

A Second Story Room

by Forest Bright

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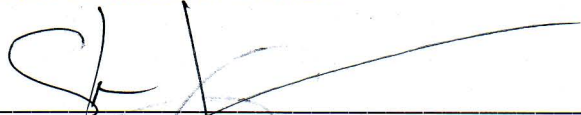
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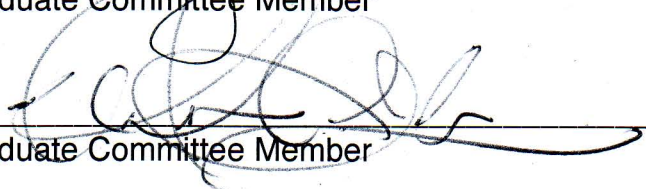
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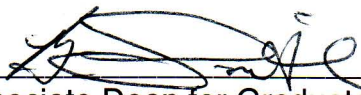
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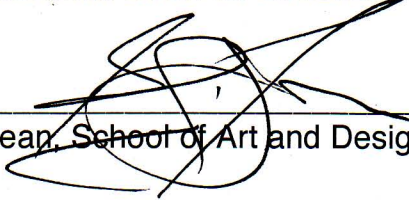
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April 25, 2008

The following letters were written to the members of my immediate family, as well as a character from a popular children's story. They are meant to describe and contextualize *A Second Story Room*, which I have been living inside of since September 2007.

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Keywords: home, installation, correspondence, dwelling,





Dear Little Prince,

Once in the fifth grade I was in an advanced class called "challenge" at Sarah Smith Elementary School. For an assignment I was to write a book report and deliver a presentation about you. I heard about your travels from my mother when I was very young, so I decided not to read your story again. I went about making drawings and a diorama for my presentation from memory. My teacher was not interested in this approach, and when questions arose about whether the information I was presenting was accurate I blamed my mother, who originally read your story to me. I trusted my memories, and thought that if they were wrong then my mother must have miscommunicated what happened. The presentation ended with me taking a trip to the office, and calling my mother to schedule a parent teacher conference.

This was a long time ago and since then I have read your story many times. Some nights when I look up at the stars I imagine you, on your asteroid, laughing with your rose. I am writing to you because I am worried that I am becoming a grown-up. I hope that if this ever happens you will find me and read me the story that follows.





I was born in a city.



But I grew up on a farm. My parents were not farmers, but artists.



I have a sister, who was once little.



We all lived in a trailer on a road made of dirt and grass.



Our kingdom consisted of a lake surrounded on one side by fields and on the other by woods. We loved this land. We named the sides of the lake after the animals that lived there: minnows, snapping turtles, fish, and snakes.



We studied the moon with a red telescope.



The summers were spent swimming in the morning, and sleeping in the mid-day sun. One day my mother came to me and told me that I would soon have a brother.



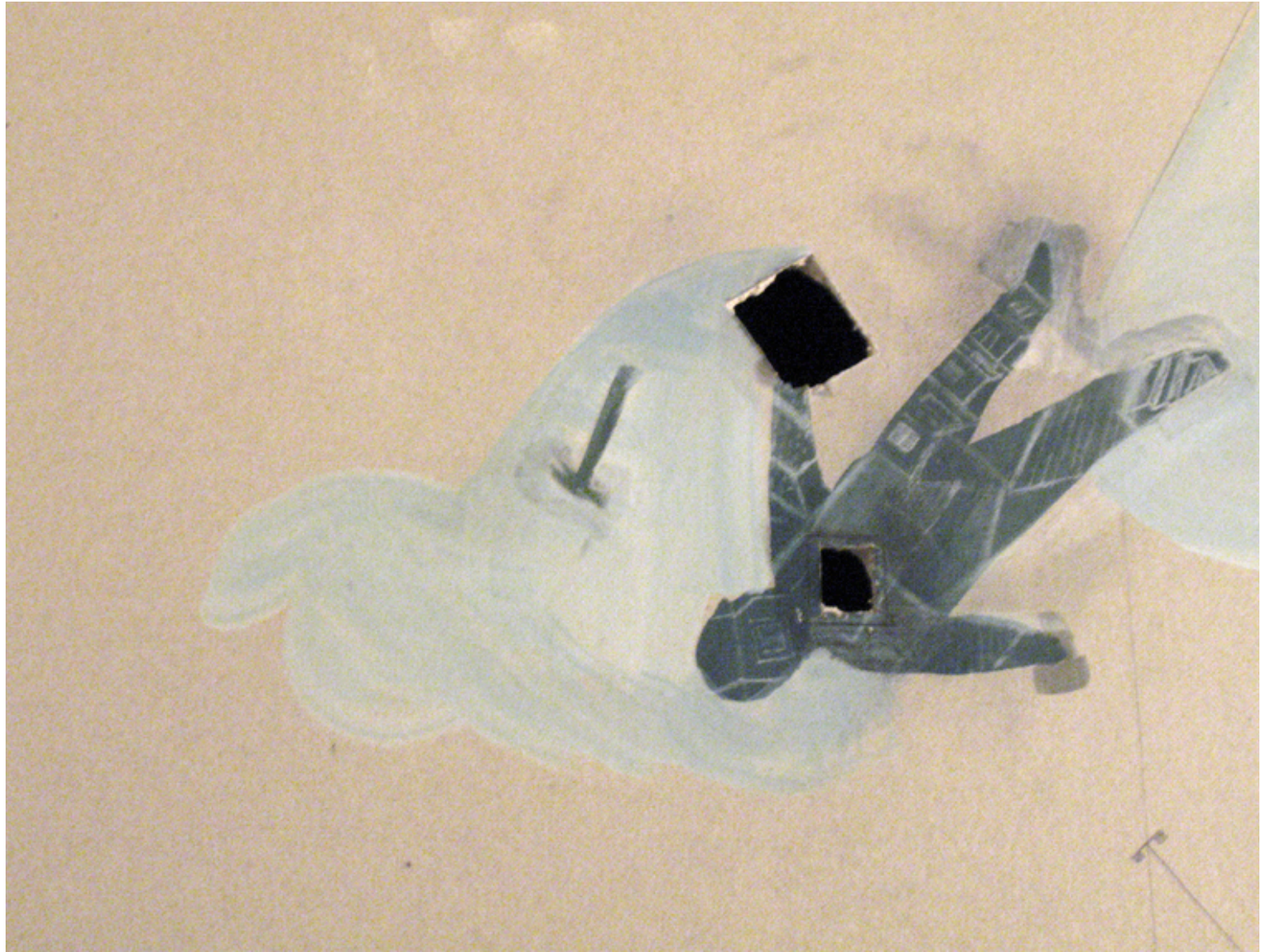
This meant that our family needed a bigger place to live, so we had to construct a house. We looked at new portable houses called "double-wides," but they really just seemed like big expensive trailers.



Tired of trailer life we ended up buying a house that was for sale in a nearby town, and moved it to the farm. But the move was hard for such an old house, and it needed a lot work before we could move in.



My father worked hard. He no longer made art, so that he could focus on constructing the house.



He started suffering accident after accident. He fell off the roof, hurting his back, making his work slower.




The wood from the house was old. It did not want to accept new nails. He hammered his fingers and smashed his thumb. The problems built on one another.



One day my father came to me. He asked

"What would you like your room to be when we move into the house?"



I didn't answer, but I imagine the room: blue, filled with toys, and many walls and levels making it look like a cave with tunnels.

Dead Bird

Albert Pinkham Ryder



Soon my little brother was born. He was named Ryder, after the American painter Albert Pinkham Ryder. Our family, still living in the trailer, became cramped. Our situation was stressful.



This is where the story becomes sad, and frightening.



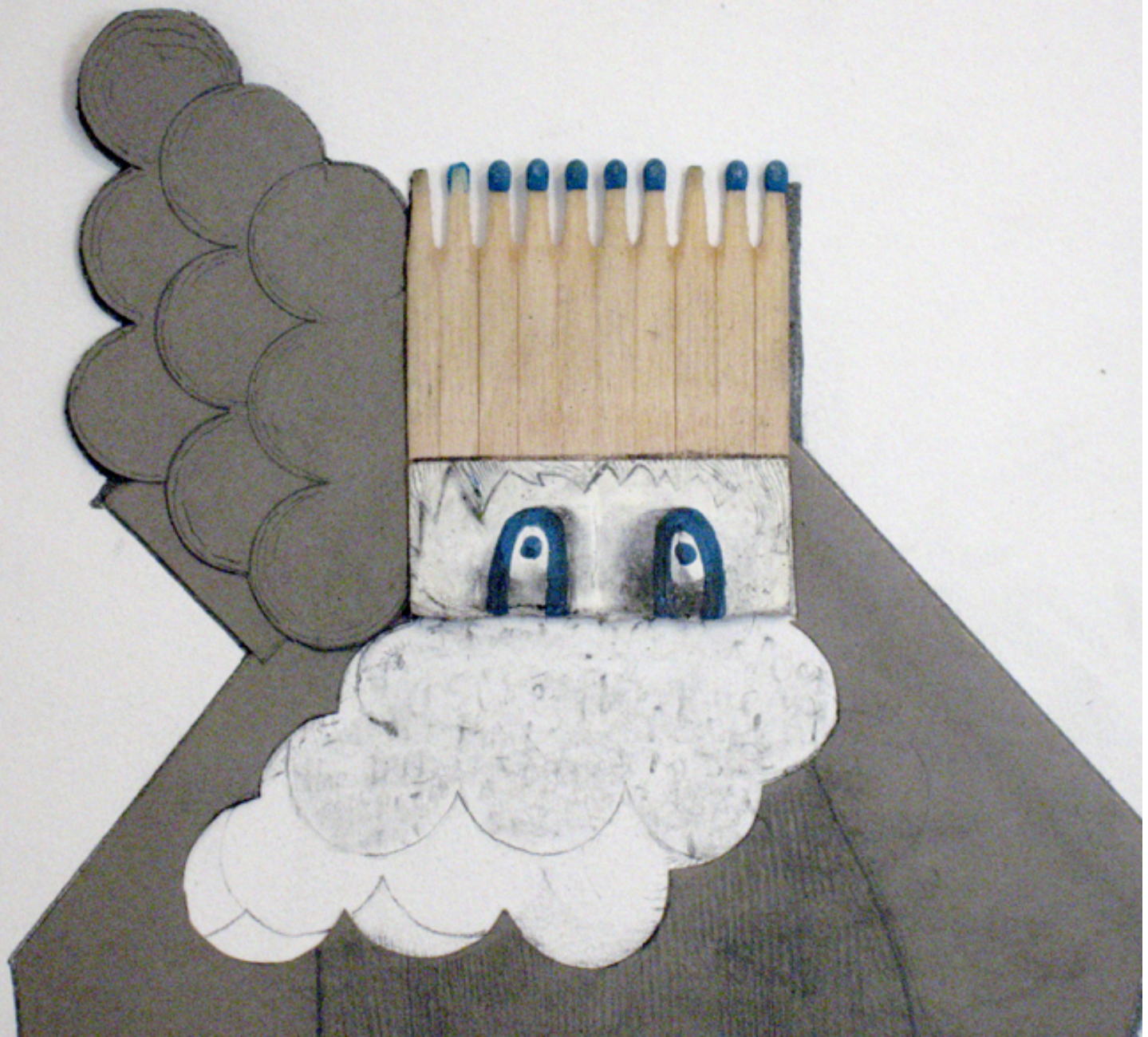
My father dies of a sudden heart attack.



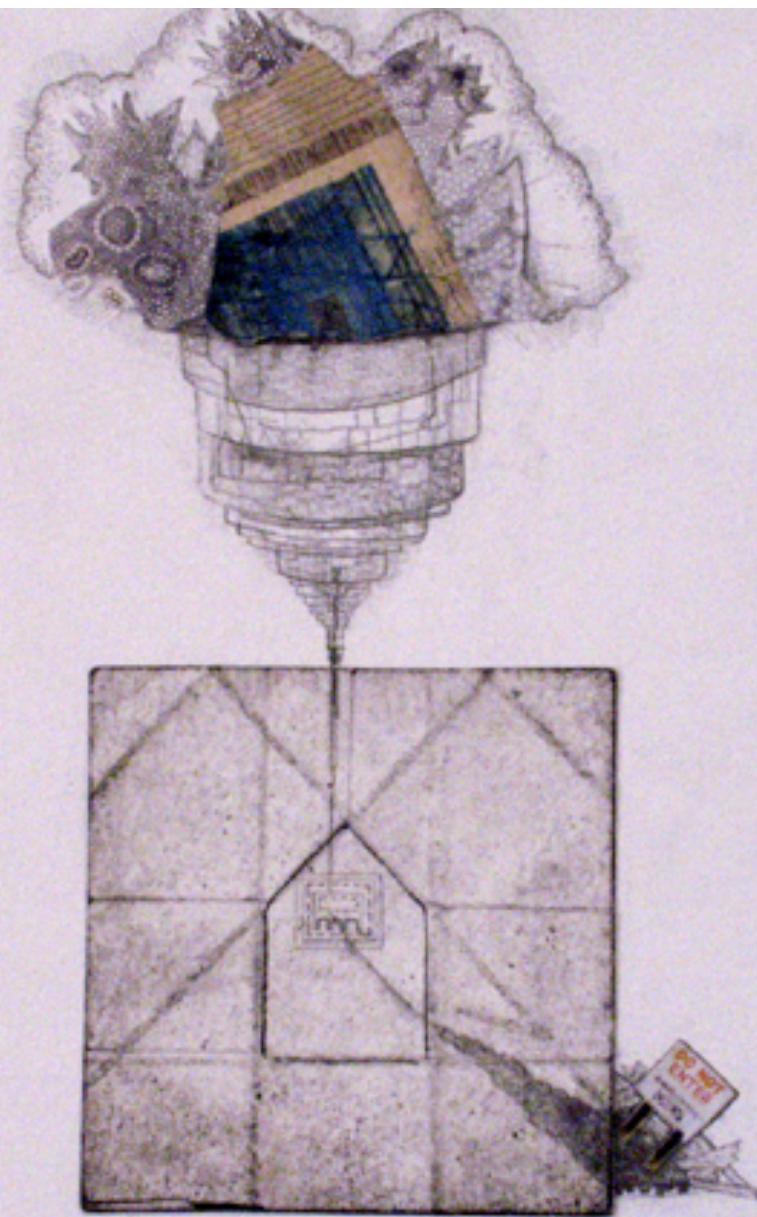
My mother blamed his death on the stress of building the house. It was too painful for her to remain on the farm.



Our family moves into a condo in the city.



With my home so far away I realizes that it is no longer my kingdom.



failure

The room that I imagined would be my own is never built. I start to forget details. I no longer trust my memory. My family once so close living in a tiny trailer, now hides in separate rooms, barely talking to one another.



Last summer I went to find my kingdom. It is hard to know if it was really the same place, but many of the details seem to fit. There is a lake. There is a trailer. But the house has become a pile of wood.



I thought I might gather this wood and use it for a new house, but when I realized it is now home to snakes and lizards I left it alone.



I moved very far away.



I decided to recreate the room I would have had if my father had lived. I built walls within my room.



I rearranged everything so that it would tell a story.



I didn't sleep well.



I built a room within my room.



It does not have a rose or a volcano, like your asteroid, but it does have a banana plant,



and flowers that I love.

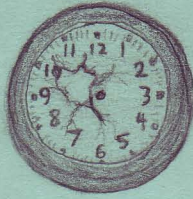


What I built helps me remember that I was once a child. I want to share my story with you, because your own story has helped me remember many times.

Thank you so much,

Forest





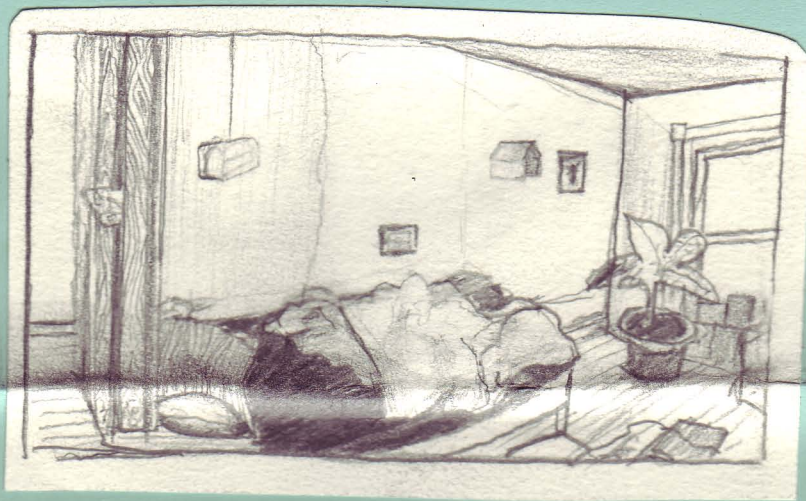
Dear Ryder,

I know that you are going through a difficult time. Mom told me a little about how depressed you feel, which was only confirmed by your telephone call a few weeks ago. I don't want to patronize you, which I tend to do, so I am not going to give you advice. I struggle with my own sense of self worth everyday. I have been totally focused on my work this year, to the point that it has invaded all parts of my life, including this letter to you. I want to share with you what I have been doing.

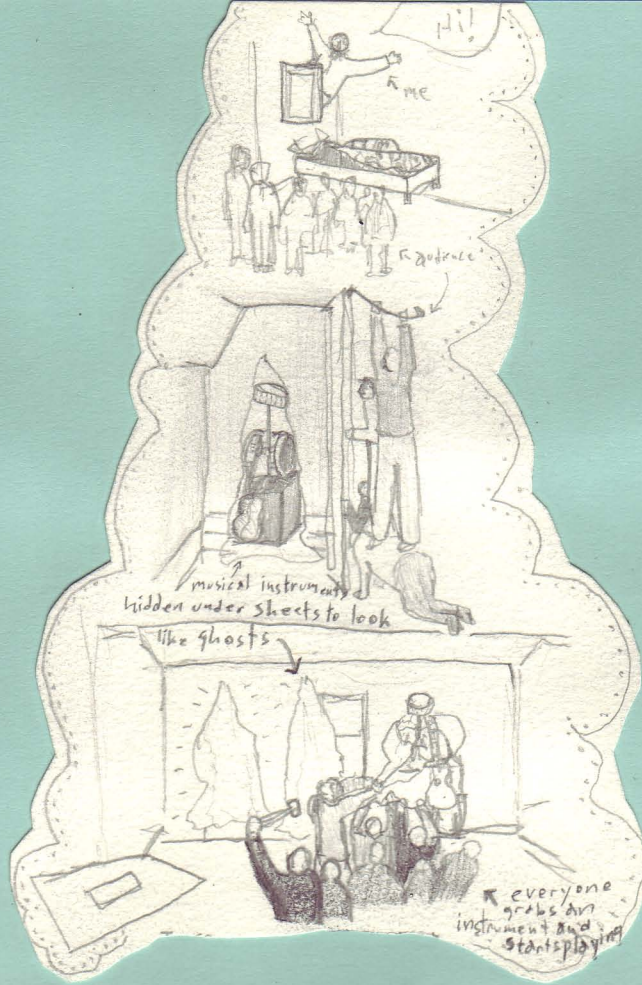


Last summer while you were in Alaska I slept in your bedroom. It was strange waking up to all the painted walls. They reminded me of coophousing in Ann Arbor, which always has a mural painted in the common space. Your room must have affected my dreams because when I got back to Michigan I started working in my own bedroom. I learned how to drywall and started by building

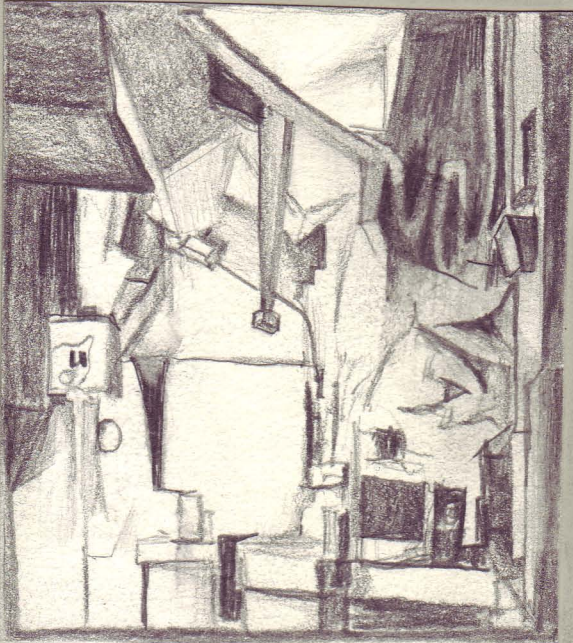
a couple walls, which made my room smaller. I was thinking about these walls as metaphors that could tell a story while also being my room, but it felt more like I lived in an art gallery. With my bed on one side of the room and these walls on the other we developed an antagonistic relationship.



I came up with elaborate plans to take the walls down. I thought I could invite everyone I know into my room and then deliver a soliloquy so inspiring that people would spontaneously help deconstruct the walls; carrying them out of my house and throwing them into a dumpster.

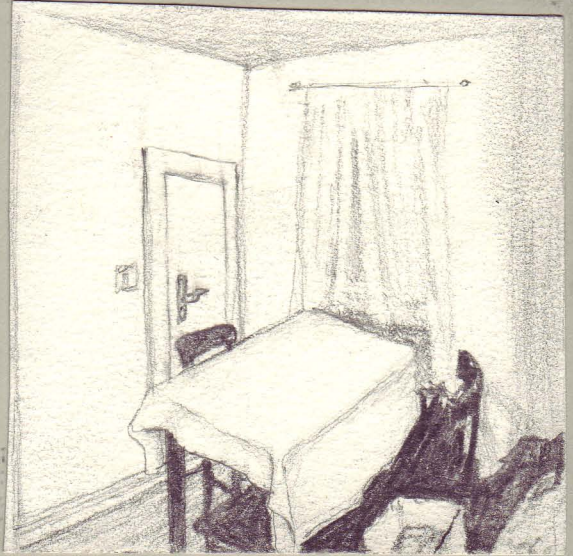


I was confused and frustrated. I was having problems maintaining any focus on what I wanted. My advisers thought that these walls were a good problem, they were so large it was physically hard to dismiss them, while at the same time they provided a focus on this point where art and life meet. I decided to live with them a little longer.



Kurt Schwitters's

Merzbau



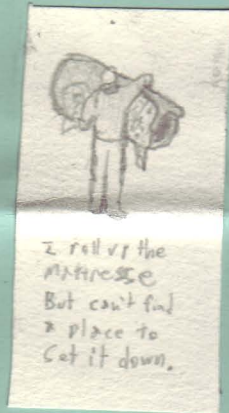
Gregor Schneider's

Dead House Ur

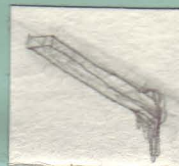
I was looking at other artists that have built interiors, like Gregor Schneider and Kurt Schwitters. I was reading a book by the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov about installations, and how to tell a story using a room.

Mostly I was thinking about the farm; how on the second story, which collapsed years ago, there was a room that would have been my own. I wanted to see that room so I started building more walls, constructing another room in my present bedroom at 213 Beakes St. This made an odd kind of sense, because my desire is not really to just see the room, but to know what it is like to live inside it. The interior of the room on the farm only existed in my imagination. It was blue and filled with toys. It had multiple stories, so that it looked like a cave with tunnels.

What I ended up building is a strange hut, a kind of compromise between my memory, my imagination, and my own present life. It looks a bit frightening and I have had a hell of a time building it. My process, like composing a collage, is a matter of building up parts only to cut them out a few days later. I never had a plan for what I was doing, and at times I lost focus forgetting about the room on the farm, and just building intuitively.



I roll up the mattress
But can't find
a place to
cut it down.



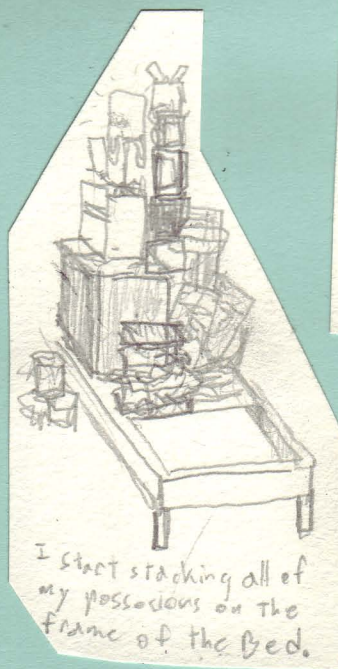
I stick
a Board
Through
the Drywall,
file.



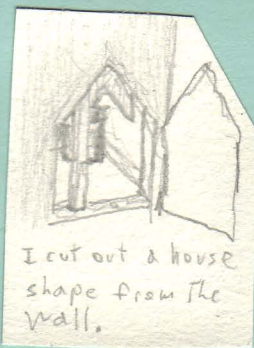
I cut it
into the
rectangular
hole in the
wall.



I lean a
sheet of Drywall
at an angle to
resemble a roof.



I start stacking all of
my possessions on the
frame of the Bed.



I cut out a house
shape from the
wall.

One day I fumbled around, attempting to move my bed to the other side of the room. I pulled off the mattress, rolling it up, and found that I had no place to set it down. The floor was not an option. I have a tendency to cover flat surfaces. I rarely have a desk or table that is not loaded down with objects. My bedroom floor, being the largest flat surface I can access, had collected a pile of lumber, fifteen picture frames, a record player, three empty water glasses, photos of our family, some paint cans, and a few pairs of dirty socks. In that moment I decided the best place for my mattress was to cram it into a hole I had previously cut in the wall. I kept my bed in this wall for months, pulling it out to sleep on and rolling it up to get it out of the way. These were the more interesting moments, I wasn't concerned with how I represent an image. I was just being with the objects and space immediately around me.

So many of the reasons I built this room have to do with dad. I wish I could visit the house that he built. I would go inside and hear his voice in the hallway. I am not interested in my memories of him. I have reimagined them so many times, and each time I transform them. I want to just be with him. I want to be surprised by the way he phrases a question. What would he ask me?

Something simple, how is Ryder? How do you two get along? I would be ashamed at what I would have to say. I would tell him about the time that I opened my door and poured a glass of water on your head. Why is it that you can make me so upset? I am tired of being angry at you. I would like to see our relationship repaired. I am not sure what caused this situation, any more than I know what needs to happen to change it, but I imagine both the cause and the solution have to do with spending time together.

I love you,

Love



you with a beard



you with a beard

Dear Wayne,

I am writing to you to thank you for all you have done for me. This includes paying my way through Auburn, and letting me live in your house for so many years, and paying my car insurance, and dealing with all of the techno-bureaucratic details that make life so hard. I don't know where I would be without you, but I wouldn't own a filing cabinet, which is not to say I know how to use one properly, but I do own one.

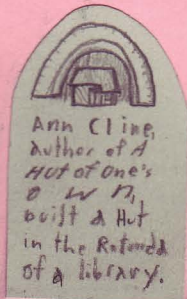
So you might be asking yourself why I am writing this now when I have never thanked you for these things before? Don't worry I am not asking for any money, and I am not moving back to Auburn. It is just that I am rebuilding an imagined room from childhood which has so much to do with private space, which includes our family. It is making me a little bit nostalgic. I started thinking about how much you have done for me. If you had not shown up we might still be living in that condo in Atlanta. The carpets of that place were so saturated with stains that new strains of diseases would have emerged, that quite possibly might have killed off half the population of the city, if it wasn't the home

of the CDC. So thank you for the hardwood floors that allowed us to side step such a disaster.

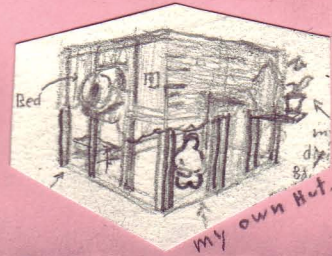
Mom told me recently that you are not exactly enjoying your retirement. I was thinking that what you might need is sometime by yourself. I did a little bit of research last fall about huts, places of seclusion where an artist, writer, philosopher, hermit can escape the pressures of society. Here are some examples I found:



recluse Poets from the Tang dynasty would escape the cities for the pines.



Ann Cline, author of *A Hut of One's Own*, built a Hut in the Refenda of a library.



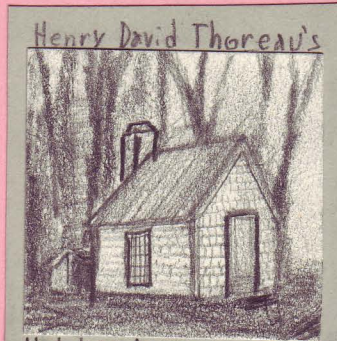
my own Hut.



Ted Kaczynski's cabin in Montana



a University of Michigan ALUM



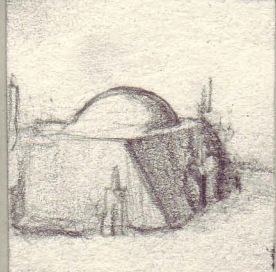
Henry David Thoreau's

Hut has been reproduced as a tourist attraction.



played by Alec Guinness. Hermits like h o o ds.

Obi-wan Kenobi



This was my first introduction to the idea of a hermit. thanks to George L U K a s.



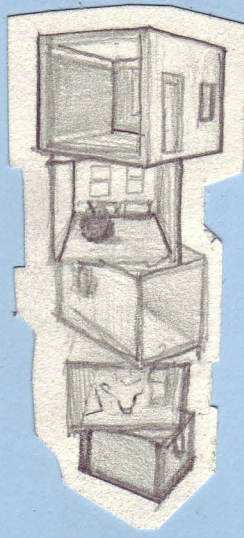
I thought I was building a hut of my own this year, but I never felt at peace in the structure I built. I am just not ready for hut dwelling, but I was thinking that the time may be right for you to create your own cabin in the woods. Maybe you could build it somewhere out in the country where you can escape our family. I am not sure what you would do there. I guess that would be for you to decide. I like to imagine you growing a giant beard and writing a novel, or maybe a series of short stories.

Anyway, I am sure your retirement will improve over time.

love,

Forest





Dear Brittain,

Hi how are you? I very much enjoyed your message in Italian. How is that class going? How are your others? Wayne told me that the insulin pump is performing miracles. He said you are taking a full schedule, and you are so dedicated you even go to class on days when you are sick. I wish I felt that level of commitment.

I watched the videos that we shot over Christmas, the clips that we talked about turning into a horror movie. They actually help me relax when I am feeling stressed out, maybe they help regulate my blood sugar. I decided to put them in my exhibition, I hope this is alright with you.

I got the idea after showing them to my roommate Charles. He is a photographer and wrestler. Lately he is making videos. I told him stories about our family, while we watch you walk through the Frank Brown Rec center parking lot. I shot

from behind you so that you were blocking out the sun, then I slowly lifted the camera, almost like I was growing up. The image changes from being washed out to very detailed as the camera raises. There is another video of you that is a little blurry like an old super 8 film. You are standing in my grey room, which I guess is your room now, putting on your pink coat. We were about to go for a walk. The color of the walls and your coat look like they belong in a painting, more than a video. They are a film without a plot, moving images that allude to a story rather than telling one. I edited them with this in mind and projected them from outside my house onto the windows, so at night when you look out the window you see these videos. My housemates seem to enjoy them. Charles does yoga to them.

Actually one of the reasons I shot all of that video was because of a film that I borrowed from Charles called *Time Indefinite*, that for some reason I keep calling *Time Indifference* by mistake. Maybe I told you about it? The film maker is Ross McElwee, this guy who carries a film camera around documenting his own life, shooting his

family reunions, weddings and other less celebrated events like toothbrushing. Actually *Time Indefinite* started out as a film about his engagement to his wife, but then Ross's father suddenly dies and the film changes. After watching I felt such a connection with him. The following statement is taken from his website:

"One of the conclusions I draw towards the end of *Time Indefinite* an obvious conclusion perhaps - is that one never really comes to terms with the death of a loved one, but one can learn to move on from that point and to find joy and satisfaction in other aspects of living - in my case, it was finally having a son of my own. The pain isn't exactly assuaged by this event, but it helps one to move on. The film-making itself, in its attempts to confront death directly, to somehow paint it into a corner, turns out to be just another denial of death - away of distracting the filmmaker from dealing with death and then getting on with life."

Maybe it's about time for me to have a son, just kidding. I am not ready for that, but I do need to find joy and satisfaction with other aspects of life. How did you stop thinking about dad? Have you?

When I started graduate school I told myself not to make work about him, and I stopped. I thought about all these huge ideas like globalization, and ecology, but in a way that was superficial. I didn't understand their relevance to my everyday experiences. I made these contraptions out of bikes and trash that had no real connection to my concepts. They usually fell apart before anyone else saw them, mostly because I didn't want people to see them. Embarrassed by my failure to really understand these larger issues, I turned back to my memories of the farm. I now realize that I was approaching these larger ideas by immediately trying to say something, anything, instead of listening. I was looking for an answer before really knowing a problem. I was righteous. I turned back to dad because I still think about him all the time, everyday. There are moments when I forget like when I start a new relationship, or I eat a good meal, but my thoughts return to him. It is like missing him is the one constant in my life.

In all of the drafts for my thesis I keep writing about dad. I feel bad for my advisers having to read all of this sad drivel, but I keep writing it. You were always better at this than me; maybe you could give me some advice. I find it so difficult to write what I want to say. I either spit out short choppy sentences that dumb down every thought; or I

write these overly dramatic generalities, that pretend to say so much when they communicate nothing, except my obvious failings as a writer.

What I want to say is simple. I like watching these videos because they make me homesick. They remind me that you, Mom, Ryder and Wayne are still alive even though I am not with you. They remind me that beautiful moments are happening all the time, and I don't have to construct them if I pay attention.

I hope you are doing well. I am including some stills from the videos. Let me know what you think. I miss you.

Ti Amo,

Forest



A Second Story Room Video Still



Detail 1

Detail 2



Installation view





Hi Mom,

Crepi il lupo! I am still in the wolf's mouth, while my thesis is stuck in my own. I thought writing you this letter might help me spit out some ideas, but here I am, staring off, clenching my teeth, unsure what to write. I would like to tell you that I finally am at home in my work and comfortable with myself, but I am not. I spend a whole lot of my time distracted or nervous and then panicky about my lack of product. I believe I want too much from my work. It should be my home, cure my illness, correct my vision, give me that warm full stomach, Oh, and maybe it could also impress the hell out of everyone in the process. I need to just relax.

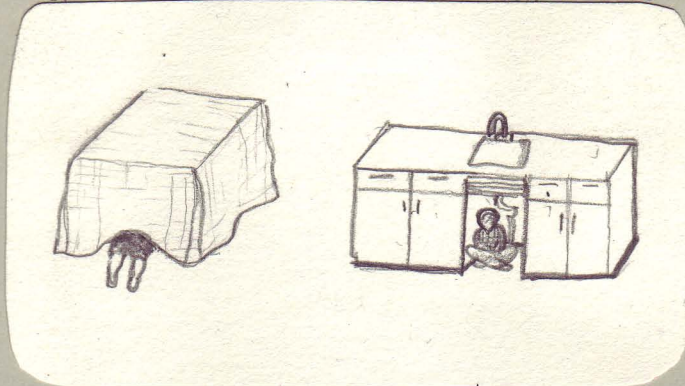
You are aware that I am building an installation inside the room I rent. It is an attempt to construct the room I would have had on the farm. You warned me that this was a faulty undertaking, not in words, but in that silent way, and maybe I should have listened. I dredged up a lot of pain that was better off buried. But here I am sitting in this room that is both a trap and a home, and I want you to know why I am here, so the next time I try something so foolish you might turn to these words and remind me.

I am aware that you don't like to talk about the farm, or about dad, but I need to and I hope you will keep reading.

I came up with a title for my show. It's called *A Second Story Room*, which is a literal description since my room in Ann Arbor is on the second story of our house. But I am also thinking about "a second story" as another way of saying *afterlife*, or a story after death. For me the setting of this story is the farm. After dad died and we stopped going there it was no longer real. The farm, the place of my childhood, became a utopia like the garden of eden. When I went back last summer, almost eighteen years since we lived there, I wandered around in the fields and the woods. I took photographs of the lake and the clouds. I tried to come to terms with what I wanted from that place, but every question was drowned out by the incessant hum of insects. I was more lost there, in that moment, than at any other in my life.

The lake had flooded and killed the trees immediately surrounding the shore, leaving a grove of gray trunks broken without branches. The wood of the house was in a similar condition. I picked up a few boards only to have them break apart in my fingers. When I lifted a large sheet of moldy plywood, so that I could move further into the pile, I saw a snake, which made me jump and walk away from the house. I built this farm up in my mind as paradise, but here I was standing in the middle of a field sweating and itching mosquito bites.

Child Caves from Christopher Alexander's



a pattern language

Back in Ann Arbor in the autumn and feeling overwhelmed by graduate school, I started thinking I would discover some inherent internal motivation by moving into my memories and building within my own bedroom. I wanted to hide from the world. I felt embarrassed about this for a long time, but now I think it was helpful. I was temporarily detaching myself, so that I could remember a much deeper connection.

I remembered a story that you told me. You were walking by the lake, wondering what you were going to do with life, feeling devastated, staring at the grass. Then you looked up and saw the blue heron in the water, silently drifting by your side. You took this as a sign. Dad loved this bird and here he was beside you, giving you permission to get on with life.

a beach house on the gulf.



what was its name?

I think heaven for me would be to find this same kind of Permission. I tried to construct it, which makes me sad, because how could I construct divine permission?

The structure I built in my



r o o m

I miss being at home, the feeling of being physically connected to a place. It is not in Ann Arbor, and I don't feel it in Auburn anymore. I am not sure when or where or if I will know it again, but it hurts. I want to believe that home is everywhere at all times; and it is just a matter of changing my state of being so that I can accept it.

I hope this rambling letter is not a burden to you. I would appreciate your thoughts on my ideas and stories. I miss you mom.

love,

Forest