Last semester, I woke to the theme song from Law and Order (the sound of my alarm). Drool plastered my face to my pillow and my roommate pounded on my door. It was 11:26. Class started at 11:30. I scrambled out of bed in a daze–threw on my trusty gray sweatpants and sweatshirt and tamed my mane with a beanie. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and was out the door–with a puff of smoke.

And then, just like that, I was sitting in class. Surrounded by students well-aware of the fact that I had woken up just four minutes ago.

The class was Nature and Literary Imagination. My professor would always start with a prompt or written exercise. And on this day, she asked that we write down everything we noticed while walking to class.

My mind was completely radio-silent. It's as if one of those memory-wiping devices from Men in Black had completely erased my walk from my dorm to this classroom. How could it be that I couldn't recall a single detail from a ten minute walk? Had I been that vacant? It was undeniable, then, that I had to make some changes.

I had to be more present.

Recently I met with Alissia Thompson, a pastor at the United Church of Granville in Ohio, who introduced me to a life-altering concept: The simple yet powerful act of resistance in pausing and finding awe in a fast-paced world.

"Pausing is a countercultural move. It feels radical," Alissia said.

Alissia works tirelessly to divorce herself from our often unhealthy culture, obsessed with productivity.

“There's just so much fucking beauty in the world and we don't see it. We don't see it because we're so wrapped up in this culture that wants us to rush around. And we don't pause and we don't think, and we don't breathe and we don't take time for rest or solitude. It's a complete disservice,” Alissia said.

Alissia was raised in the Catholic church and had no interest in Sunday school or learning about the bible. But sometimes she’d slink off to the sanctuary where the air was still and quiet. Where she could pause. There, in the solitude, is where she first discovered an entire playground of worship, wonder, awe, and curiosity.

And she’s been hooked ever since.

Religion hasn’t always been Alissia’s path. She understands religion’s capacity to be used as a weapon–and did not associate with religion for a decade of her life. Now, Alissia practices Apophatic theology, which basically means that there is much more we don’t know about God than we do.

“It’s easier to make non-declarative statements about the divine than it is to make declarative statements about the divine,” Alissia said. “Because God, divinity, energy, light, whatever you want to call it–the God of your understanding–is mystery. I would rather live with the not knowing and wonder about it. And be awestruck by it and walk around and see beauty in the not knowing. In all the spaces in between. Because not all the spaces are filled up with knowledge of stuff. I think wonder and mystery make space. They create space for a lot more than certainty.”

As a child, we discover wonder and awe so effortlessly. I want that back. So, after talking to Alissia, I decided to embark on a mission. A mission to pause and reignite my senses by

finding a little bit of awe everyday. To recover my child-like curiosity and remove myself from the conveyor belt (and my own mind) to connect more deeply with the world, and by extension, people around me. And I'd do this by sitting down, noticing, and writing for 30 minutes a day.

From 12 to 2 a.m. every morning, my friend Teddy skips around campus in his blue hoodie humming sea shanties to himself. And he doesn't care who sees him skipping.

"I like how slow everything feels when I'm on a walk. It resets me for sleep when I get back to my room," Teddy said.

So I took to night-walking. More noticing can occur once everyone's gone to sleep. I picked up my journal and wrote:

> *The air is cold. I have my headphones in yet I can tell it's silent. The air is still. I can feel the most minor shifts in the air. It's as if every step I take sends me into a different dimension with different appeals to the senses.*
>
> *I want to ride away on the bike parked beside me. The light from the lampposts shows the bark on the trees fraying.*
>
> *The sidewalk's glistening and there are little crystals in the cement, mimicking the stars.*
>
> *When my music changes to a new song, there's a pause, and I can hear frogs croaking.*

After that first night, though, I hit a wall. Finding awe, after being out of practice for so long, is far more taxing than anticipated. My awe-finding muscles, comfortable with hanging out on the sidelines, are sore and want nothing more than to give up. But still, I wrote about it:

I feel a tangible barrier between my senses and the world. Like oil and water. They just refuse to interact. I feel like a mindless drone; my brain completely quiet.

I'm desperately trying to resist my urge to stop writing. I need to keep writing. I need to rewire my brain to make time and space to just be.

I think my brain is fighting–wrestling with the belief that I should be doing something more important. Something more productive. It is a disservice to me, just like Alissia said. A disservice to everyone who doesn't take the time to stop. I don't want to reach the end of my life and realize I've missed it all.

The next evening I sat in my dorm room cracking my knuckles. Water flowing through the old pipes of Myers Hall rushed like a river. And I could hear footsteps from up above. I tapped my pencil against an empty page:

I've been struggling to find anything to write about lately. Can you pause when you are spread too thin? Does pausing take energy and intention?

I would suspect yes. Because to pause is to feel. To choose to open yourself up to feelings you haven't experienced.

I had the strangest dream last night. I dreamt that I was scrubbing mold off of my windowsill. This monstrous black mold. And the harder I scrubbed, the more would grow. It reached out with its tentacles and enveloped me:

I haven't felt like writing much of anything. Don't particularly feel like writing now, as a matter of fact.

I've felt pretty numb to the world. It's easier to live that way isn't it?

Most of the time I don't feel like I've awoken from sleep–like I'm deliriously floundering.

"How are you?" an acquaintance asked in passing on my way to class. Put on a fake smile. "Good, how are you?" I replied. But they had already walked too far a distance to hear my response:

Today I took so many naps in an attempt to pause. But leaving consciousness isn't pausing.

The trick is to be able to wrangle your thoughts so you can stay conscious while pausing.

The other night I plopped down at an unassuming wooden picnic table sandwiched in between two dorms at the bottom of a hill. And I started writing. I noticed passerby on the path above me, strangely enough walking to the beat of the music crammed in my ears.

I was listening to "Pulaski at Night" by Andrew Bird. There's this exquisite violin portion that mimics what a bird must feel like in flight. Free and wild. And suddenly, nature began to fall into rhythm with the music. Or music to nature, rather. Branches started dancing in the breeze. And the flutter of bees' wings matched the strumming of the ukulele. Even the way the clouds migrated in the sky mimicked the vocalist's vibrato.

Today I read the first 15 pages of The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron, where she writes, "Get out of the way. Let it work through you. Accumulate pages, not judgments" (XV). Writing without judgment is intoxicating:

> *The grass is so tall where I'm sitting. And the sun feels like a warm towel fresh out of the dryer on my back.*
>
> *It feels good to sit on the ground. Like I'm home. If I look out in front of me I can imagine that I'm in the middle of nowhere with no civilization around.*
>
> *Scattered amongst the tall grass are clusters of little dandelions. I wonder what's underneath me. All the fungal innerworkings and highways.*

Music has always been my chosen method of stopping time. For me, it functions as a remote control. A way of hitting the pause button.

My grandpa was a performer. The greatest showman with the largest collection of top-hats and the most mediocre voice I'd ever known. But nothing else about him was mediocre. Everything he loved eventually became something I loved. And, music was no exception. He taught me how to sing; how to perform with passion. He loved the ocean, constantly humming to the rhythm of the waves even when living in Arizona.

His skin was so scorched from the sun that he appeared to be cracking yet still maintained an otherworldly glow. He'd charge into the waves at eighty-five years old (at approximately one mile an hour), with wobbly, emaciated, frail sticks of legs, unintimidated by the crashing walls of water. I'd watch, safe on the shore, as he tumbled endlessly, his stick legs poking out of the depths every once and awhile. I'd laugh until I couldn't breathe because I knew his vigor for life

would conquer the waves. He'd finally surface, give me a firm thumbs up, and proudly proclaim, "A-OKAY!," with the most endearing smile.

In high school, we organized a show together full of songs from the 40s-80s that we'd perform at nursing homes. We'd rehearse tirelessly. His need for perfection was infuriating. When I first learned how to drive, he typed up a list of rules for me to follow on the road titled: "WAYS TO AVOID MUTILATING OR KILLING SELF OR OTHERS WHILE OPERATING A VEHICLE." I once made the reprehensible mistake of leaving the stem in the bowl of grapes after eating some. He was horrified by my manners and sat me down to discuss common courtesy. The way grapes were handled was paramount to him.

When I think back to performing our finale of "New York, New York," with both of us in our top-hats– his 86-year-old wobbly legs kicking to the beat–I realize that that was the most powerful sense of awe I've encountered in my life. We'd perform for people in memory clinics. People who couldn't even remember their own names were singing the lyrics of long-forgotten songs. How could it be that music transcends dementia?

When I was in the womb, my mom would attach BellyBud speakers to her stomach, transmitting music to me. And still to this day, when I listen to music, it transports me back into utero. A quiet, safe existence. Just me and mom:

> *I'm sitting here listening to a song called "Conquest of Spaces." The lyrics read, "I'm ready to start the conquest of spaces, expanding between you and me."*
>
> *It's humbling to know we can never conquer nature. We can build on it all we want, but really, we are at its mercy. All we can do is fully embrace it. Because it's always expanding and changing before our eyes.*

I'm sitting in this Physics classroom where blinds are adhered to the outside of the windows. Is it for privacy? The only way to open them would be to venture outside.

Sawyer starts his morning at 8:30 everyday to make it in time for his 9:30 class. He does more in that hour than most college students do in an entire day. He rolls out of bed and frees the chickens from their pens, provides them with food and water, and collects eggs to cook for breakfast. Next he feeds the cats roaming the land. With little time to spare, Sawyer grabs an orange and embarks on his journey to class.

Sawyer Muir is a senior at Denison University studying international studies and practices the art of stopping time, noticing, and finding awe more effectively than anyone. Sawyer lives at a place called the Homestead, located a solid 20-minutes of walking distance from campus. The Homestead is a place where students learn to exist with intention. 12 students choose to live there per semester and work together to promote an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. Living on the Homestead is a full-time job on top of college–and every Homesteader must do their part. In fact, Sawyer prepares dinner with another Homesteader every Wednesday for all of the 12 Homesteaders. An operation clocking in at nearly an hour and a half. The night ends with a game of scrabble and a gathering around the bonfire where Sawyer plucks the guitar.

Having lived on the Homestead for two years now, Sawyer's begun thinking more and more about the separation of people and nature. But more specifically, "How humans aren't separate from nature, although we try to be," Sawyer said.

Sawyer believes our separation from nature isn't from a lack of effort on our part, but more so the result of how our systems are structured. As we sat there safely stowed away in my

dorm chatting, far from the Homestead and separate from nature, Sawyer pointed out how we build these structures out of a fear of nature. To be safe from the elements.

“In the Homestead, our building is made with the idea in mind that we want to be part of nature. So some of the buildings are made out of straw bales and other nontraditional structures that are better for the environment but also incorporate us into the environment,” Sawyer said.

Sawyer looks forward to his treks to campus, even on those negative ten degree days. “You are able to find beauty when you are forced to be outdoors,” Sawyer said.

Sawyer plans on continuing his mission at an Eco Village in North Carolina.

I walked outside after my conversation with Sawyer, sat in a patch of grass just outside of my dorm, and wrote:

> *The trees look sturdy. My roommate’s sandals are the same vivid yellow as the dandelions. My hair blows in the same direction as the blades of grass–and for a second–I’m a part of nature.*
>
> *More dandelions have sprouted since the last time I sat out here a week ago. Last time, there were only a couple patches of two or three. But now there’s dozens and dozens. They gather in clusters. Are they afraid to be alone?*

I just took a sip of hot chocolate. I can feel the warmth and gentleness of it coating my entire body.

The light in my room is soft. Reminds me of stories my mom tells me of dreams she used to have when she was a kid. She’s writing in some sort of crop-journal with only candlelight listing all sorts of terms she didn’t understand at the time. But those dreams felt so familiar to

her. She's convinced they were windows into a past life, and as she aged they became more and more distant. And I believe her.

I turned off my lamp, lit my candle, and wrote:

In front of me is an EcoWix candle, advertised as "hear the difference." The candle wick is made from wood instead of wax. The wood creates a crackling sound when it burns. Like a little forest fire. Or a campfire far out in the wild. One a human has started just with twigs and friction.

In fact, if I close my eyes, it's just me, the campfire, and the stars.

Writing in the dark feels like I'm in a sensory deprivation tank. The water has just been substituted for darkness. I can breathe.

There's a spider stuck under some paint adhered to the wall in my dorm room. Was it just painted over? Or did it wander over onto the wet paint? It's a tragically perfect example of being frozen in time. I wonder how long it's been there. It's as if it's fossilized, just waiting to be discovered.

There it was. On my left shoulder. The most verdant little grasshopper I'd ever seen. I looked at my mom who was sitting in the passenger seat. "Jasper's perched on my shoulder," I said.

We had just decided to end Jasper's life. I laid there with him until he closed his eyes. And long after. He was diagnosed with cancer a couple weeks prior–he was riddled with it. Jasper was my best friend.

He just so happened to be a dog.

I've always been in awe of how dogs have figured it out. Living and loving like a dog, allowing yourself to be completely overtaken by how you feel and never being afraid to voice it is an honorable way to live, full of humility. It is standing by the ocean and still feeling small.

I remember how Jasper would tiptoe on all fours out of the room to avoid waking me while I slept. How he'd run full force into the waves of Crystal Cove in California, just like my grandpa, only his tail visible when the force of the waves would take him. How he'd curl up in as compact a ball as possible on the upper right corner of the couch as if he wasn't a chubby, 60-pound border-collie.

Only several days after Jasper's death, an acquaintance texted my dad. "I have a little border collie puppy. She's the runt of the litter," she said. We hopped in the car to go see her. She wiggled like Jasper did. Strangely contorting her body as her tail wagged. She felt strangely familiar. We took her home that day. Named her Mila.

Later we ran some genetic testing on Mila just out of curiosity. Turns out Jasper is Mila's cousin.

I read this beautiful poem called "Epitaph" by Merrit Malloy nearly everyday before going to sleep:

When I die

Give what's left of me away

To children

And old men that wait to die,

And if you need to cry,

Cry for your brother

Walking the street beside you.

And when you need me,

Put your arms

Around anyone

And give them

What you need to give me.

I always thought Ray Bradbury was a good writer–but then I met Rae Dewberry. I was struggling in one of my high school writing courses and was in desperate need of a tutor. We first met at a Starbucks nestled in the back of a Barnes & Noble in Scottsdale, Arizona. She had snow-white hair and the most exquisitely mystifying blue eyes. Her breaths always sounded labored, though. As if with every breath, her lungs were lifting 50 pound dumbbells.

We soon began grabbing breakfast together every couple of weeks outside of tutoring sessions. We'd order these gargantuan protein pancakes that engulfed entire plates and talk for hours on end. She was my mentor and most certainly a soulmate.

When she was diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer I wasn't surprised. She had smoked most of her life. What surprised me was that she didn't want treatment.

The summer Rae died I had accepted an internship with Scout Productions in Glendale, California in the heart of Los Angeles. I walked into the office on my first day and bumped into a co-worker in the bathroom. "Sorry, I'm a little flustered. It's my first day," I said. "LA takes some getting used to," she said as she opened the door to leave. "I'm Rae by the way." And the door slammed behind her.

Last semester my Nature and Literary Imagination class took a trip to the campus cemetery. Our professor gestured to a plot of land under a red maple tree. “Here’s where I’ll be buried,” she said. Alongside 25 other classmates, I wrote:

It feels heavy here. But not a sad heaviness. The grass is tall, unkempt. The birds are very loud and I couldn’t help but wonder if they are people reincarnated.

I walked through with light feet aware of everything I was stepping on. All the people who were once alive.

I find it interesting that the cemetery is surrounded by such life, such young students.

I wonder if a cemetery would be considered a natural landscape? I suppose it’s a designed landscape made to feel natural–like most of our world.

Our connection to cemeteries is strange. They really are for the living. But there’s always the “what if” thought. What if our loved ones know about our ritual?

So we’ll keep doing it. On the off-chance that they are still around.

Today I chose to sit next to the most formidable-looking tree. A tree that would be the last one standing after a nuclear war. It looks like a silhouette of a woman. She walks tall and holds her ground.

I have this weird draw to trees when I’m out in nature. Everything else becomes background noise and there they are, the trees, with roots extending far below.

After studying that single tree for quite some time, I wandered over to a point of campus known as the "Lion King" view, because "everything the light touches is our kingdom." I wrote about what I saw:

> *The forest of trees is so dense in the distance it almost looks like the Amazon. The crickets create a symphony to accompany the view.*
>
> *The grass in front of me looks like a prairie. Everything is so verdant. The canopy of trees in the distance looks like a cloud.*
>
> *It's a terribly gloomy day but when I look out over the arts quad, I feel content. The trees, too, look content.*
>
> *I love thinking about the interconnectedness. How the trees communicate with one another.*

I just read an article in the *Personal Journal* called "Time Is Zooming By. Find ways to Slow Down," by Elizabeth Bernstein. The article discusses how giving time away to others, while seemingly counterintuitive, actually gives us the sense of more time. Simple acts of kindness for others provide us with escape routes from our own heads. And spending time on others even boosts our overall confidence and efficiency levels.

Awe is also proven to expand our perception of time. "Awe is the emotional response to something vast that expands the way we see the world. It's the opposite of feeling rushed, narrowly focused and overwhelmed. It can enhance our well-being–and make time feel more plentiful," Bernstein writes.

Today my friends and I were discussing our most powerful moments of awe. Danielle talked about how in high school she used to wake up so early that the stars were still out. While waiting for the school bus she'd look for the Big Dipper. She'd always find it.

And Andrew's most powerful moment of awe was also in the sky–when he witnessed a full solar eclipse. "The air became quiet and cold, and the shadows twisted," Andrew said. Andrew and his family drove four hours to witness a solar eclipse that lasted all of two-minutes.

I sat outside and wrote, with a particular focus on the sky:

> *I see something plummeting from the sky that looks like an asteroid. I wonder if beings on other planets are so concerned with the possibility of civilization ending.*
>
> *In most places nowadays, pollution is so severe that we can't even see the stars. But they are still shining under all of our waste.*
>
> *Although right now I can see the moon. Only a crescent is seemingly visible. But if you look very closely you can see the outline of the rest.*
>
> *Sometimes just staring at something for uncomfortably too long can reveal something beautiful. The eyes adjust and see new facets.*
>
> *I looked back toward the ground–which is just as mysterious as space in a lot of ways.*
>
> *The grass isn't as full as it was a couple days ago. It's a freezing day. Bone chilling. The patches of dandelions have vanished. Have they all died? Or did they just retract, waiting eagerly under the surface?*

I remember after being sent home during the peak of COVID in 2020, I woke up in Arizona in what sounded like an aviary every morning: a rainforest of house finches, white-winged doves, sparrows, yellow-rumped warblers and cardinals shooting the breeze--singing with perfect pitch and rhythm.

Mockingbirds flung themselves against my window everyday, without fail at approximately 2:50 p.m with a startling thump of beak against glass. Turns out they saw themselves in the reflection and believed it to be a possible suitor. I wished then that I could be a bird. Even if it meant smashing into windows.

Another day while I was quarantined at home, I looked out the window and saw something splashing around in the pool.

We have this oddly shaped pool in our backyard at home–constructed in a way that zigs and zags in the most peculiar directions. A little mourning dove had fallen in. I was certain it was facing the last seconds of its life. I grabbed the net (usually used to fish leaves out of the pool) and swept the winged damsel in distress out of the pool and onto the deck.

I sat by the little bird and could hear its heart beating. Thumping. We sat there in comfortable silence.

The next morning I came back to find the bird had flown away.

Back and forth and back and forth. The lawnmowers paced the grass, leaving perfectly uniform lawns in their wake. Landscapers on the sidewalks used leaf blowers to clean up any rogue grass that managed to escape the blade. Window cleaners gathered around the student union. They used contraptions, almost like freakishly long arms, to reach windows on the highest floor of the building. They scrubbed and scrubbed at pristine glass.

I left the quad and walked to a plot of land by the football field, where nature looked wild, blanketed in a *Sound of Music*-like patch of wildflowers.

A sign next to the patch of flowers indicated that it was an intentional space, not to be confused with carelessness, called the Grow Zone. The Grow Zone is meant to be a place where wildlife, insects, and plants roam freely in an untamed environment. The space remains untouched throughout the year with zero landscaping.

It's a shame to me that the spaces that look untamed are that way because we grant them permission to do so.

After wandering campus, I sat down in one of my favorite campus locations and wrote:

> *There's a spot to the side of the library called the Zen Garden that almost feels like you are part of The Truman Show. It is very intentionally made to look and feel sirene.*
>
> *There's a bench nestled in the trees that faces a man-made stream with a little red bridge crossing over it.*
>
> *I was sitting there examining the Truman-esque nature of this place when something in the tree caught my eye.*
>
> *There were thousands of them. I moved in closer to find an army of the tiniest pinecones I'd ever seen. The patterns of the scales on the pinecones differed ever so slightly.*

This morning I woke to the sound of my roommate blasting "For Elise" by Saint Motel. Before my eyes even opened, my body started swaying to the rhythm of the soft opening ooh's. My lips started mouthing the lyrics:

When it's tough

When you get stuck

You're at the wall

Of the writer's block

You need a spark

A light in the dark

To get you out of your head

And into your heart.

In my final week of life as a college student before graduation, I realize these are the things I'll miss most. Waking up to my roommate singing along to "For Elise" in the shower. The pitter patter of her feet before she knocks on my door. Even the dishes she leaves in the sink.
