobs on our parent's bed. Twenty-ish years later, I am writing on a chalkboard *I miss my brother, I miss my brother*, over and over and over again, as if I am a schoolgirl once more, punished, kept away from recess, confined here to learn my lesson. *I miss my brother*. I miss his ability to listen, to witness. I miss the possibility of growing older, telling his kids this school-bus-story. Walking my own kids to the school bus and telling them about some stupid thing their pal Uncle Neil once did, and it would not have to be special, it would not be my millionth eulogy. But, instead, I collect stories here, learning and relearning the ways my brother taught me to survive his own dying. When I can, I install a laugh track into these memories, microwave some popcorn, sit back. I pretend, long after our kids themselves have grown, after all the moments we got to share have passed, to reminisce, to choke on uncontrollable laughter with my older and wiser brother, who I know is somewhere laughing, too.

## *CONTACT*

It took my brother twenty minutes every morning to put his contacts in. It made my family rage with annoyance. Us, family, always having somewhere to be. For example, I am on my way to the optometrist. Things are getting out-of-focus (I've been reading too much). I look up and

everything is just a little bit farther away than it used to be. I'm looking at my phone, now, for instance, for no reason. Ghost flipping through bright icons like I'll find something worth anything. No new notifications. And yet, I scroll. Did you know that I have a hole in my retina

on my right eye? It doesn't affect my vision much, apparently, but if it was a teeny fraction of a fraction of a millimeter to the left, I would be blind, in that eye. Random, huh? It only takes me about 45 seconds to get my contacts in each morning and I think of my brother, actually,

every time. A ritual. The green river in my iris, outlined by soft plastic circles that somehow let me see. So, now, I am waiting on a couch in the office of the optometrist, phone in hand. I find my way to the call center. Maybe today will be the day I finally sift through and delete

the people I don't recognize here. You know, the people you never call? Like my brother, for example. Or, at least, his name. Black text blurring, thick streaks of ink streaming into nothing

the longer I stare.

*A MAN WHO MUST BE*

The dream starts the same way each time.  
Sunflowers tilting in thin brass pots.  
Colorful cloth and handmade candles, table after decorated table.  
A horn band in the corner and  
so, so many strings of tiny lights. I'm barefoot, dancing.  
White dress, sure.  
I sink the curves of my feet into patio tile,  
hear the slow drip of trumpet against river rocks dropped, skipped,  
take the hand of a man who must be my husband and, soon, I'm spinning.  
Slow at first.  
Half-turns, little spirals.  
The lights blur around me and my hair smells like sleep and melted wax  
and clean linen. The circles gets faster, and  
I'm looking around the dance floor, big white bundles of tent streaming into  
paint strokes, each bubble in  
every champagne glass, all the flickering wicks, petal after yellow petal, all a  
mess of stretched  
shadows, muddled lines. Still,  
I do not meet the eyes  
of guests. Face after  
unknown face until  
I wake.  
I wake in damp sheets and here I see  
his face, old image framed  
alongside empty, unlit candle,  
on white nightstand.  
Soft brown eyes. Smile lines.

## *IN the LIGHT*

I started drinking coffee when I was twelve years old. Catch up, look up, grow up. Ever the youngest of three, everunder, everout, everleft. *Be like them.* Early runs on blues or black diamonds, everpatient mom watching me pizza-slice the whole way down the bunny hill. Sister and brother driving to high school together, me everon yellow elementary bus. PG-13 movies after sunset, me everalready in bed. Dad, you, the youngest of four brothers, must have known what it was to be everso small, so behind the rest. What's it like to have so many living brothers? Do you everstop looking up to them? *Be like them.* Left out in the daytime, left out in the night, coffee too early, just wanting wanting wanting to be like the others and can't. Wake up, stagger to the grinds, the filters. Everunwilling to wake. Still uncertain of when and whether we have been sleeping. Caffeine finds bloodstreams and we return, again, to the living. Everalive, looking for each other as our dreams and days repeat, wondering where in the light the other everlives, everlasts.

*DEAR NEIL,*

i.

If the wind could know cease to whistle sifted whisper long leaves linked sycamore rungs the song breathing mud finding itself	what I know no more hum steady like hollow robins here machine	it would altered echo stamp among ink listening blood slow kneading among you	absent thrum  lines      on  skin on skin while it walks
hand against neck entirely all around in your jacket pricked thumbs though rain would fall spaces staggered little keystrokes but everything still could know just rain and fire knowing we know swollen rain boots chewed fingernails just	thigh against thigh you typed letter on folded corners  in straight chutes into ladders drops no here so what I know  on sidewalk nothing peace you your	the sky the flannel lining pockets bleeding clean  even angled leading up to falling littered leaves shocked if the wind there would be  with us finding lint pockets or	as  falling

ashes

If everything was still  
as it was  
as you are  
the lamp would be on  
in my purple room  
on the white nightstand  
I would be  
on the edge of the bed  
alongside mom  
cool of a summer evening  
teasing tiny windows  
in the window screen  
as we are each  
at once  
mid-inhalation  
though we do not feel  
our matched breathing  
as brother stands  
in shadow  
at the door  
arms outstretched above  
fingers curled around weak frame  
eyes cast down along old carpet  
where I last saw him living  
where I will always be  
crying for what I can't remember  
in the fading light of day

Pages of  
no-longer-knowns  
about me.  
She is, she was. This has been  
a most terrible becoming,  
growing into the woman I am  
without you. Kid sister still alive  
or died right alongside you. Do we play in heaven?  
Blissful, unknowing.  
Person, place, or thing?  
Weddings, graduations.  
Mourning, morning coffee.  
Getting caught in the rising light again,  
wonder, what it is,  
to be surprised at sunrise,  
in all that gold and glittering  
that might envelope us when  
we die,  
which has no name but maybe  
blissful, magic, dreamstuff,  
and the everaction of drinking in a  
*you are here*  
breathing  
all there is  
to be.

## PAIN MANAGEMENT

This is how a fire starts. Smooth shape of pen against mess of lines on my right hand writes *I think today I'm going to bring my brother back to life.*

This is how a fire starts, match finding paper scraps. Thin metal office wastebasket, out on the sidewalk on an ordinary evening.

One paper reads: *when I was fifteen, my brother died, and someone said "We all die anyway"*

Another: *when I was fifteen, my brother died, and a school-friend asked me: if I could wish for anything in the world, what would it be? I replied: the ability to fly. She, confused, asked me: but wouldn't you bring your brother back to life?*

Another: *at my brother's funeral, a man unbuttoned the top of his black shirt to show me the name of his once-alive girlfriend, tattooed over his heart, in her handwriting. That same man told me that, after a few years, the sharp sting would melt into something sore and aching, something easier to manage.*

*How often do you think about the thumbprint of your handwriting? How often do you write your own name?*

Do it now. Let it be volatile, messy. Like tiny poems written on the backs of pictures I keep. *Neil, rt, 12. Hannah, lt, 8, rocky mtn. ntl. park.*

Lines I use to turn his unchanging face into songs, songs that silence the moan of machine once used to keep him breathing.

I never knew when my brother would come home after one of his departures.

I always, always understood this love for running away.

I always, always trusted he would return,

never once doubted it,

and so, I write, making and unmaking him, keeping words where I can, other days finding ways to make ash on my own terms, watching the river-lick of flames take paper,

watching the world starting over and over and over and over,

again.

*WE DIE*

if we all die anyway  
then  
we die

all die any why way we

## LOST GULCH

My brother died and we made trail signs.  
Dreamed, drawn, dedicated, pictures protecting sensitive habitat,  
pictures finding peaks. Immovable in these mountains,  
somewhere among immeasurable pine needles,  
unphased by packs of snow, the new road, you, me, our prescribed burns.  
Hidden in everturning switchbacks, lost on the groan of hungry bears,  
missed in the swish of the fox tail lighting its own fire. To find these, turn  
when you read *Lost Gulch*. Small parking lot, scattered paths, "outlook"  
doing this injustice. A view that could change you, break you. Read the fine-print  
on the signs when you find them. Hand-painted peaks, kind eyes drawn on bear and cub.  
In memory, in honor of. A good place to remember yourself, if you can, alive. *You are here.*  
Say his name here, if you can, out loud. *Neil.*  
My brother. He loves these mountains, Led Zeppelin, junk food.  
His dark brown eyes have smile lines and his laugh could light these hills.  
What can I say, for you, in return?  
What place can I look for, for you, to remember?  
All of our sacred places.  
All of us, reaching  
some full-hollow-here-ness in our travels, our breathing,  
our sun making it back to us, alive, as we listen.  
Blue sky framing snowfall, thin air finding lungs.