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A lovely room of death

Tessia Laryn Rockey

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A lovely room of death

by

Tessia Rockey

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Interior Design

Program of Study Committee:
Çigdem Akkurt (Major Professor)
Lisa Bates
Bambi Yost

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2015

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I confess to the murdering of an ideal, the acceptance of not finding the absolute truth, and for discovering that this in itself is a victory. For what is not found, is continually searched for; may my pursuit be eternal.

Thanks be to the others, whose support has been unwavering:

My Committee:
Çigdem Akkurt, for boundless ideas.
Bambi Yost, for encouraging chaos with consequences.
Lisa Bates, for deadlines and complete optimism.

My Family:
Parents, for taking care of me when I forgot to.
Friends, for perspective and playful hearts.
Husband, for his belief in honesty, and for the reminder that in the end, we are all dying.
ABSTRACT

What I hope to accomplish with this thesis is an exploration into the process of making home during relocation, and the characteristics it takes on as a statement of value, where the individual and culture meet. As a person currently going through this transitional phase, I will be using myself as the research subject, documenting changes that my space and I undergo as home is made, the process that leads to stable, familiar shelter. To study this process, I will be using visual autoethnography. I will take a deep look at the everyday habits that makes private dwelling what it is and what makes me, as a creature of this earth, an indweller, a settler, a maker of home. By making photographic excursions to nearby residential neighborhoods, I wish to understand what happens to the meaning of home as one gains knowledge about the new context outside the front door. I imagine this will be a simultaneous journey of self awareness and place acceptance.
A Lovely Room of Death

A house, is never a home.
A house, is merely a reflection,
Are you comfortable with what you see?
A house, is far removed from a home.
A house, keeps.
A house, cannot breathe.
How are you alive?
No one remains the same as yesterday,
gathering dust, layer by layer,
with every breath, every step.
Going 'round in squares,
triangles.
Before you,
and behind you, always.
Somewhere you'll never reach,
and someone you never knew.
A lovely room of death.
A Lovely Room of Death is my expression of home. It is an expression which I feel will change over time. It is not meant to be set in stone; its importance comes from its very existence. My awareness now of how I see home, of the meaning I give it, is a crucial step in being able to design for that meaning. Gaston Bachelard (1964) writes in his classic work, Poetics of Space, “[t]he phenomenology of the poetic imagination allows us to explore the being of man considered as the being of a surface, of the surface that separates the region of the same from the region of the other. It should not be forgotten that in this zone of sensitized surface, before being, one must speak, if not to others, at least to oneself. And advance always” (p. 222). It seems that in the context of man and his place of being, the home is a physical realm which fits this description of a surface. Where else can one so clearly separate the self from the other? Surely there are physical realms in which one can occupy temporarily, but truly the most dominant and permanent of these is the home.

The poem clearly distinguishes between the house and the notion of home. Potential meanings of home vary far and wide, but the most important attribute is its variation amongst indwellers. ‘Indweller’ most simply means: one who dwells within. It is a term that I have appropriated from Walden by Henry David Thoreau (1997). While discussing his choice and reasoning to move to Walden pond, he describes the process of acquiring land and building his own house. One quote in particular has had a profound effect on the way I view design, particularly interior design:

What of architectural beauty I now see, I know has gradually grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder, - out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance; and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life. (p. 55)

This idea of growth, of gradual percolation of ideas exuding from inside the mind, body, and soul of the one who dwells within is central to the experience of home. Home is synchronic, altered by the changes and developments over time. Describing the home as a
lovely room of death should, then, not be looked at as a morbid gesture, but rather as one of honesty of the human condition. Growing up in a Western society, it is hard for me to simultaneously accept and reject the feelings that arise when discussing death. The idea that it is beautiful or lovely is even more estranged from my cultured feelings. How can a moment of a perceived end to a full life, that feels and looks so final, be anything but ugly and unfair? How is one to cope with the idea that we humans are not immortal, that this corporeal experience of life does end? It is when I look at Nature, its forms beautiful out of necessity and not out of want, and see its cycle of life that I am reaffirmed. Every year regeneration is brought to attention, when the scraggly, dry branches of winter breathe in the fresh air and sun of spring and with such sustenance sprout the green of life again. Knowing that all things die so that others live, out of a natural sequence of advancement, removes the fear of death and dying. In his book *A Timeless Way of Building*, Alexander Crawford (1979) suggests that “our physical appetites are accompanied by a hunger for the sacred in our lives...We can express this urge through a reverence for nature and life, for the systems that sustain us both physically and emotionally...Cast in your lot with those who favor not only survival but truth and beauty. These things we can have in abundance. They have enduring value” (p. 37). I am today too far removed from this comforting reminder. Getting bogged down by the day to day, carried from one building to another by robust machines, creating a trail of waste that can weigh down the soul, keeps blinders on the individual. This containment makes it too easy to forget this larger cycle to which all humans belong. It is too easy to be alone, to be contained in spaces that leave no reminder of death. These spaces are, in a sense, perfect. Gentle interactions are not clocked over time in these flawless spaces. The impressions I make do not affect their sleek, robust, manufactured strength. “[T]he machine-made materials of today - scaleless sheets of glass, enameled metals and synthetic plastics - tend to present their unyielding surfaces to the eye
without conveying their material essence or age. Buildings of this technological age usually deliberately aim at ageless perfection, and they do not incorporate the dimension of time, or the unavoidable and mentally significant process of again. This fear of the traces of wear and age is related to our fear of death” (Pallasmaa, 1995, p. 31-32). The buildings feel as if they are immortal; they do not age with me. I am left alone to be the one dying. This is the moment that death and change feel morbid, where fear enters in. This is not the condition in which I choose to dwell. I choose to dwell in that lovely, growing, dying space, the one that will be my companion, comforting me as I make my way to the end.

This companion is efficiently described by Otto Bollnow (1967) in his writing on the phenomenology of what he calls lived-space. He describes dwelling as “not an activity like any other but a determination of man in which he realizes his true essence. He needs a firm dwelling place if he is not to be dragged along helplessly by the stream of time” (p. 180). Here again we find time as a critical dimension to living. The home, however one describes it, acts as this center of being. It is a solid place where time does not float along endlessly, but where its progression has been marked by its passing. This fits well with Thoreau’s concept of beauty relying on the growth of function and character, both of which develop over time. What is it about this description of beauty that is so appealing? I think the answer might be that it changes the relationship of means to end from direct to indirect. Essentially, by living beautifully, meaning out of necessity, and with fit of character, for the sake of living and not for the sake of beauty, it is then that beauty arrives.

“The beauty of...place, the quality in it which touches us, the thing which makes it live, is, above all, that it is carefree, that it is innocent” (Alexander, 1979, p. 535).

Christopher Alexander describes this quality of beauty as innocent, Thoreau mentions it as truthful, but I prefer to call it honest. Beauty, simple, character-filled beauty, is inherently apparent. Beauty is a quality that is felt, that is sensed. This means engaging more than just
sight, or “what looks good”. Thinking of beauty purely in the visual sense does the term a disservice. Experiences and memories are stronger and richer with each incorporated sensation. In this way, the wholeness of beauty is alive and animate, vibrating with goodness and honesty. Homes that lose touch with this honesty of beauty, and that are made for the purposes of being beautiful, as opposed to fitting with the indweller’s life and character are contrived. They lose their beauty as ulterior energies compete for attention. To honestly exist, beauty must be from life.

“The beautiful does not depend on the useful;...but it is not independent of the necessary, for the necessary must also be the habitual and consequently the basis of the type, and of all its imaginative variations” (Santayana, 1955, p. 98). This brings to attention the relationship between individual’s concept of home and honesty. How does one design their home honestly? Is this ideal possible? Does such an idea have any value? These are the questions I wish to explore.

Interior Design and the Home

Interior Design is often described as a fusion between art and science. Color theory, appropriate textile and hard surface selections, cultural and historical references, aesthetic preferences sway and swirl with fire codes, accessibility considerations, environmental systems specifications, clever space planning, and thermal properties of materials; the list is endless. All of these properties are merely means to an end, and when exquisitely combined, the end transcends space. Interiors become experiences, memories, moods, not spaces just to pass through, but places to belong, to enjoy, to live. The duty of designing lived space goes beyond the expectation of combining art and science; it should be viewed as a service to the user which is focused on value, quality, and uniqueness.

Prescriptive design is an assumption, an average, a mass production of an image of conformity. It is a solution produced by looking at fashionable trends, driven by economy
and profit. There is a disconnect in this strategy, which can be seen in the way our cities and residences are developing. Mass production of similar housing typologies, suburban sprawl, building booms and market busts; these are all symptoms of a larger, broken mindset.

How did we get to this suffocating point in time? How have we become okay with such a level of consumerism? Fed to us by society, we have become lazy, unconscious, walking trash compactors consuming a packaged, manufactured life, scarfing down the latest and greatest like it is going to be the last, only to discard of it like yesterday’s paper, never to be thought of again but forever to clog the veins of our cities. Where have our imaginations gone? When did it become the norm, even the preferred, for this desire to keep up with the Jones’s, matching them eye for eye with each new gadget and trinket, each new formula for happiness? From nomadic, to agrarian, to industrialized society, we now have progressed into a phase when it is no longer good enough to purchase products to augment experiences. Now the whole experience is packaged and bought, with every detail designed for you, to free the mind of the worry of failure. How long can this continue before the minds are left empty? It takes no stretch to see a future in which we are going to pay people to follow us closer than our shadows because we cannot decide whether to brush our teeth with toothpaste or fungal cream. We as a society need to stop relying on the almighty dollar to build us a convenience ship to coast through the sea of life.

In recent years, we have become inundated with television programmes and magazines on décor and domestic design...We watch the tastes of others being excoriated by style gurus and then we are advised on how to do it ‘properly’; we can now have no excuse for not living well, so long, this is, as our house is sufficiently valuable to make the future something worth planning for! We are now, it appears, a nation of neurotic snobs, sneering at the tastes of others, whilst worrying about our
investments. We watch programmes advising us on ‘good taste’ and the proper use of space, and wonder if we too are not guilty of ‘style crime’. (King, 2004, p. 115)

King here speaks of a nation, but I think this condition can be recognized in much of the Westernized world. Are we too thoughtless to figure out, as individuals, who we are without being told who we should be? I blame the valuing of convenience, perfection, and economy, over valuing being an integral part of the process, the process of living, of creating, of experiencing, of failing. This backwards value system is intimately evident in the way dwellings are produced.

Stepping away from prescriptive design would mean a shift towards a more conscious, responsive effort. The question then becomes, to what exactly are we supposed to respond? If not economy, profit, and trends, what are we to value? My hypothesis is that responsive design is, first and foremost, honest. Honest, responsive design is achieved when three things occur in conjunction.

1) When design is simple. Simple design is a quiet backdrop for life. Simple in form, without a lack of character. Simple in aesthetics, not contrived, but as a growth of real function.

2) When design is respectful. Respectful of the environment, its forms, materials, and spatial logic. Respectful of the indweller, its patterns, habits, and aspirations.

3) When design is boundless. Boundless in connections between community, environment, and other dwellers. Boundless in ideas of what defines home and what is necessary to fulfill that definition. Boundless in evolution and growth of the meaning and function of the home to the dwellers.

The current contextual reality for the interior dwelling is the shelter, or architectural form. For an interior program to operate successfully, it must meld with the given structure
and become one with it. But what of the landscape, that context which surrounds the shelter? Are we supposed to follow the architecture blindly, ignoring the world that supports it? I think not. I do not think we would be overstepping our boundaries if we took a little initiative to connect to the landscape realm, to reduce the separatism of our interiors, to break harsh boundaries, to reconnect with our original dwellings in nature. Being connected with our natural habitat regulates our intimate, corporal systems. Happiness, calmness, health of the human mind, body, and spirit are aided by the ancestral connection to our world’s flora and fauna, creating a sense of wholeness within. We should all value our original home - it is not ours to own, but ours to respect and care for. If we are honest about who we are as members of the human species, recognizing our place in relation to the environment gains a sense of urgency, and calls for a dismissal of passivity. Keeping this in mind, we still must discover and respect the spirit of the indweller; that is not negotiable. Designing with no one in mind is folly; design for design’s sake improves the life of nobody’s ghost. How do we respond to this three-way conversation between user, interior, and landscape environments? Where should focus be placed? The past is gone and the future is unknowable; one could argue that the proper and honest thing to do would be to respond to the moment, the moment of the collision between user, interior, and exterior, where three become one.

There is something more essential, more basic, more meaningful to what Interior Designers do than decide what finish trim the dining room has or which brass knobs embellish our cabinets. I argue that one could design an interior with nothing but walls and fenestrations and it would have the potential to feel more wholesome, more alive, more connected than stuffing a room with the latest trends and calling it a day, suffocating anyone upon entry. This urge of simplicity should not be labeled as simply a house. People do not
live harmoniously within houses. People live in homes. You can put an envelope around any wholesome space, but you can't create wholesome space out of every envelope.

What is missing in the way we currently design dwellings? Are we stuck in convention, the convention of being 'the finishing touch', the ‘fashion’, of design? Fashion is temporary at best, but the bones of the space are forever (or at least, more permanent). Focus needs to be turned towards what the bones need to do before what they can do. And, quite possibly, it is through the proper satisfaction of needs that the can is completed, needing no more energy. If we consider necessities, it follows that:

Aesthetic is a function, but not a fashion.

Fashion is aesthetic, but not function.

Function is a working form that provides a base for aesthetic function, and allows room for fashion, if desired.

Concern for this idea is expressed well by Peter King in his book, *The Antimodern Condition* (2014):

I believe that we should be concerned to understand the notion of enough of what constitutes a sufficiency for us. The idea of what is enough is not simply a question of reductionism, of levelling up or down to some externally determined point, but of differentiating between those parts of our lives that are vital and necessary and those which are the veneer, the dressing. We must come to understand that a concern solely for the veneer may be destructive to the base. (p. 98)

He doesn't call for a doing away with the veneer, or fashion as I term it, but merely taking care that the balance of enough, or necessity, is maintained.

People, just like any other organism, are a mass-produced typology. We are similar, however, we are not the same. It should be stressed that we are all unique. What is enough for one person may not be enough for another. If aesthetic is a function, or grows out of
function, then it would follow that aesthetic preferences grow out of our human function. Therefore, just like there are personality types that people fit into, so it should follow that they fit into an aesthetic preference typology. That typology would have its origin rooted in the individual’s personality and genetics and would waver over time based on changes to the human caused by environmental exposures. It might temporarily sway from left to right and back again, but when truly analyzed, it would maintain its original core typology.

What does this mean for interior design and the home?

1. Mass production of interiors harmonize with a dismal fraction of the population.

2. The temporal societal fashion of interior design is given more weight than it should.

3. The artistic science of the profession needs to respond to the function of the specific core person, producing a design with relatable longevity.

4. That by designing for the function of the human, environmental considerations are of the utmost importance for spatial wholeness and harmony. No matter how mentally, emotionally, physically, or spiritually disconnected from this Earth we have become, we always have and always will maintain a biological, natural connection with it. Environmental considerations are, therefore, human considerations.

Before going any further, it would be helpful to have an overview of what exactly is meant by the term home. When looking at the literature, one can find many viewpoints from which to analyze this term. Anthropologists, economists, architects, poets, all lend their own dimensions to this environment of home. As Amos Rapoport (1995) points out in his chapter for The Home: Words, Interpretations, Meanings and Environments entitled “A Critical Look at the Concept of “Home”, the term home is a muddy one, and is often used
interchangeably with others such as dwelling or house. Dwellings or houses more typically refer to the physical entities of the space: the furniture, fixtures, equipment, personal items, structural forms, etc. But the complex concept of home is so much more than just the physical makeup of space. Home evokes a feeling, a mental state, a memory. Home can even occur in the absence of a physical space, such as within the presence of family or friends. Their love and care becomes that feeling of home, as demonstrated in the saying, “Home is where the heart is”. Space can constitute a house, a town, or a country. Boundaries, whether physical or otherwise, do not apply to the personal realization of home. It will mean something slightly different to each person. Just as each person’s life experiences are unique, so is how they, over time, build this concept of home in their own hearts and minds. This variety and complexity, and essentially subjective nature of merely defining the term home demonstrates the importance of the design of such a concept to come from within the end user, the dweller. So what is the design relationship between ‘home’ as human responses to dwellings and ‘home’ as the physical object? In The Sense of Beauty, George Santayana (1955) suggests that “...”home”, which in its social sense is a concept of happiness, when it becomes materialized in a cottage and a garden becomes an aesthetic concept, becomes a beautiful thing. The happiness is objectified, the object beautified” (p. 41). Home becomes a manifestation of what makes us happy; the place inhabits both feelings and form in one entity. It is a cyclical conversation between these two dimensions of the same entity that is constantly evolving. Likewise, it is this concept of feeling that should be the driver for the physical manifestation of the home concept. The physical then becomes a representation of how the individual describes home – internal and external can be in harmony. Through Rapoport’s (1995) examination of popular and scholarly uses of home, he finds issue with using the term because “home attachment involves mental representations and has three main constituents: objects, people, and object/
people relationships” (p. 40) Consent is given here that I find, for scholarly purposes, that it is a murky, vague term that, as I have stated, evokes many different responses from individuals. But it is precisely that reason why using this term is so important for this inquiry. Within this context, house or dwelling do not do the experience justice. Those terms conjure up completely different images in the mind. The concept becomes rigid, fixed, constraining, albeit an easier one to study, but it loses a certain human quality that the word home represents. The interest here is to explore the relation between the home as an experience and the self, the individual being, its core identity. Any reduction of the human side of the concept need not be swept away, just due to a lack of clarity. For it is precisely that lack of clarity which makes up the human nature. Humans are complex beings, wrapped up in personal, social, economic, political, and environmental roles and dimensions, and so too are the homes that occupy them going take on this complex persona. If the decision to leave home as a subjectively defined term, left for the individual, based on the individual, seems idyllic, that’s because it is.

The activity of dwelling should be seen as the compound of our individual experiences, which receive no explicit articulation except through the condition of dwelling itself: as the self-justifying aggregate of the very actions that it sustains. Dwelling is the process that comes out of, and is cause by, our experience, and when we look back, we review not dwelling itself, but the experiences themselves.” (King, 2004, p. 66-67)

It is the object/people relationship that sets the stage for such experiences to take place. Time, objects, and people become wrapped into this package called home, or life.

In his chapter for The Home: Words, Interpretations, Meanings, and Environments entitled “Identity, Intimacy and Domicile - Notes on the Phenomenology of Home”, Juhani Pallasmaa (1995) writes “the essence of home is closer to life itself than an artefact” (p. 132).
By artefact, he means the dwelling or house, the physical shelter. Is the essence of home similar to love, a term that results in more confusion the more it is attempted to be defined? Is home better left alone, as a wholeness, something to be felt? Where love is something you just do or do not do, home could be something you have or do not have.

In his writings on the phenomenology of home, Pallasmaa (1995) critiques modern architecture, drawing this conclusion:

When we compare designs of early Modernity at large and of today’s avant-garde, we can immediately observe a loss of empathy for the dweller. Instead of being motivated by the architect’s social vision or an empathetic view of life, architecture has become self-referential and autistic. (p. 132)

If residential architecture has become the autistic child of design, then interior design is the equivalent of its hyperactive sibling. If architecture distances from the human and is no longer sensitive to the behavior of the dweller, you could say the opposite of interiors. It seems we have compensated for this starkness with an over-abundance of stylistic trends, trivializing life’s relationship to home by making it akin to fashion.

We look instead to the media to inform us of how our dwelling can be transformed. We want (or convince ourselves that we want) what is outside ourselves, to have our sense of self confirmed by others, according to standard modes of reference, rather than by ourselves alone through our everyday, habitual activities...This is no less of a subjective process, but what is lost is a sense of authenticity, a sense in which we can confirm our belonging in our own vocabulary, rather than in an entirely conventional one...In essence, then, we subsume our authentic selves into a common understanding of what dwelling is and what our dwelling means. (King, 2004, p. 124)
Both have forgotten the dweller. It is time to remember. Residential design, whether it be architecture or interior, needs to put not only the dweller’s needs, but also the soul, at the center of the home enclosure.

Values are at the heart of this discussion. Concern for values is stated eloquently in Jørn Ørum-Nielsen’s (1995) chapter entitled “Denmark's Living Housing Tradition”, in which learning from past vernacular forms of house construction is considered vital to solving city and housing planning issues within modern society. He emphasizes the vital importance of recognizing patterns that have stood the test of time, and using those patterns as a base for fusing modern desires with modern constraints. Of tradition, he writes, “it counterbalances values that are rooted in the natural environment with customs of social behaviour and cultural heritage” (p. ).

If we dig deeper, what is really found here is a universal definition of an individual, they are all facets of what it means to be a part of this globalized world. We as individuals cannot allow ourselves to be torn from our original roots by “obsession with newness, the non-traditional, and the unforeseen” (Pallasmaa, 1995, p. 133) because this newness is constantly regenerating. It thrives on that condition of being inherently temporal. While newness can add a sense of wonder and vitality to life, we must also keep one foot on the ground, connecting with our past. A balance is in order and with this balance, harmony can be realized.

Importance must be placed on space of home. It is the last frontier for humans, our area of refuge and privacy. Home is where we can be the most autonomous in our behavior. Within these limits of home that we set, we are free. It is the ultimate environment for the self to flourish, to be itself as it wants and needs to be. With this freedom comes freedom to reign supreme. Control is for the dweller only, and for no other. Everything can be just how one wants it, the home mels and bends and grows under the human’s will. Speaking on the poetics of home, Pallasmaa (1995) captures the spirit of such a place “as a mirror and
support of the inhabitant’s psyche” (p. 134). The image we cast out to the world should also be the image our home reflects to us, because there is no other such place like it to be found on this earth. To create this reflection, the design of a home’s interior must be done with integrity, authenticity, and honesty. “Dwelling is...where we are free of cares beyond ourselves and those intimate with us, or, to qualify this somewhat, where our cares are of our own making” (King, 2014, p. 73).

Considering the Human

When an interior is a true reflection of the indweller, that is honest design. Dishonest design occurs when the indweller does not identify with its physical manifestation, whether visually, audibly, ergonomically, etc. The only chance an interior design has at being honest is when it comes from within. “The uses and habits of one place and society require works which are or may easily become intrinsically beautiful; the uses and habits of another make these beautiful works impossible” (Santayana, 1955, p. 133). Subjectively, good, honest design can only be defined by the indweller. Its quality and beauty can only be understood completely by that indweller. An interior space meant to encapsulate a human, that interior can never be, and never should be considered finished, done, completed. It must grow and change with the self of the indweller. As we collect memories, so should our homes. As we begin to lose memories, so should our home begin to fade, to rid itself of burdens from the past. As we live, breathe, and die, our homes should be doing the same; growing, inhaling, exhaling. We make the mistake of designing our homes as museums; sterile, still, plastic exhibits made to speak of eternity, mausoleums of stillness, stagnating, suffocating the living, until the living are dead, and yet even still, the places live on. Who would feel at home in such a space? Nothing was made to last for an eternity. Why kid ourselves, if even just for a moment, that we can create space, environment, experience, that does otherwise? No,
it is better to accept the fact that everything is bound to an unbreakable cycle. Waxing, then waning. Nothing follows this cycle more beautifully than nature (and the natural), for it is what it is and can be no other, and it tells us so. Age is beautiful. Flaw is beautiful. Intention is beautiful. Dying is beautiful. “Does the thing itself actually please? If it does, your taste is real; it may be different from that of others, but is equally justified and grounded in human nature” (Santayana, 1955, p. 50). Attempting to ignore or mask natural processes is detrimental to the psychology of home users. Marks of use are not flaws, but pieces of character that materials hold. The truth is, things, people, everything ages, and to deny this natural cycle goes against the process of our ecosystem. Employing materials that reflect destruction will build care of and respect for the possessions we keep, and hopefully begin to reverse the disposable nature into which our culture has fallen. As humans, we need to embrace our nature, and aesthetic function (beauty) will follow. Unity and wholeness of self cannot be accomplished or fully realized until the external manifestations harmonizes with the internal manifestations. Some might say, “I am myself no matter what the external looks like or feels like.” I might be willing to agree if the home was not so essential to our psychological and behavioral well-being. What the interior looks like, how it is presented, does not only talk about the self to others, but is a constant communication back to the self. It matters, because being able to identify with this essential space as your own, as you, gives a house the very meaning of home.

It is about putting a barrier between what we can readily control and what is beyond our reach. Of course we are still in the world, we are a part of it, inextricably linked with others and the affairs beyond our boundaries: the world beyond us helps to define these boundaries and so to shape our actions. Yet we should still seek to restrict the influence of the public realm, with is certainties and generalisations about how we should live. We should try to maintain the boundaries between ourselves
and the public realm, and keep some control over the way we perceive the world and how we are perceived by it. (King, 2014, p. 105)

There is no self without the other, and our identities are ways of making and communicating that distinction. Caution is being given against paying someone to create surroundings, lives, for indwellers. Instead, we should pay them to serve as an aid in our quest, our quest in the search for homes as honest reflections of the self. Let no one put words in your proverbial mouth.

What we should strive to provide is client facilitation in the process of design, helping them to achieve a result grown organically from self-analysis and introspection. This is not a prescription. Ornamentation without fashion. Aesthetics produced by function. Listening without judgment. Aid without contrivance. Design with honesty.

Through this translation from inner, ephemeral self to the outer, physical representational manifestation of self, authenticity to the unseen should be valued and attempted. How does the individual remain authentic? Is this sort of authenticity attainable?

Redirecting Values: A Place for Philosophy

To shed some light on these questions and their potential answers, I will turn to some philosophical perspectives on honesty, integrity, and authenticity. The query here will look for consensus in defining what exactly authenticity is, its value, and how to go about living in this way.

“To “tell the truth” means to convey as best one can the impression in one’s mind”, states Richard C. Cabot (1938) in his work entitled, aptly, Honesty. Under this definition, expressing false information does not necessitate lying - it can also be a case of ignorance if one believes truth in his own statement. One is being honest if he speaks of what he knows, all he knows (no white lies permissible), and cannot be faulted for lacking knowledge
or of being misinformed. This calls importance to never stop learning, to continue
discovering facts unknown. Is each man then granted his own individual truth, and
therefore, reality? How are we to distinguish lies from differences in individual truths? The
difference between one's individual reality (potentially a mistaken one), and lying, is clearly
knowledge. One who does not know something does not intentionally tell incorrect
information, they are simply ignorant. If “in the moral sense...the truth is whatever one
honestly believes” (Cabot, 1938, p.12), how are we supposed to know when someone is
lying? How are we to say what they do and do not know? Of course, we can never know
whether someone has learned any sort of information, and trust must be built. Within the
realm of actions, however, any false information given about what we have or have not done
is lying, because, barring illness, unconsciousness etc., we know we did them.

If honesty is to convey the truth as far as one knows it, then this clearly hints to a
subjective viewpoint of reality. But within the self, there are, in this moment, objective
realities that cannot be ignored, such as behavioral patterns, preferences, attitudes, strengths,
and weaknesses. Dishonesty then, could be framed as trying to mould objective facts
according to one’s own desires, to fit his subjective reality. It is not that desires for change,
or aspirations, are dishonest. No person should try to be a stagnant being. Aspirations,
however, should not be used as an excuse to pretend that existing conditions are other than
what they are. Intentional ignorance after awareness is a lie, and this is what begins to cause
misfits and inefficiencies within the home design. Our knowledge of ourselves is what
separates us from others in terms of a responsibility to uphold our individual honesties. To
be fully honest about something you must know it, as much as can be learned. In relation to
the self, this requires knowing and accepting your own process of living.
If he has formed the habit of pushing for reality in his thought and expression as well as in the accurate recording of his data, he will tend to be truthful as well as accurate by mere economy of effort and identity of motive. (Cabot, 1938, p.16)

Cabot writes this as advice for scientists in the laboratory, he himself being a physician by trade. Philosophically it rings as solid advice too. Constantly striving for an ever clearer image of the self, in awareness as well as motive and action.

The topic of motive is an interesting one when we consider the external presence of the self in the home environment. In his chapter on internal honesty in art, Cabot (1938) makes this statement:

This inescapable reference to something objective is the ground of [the artist’s] honesty. If his art has value he does not make up anything out of the whole cloth...But if to please the spectators is his prime object, he is headed straight for disaster. That way lies the meretricious in art...the cheap and tawdry. He is in just as great a danger...if he tries to be original or to assert himself. As much as the craftsmen or the tradesmen he must work to fulfill a need, though the need is his own and no other. (p. 177)

Much of value can be taken from this paragraph. On one hand, the artist has the other: the consumer, critic, curator, or society at large as the subject for whom he makes. Their preferences for what fits as art or for what is in vogue drives his product outcome. This is especially troublesome for the artist if his use of the medium or topics of study do not meld well with this expected outcome or product. Resulting from this prescribed solution generated by outside desires will be a forced process, lacking true interest from the artist. Objects will be rendered lackluster and lifeless. A lack of a certain quality will be missing, one that can be felt by all who view the piece. Done under false pretenses, the disheartened motivation that lends itself to dishonesty cannot be ignored.
On the other hand, there is heightened self-interest present in any attempt to be original, to prove, once again to the other, that he is an artist. In this way, he abandons his true interest and tries to reinvent the wheel. Purely based on his desire to stand out, his process becomes rushed in trying to be the first, the best, the ultimate artist. He is motivated by fame and accolades. As a result, his works are over-confident and boisterous to compensate for their lack of true value to the artist, as an artist.

Either end of the motivational spectrum spells disaster for the artist. Cabot’s solution for the artist is to follow his subjective desires. Falling along the middle of this motivation spectrum, this ideal is balanced. The artist feels free to explore. He is doing so not because others will like the outcome, but because the process of exploring and making genuinely interests him. He is not following desires for fame or recognition, or to be original. He desires to study the wheel that has been in motion for centuries, not to reinvent how it rolls. Through this need for discovery, exploration, explanation, or whatever grips the artist, he has proper motivation to make art. Through following these intuitions, he will captivate an audience, because he is being honest. He in turn will be original, because he is himself and can be no other. “The artist...is under an inner command to express the truth as he finds it and not as he wants it to be or as he thinks it will please anyone else” (Cabot 1938, p. 179).

This line of creative motivation for the artist can be taken as advice for the indweller and his home environment. Make home not as a performance for others, or to simply follow or create new trends or fads. Make home an expression of your truth, of your exploration, discovery, and explanation of your self, as you find it.

Ayn Rand’s views on honesty fit quite well with this idea of truth for the self. The book *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics* by Tara Smith (2006) covers a range of topics, but contains chapters dedicated specifically to honesty and integrity. In describing Rand’s position on the
honest person, Smith (2006) writes that “[s]he advocates honesty for its service to the agent’s self-interest” (p. 75). Whereas Cabot’s writing often had a tone of refraining from lying so as to keep a harmonious relationship with external bodies, Rand takes a much more internal look at the effects of honesty.

Similar to Cabot, however, Rand believes honesty means “that a person “must never attempt to fake reality in any manner”...the most basic concern of honesty is not what others believe, but the discovery and acceptance of what is so” (Smith, 2006, p. 75-76). Both Rand and Cabot stress the continual exploration of knowledge. Rand’s view is stated in a more objective way, advocating for honesty relating to “what is so”, not what is believed by individuals. In a way, it is the confronting of these objective facts - these facts of who we are and how we truly live, that gives us the freedom to design an interior around that life, for that life. The interior becomes an extension of that life. As such, we can feel comfortable. We can feel, in essence, at home. When the mirror of your interior reflects you, to you, it speaks of acceptance.

What happens then, if one is dishonest about who they are and how they behave within their home environment? “Dishonesty often takes the form of attempts to stretch the truth or to supplement reality with the objects of a person’s desires” (Smith, 2006, p. 77). Again aspirational designs are not discounted here. Merely, it is important to know who you are before you can properly proceed to be who you want to be. “Dishonesty is self-defeating insofar as pretending that facts are other than they are only diverts a person from identifying and pursuing rational strategies for achieving the objective values that will advance his life” (Smith, 2006, p. 86). How else are we to advance the design of one’s dwelling if we firstly do not know what the notion of home means to them, or how they behave, truly, within that environment? Crucial to any design project is the formulation of the design problem, and it is beneficial to not start on false pretenses. This affects the
dweller’s well-being. “I would suggest that dishonesty is likely to eat away at a person’s self-esteem - at his sense of his own worthiness and ability to achieve happiness” (Smith, 2006, p. 85). If homes reflect anything but the indweller and his ways of living, this dishonesty can be felt by them. Looking in the mirror and seeing someone else’s face begins to eat away at one’s self-image. Feeling one way, seeing another, living in a home in which you always feel like a guest makes one feel on edge and begins to darken even the brightest happiness.

How does one then maintain honesty, about the self and the home? The answer might come when one looks at the definition of integrity. According to Rand, integrity is “loyalty to one’s convictions and values; it is the policy of acting in accordance with one’s values, of expressing, upholding and translating them into practical reality” (Smith, 2006, p. 176). This sounds much like the original problem set forth: translation of inner self to outer reality. It is this loyalty to self, upholding one’s values, and accepting them that allows us to remain truthful through this transformation. This is not easy. After awareness comes effort. “A steadfast refusal to fake reality reflects the value of knowing reality and correlatively, the need for a conscientious, active effort to learn about it, to find out the way things are” (Smith, 2006, p. 77).

“Honesty demands taking cognition seriously. This requires that a person develop an active mind seek knowledge in order to act on that knowledge, and refuse to fake any item in his mind” (Smith, 2006, p. 89). This seems to correlate well with the following statement, made by Harry Frankfurt in his book titled Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right (2006). Within the chapter on taking ourselves seriously, Frankfurt suggests a sentiment that I find fits with Rand’s view on active minds:

When we begin attending to our own feelings and desires, to our attitudes and motives, and to our dispositions to behave in certain ways, what we confront is an array of--so to speak--psychic raw material. If we are to amount to more than just
biologically qualified members of a certain animal species, we cannot remain passively indifferent to these materials. Developing higher-order attitudes and responses to oneself is fundamental to achieving the status of a responsible person.

To remain wantonly unreflective is the way of nonhuman animals and of small children. They do whatever their impulses move them most insistently to do, without any self-regarding interest in what sort of creature that makes them to be. They are one-dimensional, without the inner depth and complexity that render higher-order responses to oneself possible. Higher-order responses need not be especially thoughtful, or even entirely overt. However, we become responsible persons--quite possibly on the run and without full awareness--only when we disrupt ourselves from an uncritical immersion in our current primary experience, take a look at what is going on in it, and arrive at some resolution concerning what we think about it or how it makes us feel. (p. 6)

This idea of reflection I think is central to the process of discovery of what one does and how that plays in to what they value. Within homes, dwellers should strive to have them reflect who they are, and nothing more. It is not an overnight process, but one that takes a lifetime, that changes as the person changes.

“Because integrity concerns a person’s integration of his mind and body, it demands that a person act according to the conclusions of his consciousness. He must unite what he thinks with what he does, making himself a seamless whole” (Smith, 2006, p. 188). Through the honesty of mind and thought, combined with the integrity of action, we can begin to live lives in homes that are authentic.
PLAN OF INQUIRY

The affective qualities of landscape become interwoven with memories in a process of material assemblage of landscape affects on the body and understandings of the self-in-situ. This is a messy process in which self, time, place and emotion become appropriated into the articulation of events. We therefore suggest that there is an emotional quality of ‘landscape memory’, which impacts on the body and initiates post-perceptive meaning of landscape, meaning that the material assemblages that generate affective moments become remembered, and shaped, by embodied references, which in turn reconfigure our notions of self and identity. (Bull and Leyshon, 2010, p. 125)

Autoethnography

Research methods placing the researcher in the forefront of the inquiry are making their way into the mainstream of qualitative research, their origins lying within anthropology and sociology, stretching their definitions of research to include more personal and literary approaches. Autoethnographical research “connects the personal to the cultural by analysing the self within a social context in order to extend sociological understanding” (Haynes, 2011, p. 135).

In their chapter entitled “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject”, Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2000) (while writing the chapter in the style of autoethnography) call for social science writing that departs from the tradition of passive, dry, and distant reporting of qualitative research findings. This personal-cultural method is a form of writing and research, a process, that requires changing the lens from outward to inward and back again. Stemming from the larger methodology of ethnography, autoethnography is a “model of inquiry that encourages the development of self by finding place in chaos, loving the unknown, embracing uncertainty…” (Blair, 2014, p. 6).
These projects are written in first person, and can take the form of the following: short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. To tell their stories in an effective, convincing manner, “typically, autoethnographical writing highlights action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and a sense of self-consciousness” (Raab, 2013, p. 2). Ultimately, it is both a method and a text; the writing is used as a process of discovery, while the finished written narrative serves as the result of the research project. Autoethnography aims to provoke readers to expand their horizons by providing a frame within which people can reflect critically on their own experiences, as well as the author’s. (Blair 2014)

Reflection, and the awareness and ability to do so, is one of the main tenets of autoethnography, and not just for the reader. According to Raab (2013) in her research on the subject, she writes that “the best autoethnographic writing is truthful, vulnerable, evocative, and therapeutic” (p. 11). Achieving this requires the researcher to reflect upon their experiences in the field, and to tell the account honestly. “A reflexive use of autobiographical material provides a valuable resource for exploring, presenting, and representing the self, encapsulating a personal, intuitive knowledge deriving from a knowing subject situated in a specific social context” (Haynes, 2011, p. 134). Writing reflexively requires the researcher to address the effects of the field on every aspect of the self, encompassing body, mind, and spirit. (Raab 2013) Doing so creates a more holistic account of what it is like to actually be there; it takes the reader on a journey.

The result of this reflection by all involved culminates in self-analysis and transformation. As this thesis strives to be a study of the process of making home, autoethnography proves to be a fitting method, as “arts-based research and autoethnography share many of the same aims, including blurring boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities, utilizing forms of creative expression, and the inclusion of the researcher as
subject” (Blair, 2014, p. 6). It also “may offer a better understanding of the self in the lived experience” (Raab, 2013, p. 1) which is precisely what this study aims to explore.

There are three categories of autoethnographic studies: realist, impressionist, and confessional. This study falls under the impressionist category, which Raab (2013) describes as being “expressed through autoethnography, poetry, fiction, photographs, art, performance, and dance” and is concerned with “learning about something in particular” (p. 7). Raab (2013) goes on to paraphrase Ellis in describing that an impressionist story “answers life questions, such as: how we cope, how we live life, and why we talk or act in a certain way” (p. 7). Impressionistic approaches, such as visual autoethnography, are written in the first person, utilize metaphors, and are rich in description and detail. The story is presented as is, without reflection on the part of the author, leaving interpretation up to the audience. (Raab 2013)

Visual Autoethnography

In her chapter “The Photo Diary as an Autoethnographic Method” within The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods, Elizabeth Chaplin (2011) explains autoethnography, outlines its historical roots within social science, and narrows the discussion to visual autoethnography in which images complement the text, bringing “an immediate aesthetic impact on the viewer’s feelings” (p. 244). As with autoethnography, “the narrative starts with the self and proceeds in the first-person singular; the author takes the reader on a journey - mental and physical, real and metaphorical, into her own social world” (Chaplin, 2011, p. 243). Impressionistic (or evocative) autoethnography does not aim to develop theory, but rather the writing documents the author’s thoughts and actions during and after a systematic exploration of the field, telling a unique story to a unique reader.

As Chaplin (2011) goes on to share a glimpse of her own visual diary which documents “the everyday life of a middle-class English woman, living in London and semi-
retried from being a social scientist” (p. 249), she discusses the advantage of incorporating images within the text: “[b]y presenting the readers with a particularly ‘image and words’ combination, readers can construct a connection between what they see and other stuff in my mind that they don’t see” (p. 246). She emphasizes that aesthetic considerations should balance and support the social science, not overshadow it.

Since the researcher is considered a participant in this type of study, the chosen approach should resonate with his or her sensibilities...reflexivity is an important aspect or approach to an autoethnographic study. Being reflexive means to live the moment and continually foster an ongoing conversation with the self about the lived experience. (Raab, 2013, p. 6)

It is for this reason that this thesis has taken the form of a visual autoethnographical account. Being a student in a design discipline, I find a particular affinity with the underpinnings of combining devices of image and word to illustrate the results of an inquiry into a design problem or idea.

Although impressionist autoethnography does not necessarily require reflection beyond the reflexive writing of the account, it is necessary for me to do so to digest the whole of my experience, both visually and textually. Reflection will also give me the space I needed to synthesize and derive deeper meaning from my experiential data which might not have been so apparent in the lived moment.

Method of Inquiry

The focus of these visual autoethnographic entries will center around the topic put forth by the abstract and literature review: the process of making home. As such, it was necessary for me to photograph, explore, document, and write about my home, without limiting the definition of what that might be. Some of the entries in the findings occurred within the physical constraint of my apartment building, documenting the lived experience
of space constructed and formed out of needs, preferences, and habits both new and old. Photographs have been a fitting medium for this exploration. They are at once both objective and subjective; they parallel the home experience. As time passes, I have photographed how I use my home, from the everyday rituals to the special occasions. Material and product inventory have been documented. Overall, I hoped to capture the feeling of what it is like to live in my home, and to understand that through photographs and written word. Though keeping in the same tone, other entries went beyond the front door in the form of photographic excursions.

When, however, we learn to apperceive; when we grow fond of tracing lines and developing vistas; when, above all, the subtler influences of places on our mental tone are transmuted into an expressiveness in those places, and they are furthermore poetized by our day-dreams...then we feel that the landscape is beautiful. (Santayana, 1955, p. 83)

Photographic Excursions

I have systematically explored and documented the material nature and atmospheric qualities of two neighborhoods: faculty housing at the American University of Sharjah in University City and adjacent Al Juraina 3 and 4.

Each walk has taken place over approximately an hour, ranging in days of the week and time of day. Spontaneous in nature, the specific routes were unplanned, with the exception of the point of origin. Throughout each trip, field notes and thoughts were recorded by hand, and photographs were taken using a Canon DSLR camera. While the number of photographs varied with each walk, most of them consist of photographs ranging from panoramas to close-up detail shots.

The day following a completed walk, with the aid of the field notes, I fully journaled the experience and the significant moments that occurred. To strengthen the details of the
narrative, however, I also employed emotional recall, in which “the researcher imagines being back in the scene both physically and emotionally” (Raab, 2013, p. 15). I would visualize myself back in the context of the walk, seeing the mental pictures of my memory as I would write the story. After journaling the experience, I created map of the route explored so that the reader would have an aid in placing the experience within the larger fabric of the city.

Photographs taken were not reviewed at this point; these materials were saved for review during analysis. As with any ethnographic method, excursions stopped at the point of saturation, when the strange became familiar.

Context of Inquiry

Within the nation of the United Arab Emirates is an emirate named Sharjah. Sharjah’s territory borders both the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, on the West and East coasts, respectively, of a northerly tip at the end of the Arabian Peninsula. The city of Sharjah, located on the coast of the Persian Gulf, consists of urban, industrial, suburban, and rural communities, reducing in density as distance from the coast increases.

University City lies in the middle of the suburbs in the district of Al Juraina, stretching parallel to the coast. It is a walled-in institutional development, containing the following: University City Hall, Sharjah Higher College of Technology for Men, Sharjah Higher College of Technology for Women, University of Sharjah, Sharjah Police Academy, Medical College, Skyline College, Sharjah Library, and lastly, the American University of Sharjah (AUS).

AUS has its own walls and gates defining its boarders. Within these boundaries, towards the northern edge of campus, are sections of residential buildings dedicated to housing faculty. It is in this group that I reside, in building J4. This section marks the first neighborhood location where some of the photographic excursions have occurred.
Right outside the City's gates lie Al Juraina 1, 2, 3, and 4; they run from north to south and line the eastern edge of the City. Each part of Al Juraina is suburban and residential, with a commercial section in between Al Juraina 2 and 3. Sections 3 and 4 comprise the second neighborhood location of the photographic excursions. The majority of them have taken place here.

In line with the methodology of visual autoethnography, I have been the subject of these outings and subsequent writings. Interactions with others were not discouraged and were either documented visually or textually, but did not become the direct focus of the study at any point.

**Researcher's Role**

My role within this research design is at once simple and complex, and altogether personal. Acting as both the subject and appraiser of data, I’ve found it useful, thought difficult and not entirely successful, to at times choose between roles.

Autoethnography typically does not enforce this split, and actually believes in the opposite: the complete elimination of bias as a researcher is not possible, and autoethnography instead attempts to document and show the underlying bias of said researcher. Choosing at times between being subject and collector does not erase bias either, rather it simplifies the task at hand.

**Researcher as Subject**

During the photographic excursions, I have found it useful to keep my mind focused on the present, what is happening right before my being. I say being because these excursions have been viewed as opportunities for a fully body, mind, and spirit experience. My goal as a subject is to live, document, and explain as holistic an experience as possible. Intense awareness is critical to accomplish this task. “What constitutes our ontological sense of self is our place in the world and our relation to it, not merely our existence within the
world” (King, 2004, p. 147). I must get out into the world to feel it, to know it. My Westernized apartment could be anywhere in the world. I had to get outside of it to know and learn about my home and what it means to me here. Every relationship formed between the environment and myself is open to observation and documentation:

- **Body:** sight, smell, taste, sound, touch, kinesthesia
- **Mind:** thoughts, feelings
- **Spirit:** mood, social interaction

“At every moment experience is leaving in our minds some trait, some expression, some image, which will remain there attached to the name of a person, a class, or a nationality” (Santayana, 1955, p. 110). Greater awareness of these factors, the more involved in the moment I become, and the less I try to analyze the significance of what I document as I document, the more I can be fully in the moment and hopefully record a more authentic image of the experience. This hasn’t been easy, as I am by nature analytical and constantly question and doubt everything I do. It has been hard for me to do this open-ended exploration, as I have been impatient to get to the big picture of “what it all means”. But figuring it all out is not the role of the subject, it is the role of the appraiser.

**Researcher as Appraiser**

The role of the appraiser within this process can be linked with the data analysis stage. It was at this point that I allowed myself to look at the data, both images and words, that I had collected and to analyze and interpret the meaning of the whole experience, and why it was collected. The distance created by separating these two roles gave me space enough to have some perspective, to recognize relationships, to see the forest for the trees.

As was explained in the previous section on the method of inquiry, I alternated between periods of collection and reflection. This required me to be constantly switching mindsets, from present to past and back again. This pattern seemed to work for me, as it
represented how we as humans sometimes live; behaving and acting in ways that we don't always realize or understand until we look back on the journey and see what it was all for.

Analysis of Inquiry

For data analysis in an autobiographical study, it is important that instead of the researcher merely describing what happened in his or her life, she should describe how memories may be strung together to illustrate cultural traits and relationships with others in society. (Raab, 2013, p. 10)

To create this final narrative, after two weeks of photographic excursions a week was spent reflecting on journal entries. Seemingly significant portions of each writing entry were highlighted; these were then woven together to create a summary.

The photographs were analyzed walk by walk. This was done by laying out the group of printed photos and studying them to find visual themes from each walk. During this analysis, notes were taken by hand, and from each theme and the collection of themes for each walk, meaning was interpreted as to what the photographs said about the person taking them, myself. I deliberately distanced myself from the photographs until it was time to analyze them, so that I could more easily look at them from a fresh perspective. I also chose to analyze the photographs separate from the text. Since I “shot from the hip” and without abandon, I wanted to see what the subconscious story the images would tell, without being influenced by the consciousness and self-awareness of the textual account.

Through this reflection, it was my intention to bring to the forefront my everyday activities to gain a more authentic vision of how I dwell, and how new places influence these habits. These dwelling habits and experiences, and recognition of them, will allow me to reflect upon my home and what it means to me, in an effort to recognize how harmony between place and person is realized.
Through reviewing my material collected in the field, it was my goal to be able to begin to understand the nature of how people live here. Making what was strange familiar has lead me to insights about my prejudices and preferences related to living. These excursions were intended to be used as a catalyst for understanding my place and beginning to feel comfortable with it. In the search for acceptance of the new, if that is the goal, I must start with expression. As King (2014) states, “acceptance can only come from within and only then can it express itself outwards, and in that sense it must come voluntarily” (p. 97).

Limitations of Inquiry

The outcome I hoped to achieve through this process is a descriptive, experiential narrative of what it means to make home, and how this meaning evolves through time and cultural experiences. By nature of the chosen method and setting, the result of this study was not intended to be generalizable to larger populations, nor would it be fitting to generalize the results in relation to myself. From this study, I cannot predict that how I live now will be how I live five, ten, or forty years from now. It merely gives an interpretation of how I live now, and what I can do to improve my home to align it with the values of my current self. While this outcome is unique, the process is repeatable. Hopefully by having gone through this process myself, I can in the future guide others through a similar process, and gather narratives of how others cope during times of transition, and whether or not making home is used as a coping mechanism for the adaptation caused by uprooting from previous place. I hope to use these methods as inspiration for future ethnographic studies of the person-home-experience relationship, particularly within the population of expatriates. On a larger scale, it is my belief that these self-discovery methods could be useful as techniques for a new way of developing more holistic and properly focused problem statements and design concepts in residential design projects.
And the research journaling beings. We arrived in Sharjah approximately 12 days ago, and only today do I being a routine. I feel like a month has passed since we left eastern Florida, yet it feels as if I’ve only been here a minute. It seems strange to have multiple perceptions of the passing of time for the same period.

First “research” note - perhaps I should journal at night when thoughts are more readily available, and often even hard to silence.

It’s quite interesting - this feeling I get from occupying a residence that has come fully furnished. It’s as if someone combined a hotel with a college dorm room. The furniture pieces resemble “grown up” choices, but they are of such a character (or lack thereof) that no individual would choose them for his or herself. Rather, they are quite like
they were chosen for no one and everyone at the same time. It’s almost as if they were picked so that when in combination with one another they would cause the least offense to the largest diversity of people. In actuality, by doing so, the drab plainness that results gives quite the opposite effect. The plainest of the plain all around - everything in sight is of medium hue tan - the buffet table, dining set, coffee tables, end tables, sofa, loveseat, chair, drapes. Nondescript contemporary items that have nailed average right on the head.

Of course, the first thing one does when residing in a new place, whether for the day, week, year, or forever, is make an attempt at personalization. This first attempt is often a subconscious one. I believe mine was turning down the bed the way that I like (bedding top corner folded back at 45°, decorative pillow against the headboard, sleeping pillow laying flat in front), even though I was nowhere near ready for bed; jet lag was already setting in and I was given an unwelcome burst of energy at 1 am.

I feel almost as if I’m being unfairly critical of this furniture. I should be thankful that I have a place to stay that has air conditioning, let alone free, clean furniture. It’s no one else’s job to make my house my home - of that I’m aware, but I’m close to arguing that a true blank slate would be better than this blah one.

Another more conscious act of personalization came the other day. The main room of this one bedroom apartment is a combination dining room and living room. Both areas were set up in the most logical way. For dining - one round table centered under the recessed lighting, four chairs tucked under its top. To its left, next to the kitchen door, a buffet table. Just beyond that, the living room - loveseat, sofa, chair arranged in a U, facing the TV at the opposite wall. Two end tables flanking the sofa, a coffee table and rug (the only thing of color and pattern in the apartment) anchoring the space. Two fully functional, easily maneuverable places in one room.

It drove me nuts.
Unsociable hermit that I tend to be when at home didn’t care that this arrangement made the most sense and accommodated the most people comfortably. In the middle of watching some show on the Food Network, I abruptly jumped off the couch and jammed the round table against the back wall of the dining room and replaced three chairs around it. I drug the loveseat from its place as room divider and relocated it against the wall opposite the buffet table. The armchair moved to the other side of the U, taking the place of the loveseat, an end table moving with it. This change created an L-shaped arrangement, with the sofa still facing the TV and the chair now facing the sliding glass door of the balcony. The fourth dining chair became a misfit. I placed it next to the sofa end table, in case anyone wanted to awkwardly sit next to a lamp. Now, as you can imagine, the dining room is a bit of a mess. The table-now-desk (who eats at tables anyway?) has left a strange empty void in the center of the room. This void is the first impression from the entry and was barely bettered by my addition of a rug. The loveseat stares at the buffet table and into the kitchen, both of which clearly don’t deserve an audience. The dining room has become a makeshift office for me, which was the desired effect even if awkwardness wasn’t. Even with the broken logic and weird energy I’ve created, I still feel more comfortable now in this main room than I did before. This could be because the floor plan, though odd, is more open. Or it could be that the full view out the door is unobstructed. It also could be that I like being able to work nestled against the wall, and from this vantage point I can see the most of the apartment, making it feel less like a prison and more like a refuge. But I have the suspicion that my comfort comes from the fact that even my quirky, less inviting floor plan is better than what was, not because it is better, but because I chose it.
September 23, 2014

How is it that the simple act of buying glassware can instill me with so much hope? I could chalk it up to blatant materialism, an addiction to the high one feels as they hand over currency in exchange for something shiny and new, the drug of consumerism. This may as well be it - after being essentially broke for the last month (in reality, 7 years) - I felt a warm, heady rush as the bank account was filled with this month’s paycheck. I could now afford to purchase things beyond the necessary food and gas. During that month I stalked malls, souqs, and sites, making multiple mental shopping lists of items to grab and surround myself with as soon as the opportunity was upon me. Yesterday, that moment came. I was in the mall anyway, eating a lunch of Thai soup and strolling around the marble, granite, and light-filled atriums. Upon seeing one of my previously-stalked stores, I was reminded of the fact that I could now buy what I had listed. I picked a small and logical purchase to be the first. Of the glassware we had at home, we were down to three, thin glasses that dared to join the fate of the rest, to break at the slightest sideways glance. These weary, fragile pieces were begging to be relieved of their water-bearing duties. I set out to make that so. Basket in hand, brilliant shop lights glinting into my eyes, I began to make my selections from the shelves of glass in front of me. Standing like soldiers at attention, the glasses gleamed and waited, some with bodies full and round, others tall and slender. I proceeded to break their ranks, pulling the chosen by one or two from across the field. Some were handmade, some colored, some fancy, some simple. Post-purchase they were wrapped and packed to safely endure the ride home.

Upon arrival, I immediately took to unwrapping each glass, removing the stickers of origin, and claiming them as mine. Washed and dried, I moved old items off of the open prominent shelves connected to the upper cabinets. Tall placed on one, short on the other, ready and waiting for use. Not only was this my first purchase, it was also my first conscious
act in making this new apartment reflect who I am. That's quite the responsibility for a mismatched set of glassware. Today as I walked in the kitchen, I caught a quick glimpse of teal, of speckled color, of metallic stripes, of handmade texture. I was filled with happiness as I selected one and from it drank water. Today, it tasted a little bit sweeter. No, I think this is something more than materialism. If my home is going to have things in it, they might as well be ones that I love, that bring me joy by how they work, how they look, how they feel. The process of making home has begun, and I already feel the better for it.

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October 15, 2014: The Making of a Housewife

The irony of my situation does not escape me.

A couple weeks ago, a month had gone by that I had been without my passport. During that month, I was undergoing a change of status, from a tourist to a resident of this country. Being a woman, the terms of my condition required either a sponsored job or a husband. As a student, the latter was my legitimate ticket in. I knew, legally, what this meant for me by way of new status. I was not a man, nor was I employed, but I was married. I knew what to expect when my passport and new visa were returned to my possession. I now had a new label, that of a housewife. My expectation did not reduce my reaction to this phrase; it was strange, as I stood staring at these words, I felt as if I were slowly shrinking in height. I felt reduced by this degrading (in my mind) phrase. Housewife. I couldn’t even say it in my mind without scoffing and spitting a little. Not only did I feel that this was absurdly opposite my current nature as a student workaholic (recovering), I also found it darkly humorous. In my mind, I was probably the worst possible candidate for this occupational title. I consider myself “residentially lazy”. Every home I’ve occupied, out from under the watchful eye of my mother, can attest to this. Coffee cups pile up on the counter. Dust bunnies breed with the enthusiasm of real bunnies, creating furry hairy havens in corners,
under furniture, and on every horizontal surface. Sheets are washed every...four months? Laundry is painstakingly completed when I realize I’ve run low on underwear, often times ending up in a ‘clean’ pile of unfolded garments on the floor (there’s a clean spot on the floor?), decidedly separate from the dirty pile. I don’t even own a toilet brush or cleaner. My one saving grace is that I tend not to make messes to begin with. Not sure I would know what to do if I did. I’m not sure where this aversion to housework arose from, but I’m very aware of its presence. So, seeing my aversion rise to the forefront of my new government-given title, I couldn’t help but laugh.

I found myself using it as comic relief, though I doubt others saw the joke. Upon meeting other ex-patriates with my husband, when it was time to introduce myself, I would sarcastically comment that I was, “Just a housewife!” with a little smirk. They know the conditions of spousal residency (even unemployed husbands get ‘housewife’ status) but my joke was not responded to with laughter (expected), but rather of condolences similar to, “Oh, well that’s perfectly alright!” paired with a sympathetic smile, to which I would hide my dismay at my failed attempts at humor, and would explain that I’m also a graduate student attempting to finish my thesis.

It is only as I begin to reflect on my new status and my research focus that the second wave of irony arrives. As an interior design student concentrated on dwellings, my main interest is precisely the making of home, and all that that phrase implies. It is precisely how the day-to-day living is carried out within four walls - the habit, the ritual, the necessary, the banal - these basic things are at the core of what I find so intriguing about individuals and cultures.

I am not a housewife. Nothing could be farther from the truth.
October 29, 2014: On Doing

Today is the day that my journaling officially goes into visual autoethnography.

When I was researching this method, I became so excited. It felt like the perfect thing to do for this project, and still does. But now that I’ve decided, now that I’ve committed words to paper, I feel fear creeping in. Fear that I don’t know how to write, fear that I won’t get anything out of this, and others won’t either. I’m afraid that despite the research that exists in favor of this method that’s been around since the 80’s, my efforts won’t be seen as a valid attempt at research or a thesis project. Despite these fears, here I am writing, hoping that valuable words come out. I know they’re in there. They swim in my head as I try to sleep, forming schools, circulating ‘round evading capture and preventing calm seas. They swim freely as I think, but as soon as I try to write them down they vanish, fleeing to hidden crevices in my brain. It’s maddening. My hope is that with practice and repetition, with habit, my entries will be coherent, focused, and meaningful.

Down with fear anyway! The other day I was reading *Private Dwelling* by Peter King. When discussing the positives of complacency with our home environments, he brought up the main obstacles: anxiety and fear. Both, he said, originate internally. This I know, and these two things I suffer from most. For me, anxiety is sometimes an agent for good change. Often times it increases my production; it helps me to decide and to move forward. But fear I find stops me in my tracks. I become afraid of mediocre outcomes, failure, and wasted time. Fear is what leads me to procrastinate, and lord knows I’m a champion at finding other things to do that help me finish nothing. I think my biggest fear might be believing, actually believing wholeheartedly in what I’m doing, ridding my self of all doubt, going for broke. Because with that level of investment, what happens when people still say that you fail? When you’re rejected? Heartbreak, I imagine. Shame, embarrassment, and more self doubt. But isn’t that precise condition the one that I admire most? The guy who,
in the face of adversity (even if self-inflected), still gave it his all; he was intent, focused, and committed, and it shows it his outcome. Even if I don’t like it, man, you can see that he cared. So down with fear anyway, and do what you set out to do. Write write write. Every day, write. Even if it’s bad, write. You can always edit later. Even if you think no one cares, write. Even if you think it’s pointless, you thought of it for a reason, so write it anyway. You can always cut it later. You can always fix it later, but you can’t take back the days you waste not doing what you set out to do.
Figure 2. Context Map
I started where all things begin....the mosque.

Long expanses of dust, walls, and heat. After a few minutes my face begins to strain from the squinting.

Sidewalks...is that what I should call them? I prefer to walk on the sand. It's too close to the wall.

The mosques seem to be speaking to one another; I am drawn in all directions by the sound. It must be prayer time.

Constant bird chatter that you sort of drown out after awhile.

There's a busy road beyond that I want to see but I find that I'm ready to stop; it's hot.

I only know where the car is because of the mosque towers.

I find that I look the longest when I can be far away from what I'm trying to see. An expanse is hard to find here...I keep backing up against walls.

Who is to care for these in-between spaces?

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When I look at the map of Sharjah, deciding where I should take my first walk, certain areas bring images into my mind. Along the Dubai-Sharjah boarder, seventeen industrial areas stretch from the coastal lagoons out to University City, and inward from the border to the middle of this emirate. These I know well, at least relatively, mostly because when we drive back from Dubai, we usually take highway 311. The exit we take on 311 to head towards University City is labeled Areas 15, 17. It’s not the exit we have to take, but I hear it’s a shortcut. The industrial areas are also prominent because as we drive by them (15 and 17, anyway), all you see is a tall wall of sand, but the smell of baked, roasting garbage is unmistakable. I also find it quite ironic that this border line is where Sharjah would choose
to place their trash; I’ve been told that the tribes of these neighboring emirates don’t have the best relationship. It’s most likely a coincidence.

Spreading from the Arabian Gulf inland to 311, next to the industrial areas, are neighborhood blocks, each with their own designated name. Within this area, which takes up about a quarter of my map, you can find souks, museums, cultural centers, civil amenities, and businesses. I’ve been through this urban area a few times; the map makes it look a lot more organized that it seems when you’re in it, whether riding or walking. It sounds strange to say riding, but I suppose that is what I must call it, since I have yet to drive here, for legal and skill-related reasons. That’s definitely a lead-in for another topic, for another time.

Once we pass 311, things on the map begin to look markedly different in organization. Bordering Dubai we have, as mentioned earlier, industrial areas 15 and 17. Then, a large commercial area bearing the same name as the adjacent, abandoned military camp, Mowaileh. Finally, next to neighboring Ajman on right, we find the Sharjah International Airport. All of these zones terminate at University City, where I reside. I believe it’s important to explain this area too, so I will have to circle back in another entry and do so.

For just beyond University City, near the Dubai border, is a neighborhood named Al Juraina, and this is where my first walk occurred. Looking at the map, it seems to be the point where residential neighborhoods turn suburban. I chose this neighborhood for a few reasons:

1) It is immediately adjacent to University City. I like the idea of exploring places in close proximity.

2) It is the only neighborhood name I recognize. This is the neighborhood that is listed behind the restaurant names that we order delivery from, which occurs frequently.
3) Confirming my decision, I realized as we drove towards the neighborhood, I realized that I actually come here multiple times a week, without previously knowing it.

Before the walk, we stopped to have lunch at the Matajer, which is a small local mall right outside University City. I’m familiar with this mall because we visit it multiple times a week. The mall contains a Carrefour, which is where we sometimes buy our groceries. Mostly, we come for lunch during weekdays because there are few options on campus. Today, we chose to eat at Shakespeare & Co. I’ve only seen this restaurant inside a mall, but they’re unmistakable. Pastel and dark purples and greens cover most of the surfaces, whether painted or plush. Most items have some sort of floral pattern. It’s reminiscent of a tea time restaurant, I suppose. The place is quite too cute for my taste, but the food is good; I haven’t had a bad meal there yet. While finishing my tea (yes, I got tea), I pulled out my tour book map and began to look at my neighborhood options. I spotted Al Juraina, and said, “Oh! Let’s go there!”

As we got into the car, I pulled out my cell phone to open up my Google map application. The tourist map I have has north oriented diagonally to the page, so I’m not quite sure where we are in relation to it (though this is nothing new). As my current location loads, I realize that we were already in Al Juraina, and had been coming here for the last two months. I of course immediately feel silly; I had thought we were on the other side of University City. I decide that it works; what better reason to explore this neighborhood? I am quite familiar to one specific piece of it, but the rest is still a strange mystery.

I know had my first neighborhood, but where to start? From the car, all the corners looked the same. Which to choose? But then, as we continued down the long edge road, above the houses rose two tall, tan towers. We turned towards them and as we exited the roundabout, the full building emerged and I knew I had found my starting place. I started where all things begin here....the mosque.
We parked at the corner of the section we had just driven by; this was situated diagonally across the street from the mosque. I turned from it and began walking down the sand road, into the grid of houses.

It didn’t take very long for my first impression to form. One turn and a few pictures later, a thought bubbled in my head, stirred not by the buildings but the atmosphere. All around me were long expanses of dust, walls, and heat. After a few minutes my face begins to strain from the squinting. In the past two months here, I’ve tried to spend as much time as possible indoors, otherwise I probably would have been sensible enough to bring a hat. But the squinting and the heat, and soon enough the sweating, get me thinking of things absent. Here, nearing the end of October, tied with November in a tight race for my favorite month, this heat won’t leave. I check my weather app and find, actually to a bit of relief, that it’s 95°F. At this time in the afternoon, that number is a blessing. Still I am bitter, for this time of year for me has been ranked the best for the cool, breezy, drizzly weather that I am used to.
in Iowa, and I miss it. How much more enjoyable this walk would be, with crisp air biting my cheeks, but not penetrating my sweater, and the sound of dry rustling leaves crunching beneath my feet. For a moment I can almost feel it, walking in autumn.

A real breeze kicks up sand into squinting eyes, and I’m brought back to my dusty feet. Sandals flip grains up onto them, and soon they are coated in a soft layer of tan. I don’t mind, really. My clothes (long sleeve shirt and pants) haven’t begun to stick to me. The wind comes up often enough that if I keep moving, I don’t think I will sweat too much. So welcome is this change from the realities of the last two months.

If it weren’t for the lengthening of the shadows, I don’t think I’d be able to tell you much more of a difference between the summer and fall. The walls along the streets that enclose the houses and yards are creating some pretty desirable shade, but I hesitate to move into it. The sidewalk...is that what I should call it? I prefer to walk on the sand. It’s too close to the wall.
The distance created by walking in the street is more comforting than the relief from the sun.

As I walk and photograph, I turn and walk, turn and walk, not really paying attention to what has caused me to do so. I photograph the roads ahead, and the markers of the intersections (37 street at 40 street....how?), but I’m too distracted by the sounds. *The mosques seem to be speaking to one another; I am drawn in all directions by the sound. It must be prayer time.* As I walk I find that this section of Al Juraina has its own, smaller mosque than the one where I began my route. A man is perched in the tower, speaking in Arabic over loudspeaker. A few cars in white and black are parked out front, and I assume that this is the traffic I have seen while walking. I walk past the mosque on the other side of the road, refraining from taking pictures. Mixed with the intermittent Arabic, the only other sound is the kind of *constant bird chatter that you sort of drown out after awhile.* These noisy birds I haven’t seen, but a few cats I have. It’s hard for me to resist petting them, but I don’t dare go into the open gates that I pass, where the cats are just beyond, lounging outside of the houses on the paved driveway.
I come to a T in the road, and find some homes in different stages of development. I photograph them, and think how odd it is, this difference between the progress and the product. These unfinished works are homogenous, gray, smooth, plain; their horizontal slabs stacked so they cut the skyline into pieces. The neighboring completed houses have interesting defining quirks; their variety of window tints, exterior wall colors, and metal accents make each home its own spectacle, if you can see beyond the wall.

There’s a busy road beyond that I want to see but I find that I’m ready to stop; it’s hot. I turn left towards it, but I know that I won’t go all the way. It’s been 45 minutes and I have not come prepared with any water. I begin walking back in what I think is the direction of the car, but I’m going on instinct only. I don’t want to retrace my steps, and I turn down a new road. Luckily, my guide for this walk is with me. I only know where the car is because of the mosque towers. Peaking out above the building, the towers reaffirm my place and position. As long as I continue weaving through the walled streets and keep my sights on the correct towers, I will find my way back. It’s not that I’ve really walked that far (I stopped often to photograph
and write) but, as I usually do whenever I walk to explore a place, I haven't paid attention to my path, but instead have focused on the individual things I encounter.

The towers are growing in size, and I turn at an L in the road. Four blocks or so in the near distance, I can make out the car. This is the road on which I began the walk, but turned off of before making it this far. I'm glad that I happened to come back this way, for I find something that I had missed by turning off the road. To my left is a large expanse of sand, maybe the size of 6 lots. On the other side, I see the busy road that I had given up on. It seems to be a major dividing road for the neighborhood. Across the lanes of traffic, houses line the street one after another, and beyond that, more. They face me with their bright blue and amber eyes, gleaming in the mid-afternoon sun. This is the first moment of its kind on this walk, and I keep staring. I find that I look the longest when I can be far away from what I'm trying to see. An expanse is hard to find here...I keep backing up against walls. In my minds eye, I try to layer what I'm seeing with a collage of what I know from American suburbs,
trying to make a comparison. Other than the number of houses, my effort is unsuccessful; something is different, but I can’t put my finger on it.

I turn towards the car, watching the sand shift beneath my feet. Three people pass me walking the other way; I don’t look up. A few feet later, I see prints in the sand. Someone was walking barefoot. A smell wafts under my nose, carried by the wind. It’s assaulting, rotting trash maybe? I look towards the direction of the wind and see a line of dumpsters down the street, green and blue, green and blue, two for each house. I look back at my feet, still walking. Various pieces of trash litter my path and I wonder, “Who is to care for these in-between spaces?”
October 30, 2014

As I sit here at my makeshift desk, working on my computer, I notice a slight shift in atmosphere. Something has changed, and it takes me but a second to realize what it is. I have apparently become very sensitive to the amount of indirect light that enters our apartment through our few, amber-tinted windows. With the exception of dusk, dawn, and night, the amount hasn’t wavered in my two months of being here. I rush to our living room window, and peer out into the northeastern beyond. Towering, distant clouds are above the horizon. I can actually feel the beating rate of my heart jump; the last time I saw texture in the sky was definitely not here, but in Greece three weeks ago. Before that and since, nothing but smooth, dusty, uninterrupted gradients of sun and sky. I actually find that these are significant enough to capture in picture, so I do, and become pleased with my effort. These clouds out my living room, however, are not what caused me to jump and I know it. I quickly run to the front door, and am (as always) immediately visually pained by the brightness contrast between our apartment and the outside. I don’t even give myself time to adjust, I can’t wait. I put my camera up to the sun and look at the viewing screen. There, in all its white, puffy glory, is one single cloud, partly covering the sun. I spent the next few minutes photographing it, my feet hot on the terrazzo beneath me. As I look out the window now, I see a breeze has flustered the spindly leaves of the trees. What wonderful signs. Change must be coming.

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November 2, 2014

Today, our new furniture is here. I pull out our old couch and see the layer of sand that has accumulated under it from having the windows open as the weather begins to cool. I’ll need to clean that. I feel giddy. I feel anxious. I love what we picked out. But what if I only loved it in the store? What if I don’t like the way it looks in our apartment? We haven’t
designed this place; we don’t have all the pieces we need. The red University rugs are going to clash terribly with the split pea soup colored sofa. I’m taking pictures as the men from the warehouse move our pieces in, but not while they’re inside. It’s interesting to watch the transformation; I’ve never watched people move things for me before. Our old furniture I pushed together in the center of the room, the new is stacked behind it. It’s a mess and I love it. All this stuff makes me want to build a fort later. And clean, wow is that floor gross. I didn’t know the men were going to take their shoes off at our door; I feel bad because they’ve walked through more dirt stocking-footed in our house than they would have tracked in with shoes. I told them they could leave their shoes on but I don’t think they believed me. Our new couch makes our old couch look pretty tiny, which is funny. Before, I looked at these University sofa, loveseat, and chair and thought wow, how chunky and overstuffed.
I still feel a trespasser, every human and car noise spooks me.

Is this puddle from sprinklers (highly likely) or rain?

Met a very nice man!

“Can I help you?”

“It is from the rain the other day.”

“Do you live here?”

“Where are you from?”

United States, Iowa, it’s in the Midwest.

“I studied for several years in Seattle, Washington.”

I’m alerted by every sound.

I don’t know if it’s the setting of the sun or the number of expanses, but I’m finding this neighborhood very beautiful today.

Interested in the mix of developed vs. undeveloped.

Gates heavy and solid. Lean as you pull.

These birds are going absolutely nuts in these trees.

How did I not notice that flag before?

It smells like dinner and it reminds me of how early the sun has set here all year. (DST)
Isn’t it amazing how an email can brighten your day? Support is so necessary for me. I wish I could say that it wasn’t. A minute ago, I was having trouble starting my writing for the day, but now I have so many things I want to write about that I’m not sure I can type fast enough. Today is going to be a great day! Now, to begin.

For today’s walk of Al Juraina 3, I decide to have my husband drop me off in the same place I started for the first walk. I think it will add a nice consistency to these explorations. No matter which way I walk, I will begin and end in the same place. It also
helps to ground me in this neighborhood; it will become a point of reference for the
directionally challenged (that’s me). I guess I wish for the sake of this project that my point
of reference (origin) for these explorations could be my home, since that is the focus. I
suppose in some way it is, if you count the car commute as part of the exploration. We
really don’t live that far away; my guess is that I could walk there even though it would add
considerably to the length of the journey. The reason I choose not to is that I really don’t
feel safe walking along main roads here. People drive insanely fast and sporadically. I have
no idea how anyone has the courage to try and cross these roundabouts. I can’t say that
traffic lights or stop signs would make drivers slow down at all (the speed bumps sure don’t,
not for long), but they could make it easier for pedestrians. One would think that with the
drivers plus the distance, you’d never seen anyone walking. But after living here two months,
I have to say that I’ve seen more people crossing freeways and highways than I’ve ever seen
anywhere else. I find it odd, not to mention dangerous, and I surely won’t be following in
their footsteps.

My husband pulls over and lets me out on the sandy side of the road. He’s heading
to the Sharjah Co-op which is not far; it’s the other local grocery store that we go to. He’s
on a mission to find reliable ice cube trays, which are actually pretty hard to come by here.
We bought some the other day at the Carrefour in the Matajer, but upon first use they
cracked, breaking holes into the plastic. He drives away and I’m left to decide which way to
go. I start to cross the road, but a car is coming my way, so I turn and head down the first
road of the last walk. The car passes by slowly; I don’t look up. I wait for it to make its way
down the road. As soon as it’s out of sight, I turn and look back across the road. I’m pulled
in that direction, and I cross the street. I’m not sure what my deal is today.
To mark the beginning, I take a picture of the large mosque on the corner. I walk next to a large, long wall, each point has a globe light on the top. I wonder what they look like at night. I look down at my feet, noticing how much deeper the sand is here than it was on the other side of the neighborhood. It doesn’t take long for my feet to become covered. It feels gritty between my foot and my Birkenstock. I look up and into the low sun in the distance. There is a consistent, slight breeze today, and I notice that the recent drop in daily temperatures allows me to keep my eyes open. For the last few months, day or night, if there was a breeze it was difficult to see; the wind hitting your face would be so scorching hot that you could barely keep your eyes open, or you had to look down as you walked. I smile at that memory, and appreciate how pleasant the late afternoon is. Ahead of me I see a lone man walking down the road next to the wall. He stops at by his behavior what I can only imagine to be a drinking fountain which, if it is, is quite astounding. I have yet to see one here, even in public buildings. No one drinks the water, except apparently this man. I'm
coming close and drop my eyes, not getting a good look at what he’s doing. I pass him, and for some reason am distinctly aware of the fact that I’m a woman walking alone in a foreign country. I stick out like a sore thumb. Not to mention my uncovered light hair, foreign clothes (though that’s hard to say because I’ve seen a lot of people who do not wear traditional dress), and a camera and notebook. I feel self-conscious, so I turn to the right down the first road I come to, preferring to walk without someone behind me. *I still feel a trespasser, every human and car noise spooks me.* A discarded water bottle rolls on the road behind me and I jump.

I continue to walk down the road, which has a large sandy area on the corner that’s full of scrub brush and also trash. Lots of trash. There’s a cardboard box in the middle of the road. I don’t get it.

Figure 17. W2P5

I come to the end of the block and there’s a T in the road. To the right I see a mosque, and in front of it a huge puddle that covers almost the whole width of the road.
Heading towards it, two scenarios come to my mind: *Is this puddle from sprinklers (highly likely)* or rain? Both are actually highly likely as it rained earlier this week, the first since I’ve moved here. I believe it was Saturday; I remember the kids had a dry Halloween (Friday) night trick-or-treating on campus, and I remember it being the weekend. We were home and it was dark out. We had had the windows open for hours, enjoying the new northerly winds. Dust was beginning to accumulate on the tile floor. I had gotten up off the couch about an hour before, staring at the bank of clouds in pure bliss. I had missed them. From behind me, my husband said, “It’ll rain tonight.” Just like he predicted, it did, for about 30 glorious minutes. The lighting was dim, some show or another was playing on Netflix, I was searching artist blogs on my computer, he was working. And in the background, the steady melodic pitter patter of drops hitting the dry earth echoed in my ears. The rain began to come in the open window. Neither one of us cared. Now, the reason why I say both are likely is that midway through the rain, I noticed that the sprinklers turned off. Yes, the University campus has green grass (I’m not sure why) and the sprinklers come on every day. It’s not uncommon to walk around here and other places (like highway medians of grass and palms) and see a sprinkler gone wonky, water gushing out in a vertical stream instead of a light spray. I shake my head whenever I see this. Another thing I don’t get.

I approach the puddle and investigate, looking for a sprinkler of this type. I see none. As I turn to walk the other way down the road, a man across the street speaks to me.

M: *“Can I help you?”*

Me: *“Uh, hi! Yes, I was just wondering if this puddle is from the rain the other day?”*

M: *“It is from the rain.”*

Me: *“Wasn’t it so nice? I was really excited.”*

The man explains how here in Sharjah, Dubai, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, we only get a few rains for half an hour in November, January, February. In Ras al-Khaimah and on the
western coast, they get rains for up to two hours, frequently. We both agree that it would be
nice to get some of that here. He mentions that years ago we used to get rain much more
often, but it has changed. He has a kind face and a nice smile. I can see that he’s Emirati by
the way he is dressed: an all white dishdasha (long robe) and keffiyeh (head scarf) held in
place by a black agal, which looks like a rope.

Figure 18. W2P13

M: “Do you live here, or do you go to the University?”

Me: “I live in University City. My husband is a professor at the American University.”

M: “What does he teach?”

Me: “Architecture.”

M: “Which country are you from?”

Me: “I’m from the United States, Iowa, it’s in the Midwest.”
I then babble on something about growing (?) cows, corn and pigs, wishing I could take the last part about pigs back. I feel socially awkward. I thought this would go away with growing up but I think it's getting worse. He doesn't seem phased.

M: “I studied for several years at the university in Seattle, Washington.”

It takes all that I have to not sound like some lunatic buffoon, and I think I manage to stay relatively calm, “No way! I was born in Seattle! What did you study?”

He tells me that he studied engineering which doesn’t surprise me; it seems to be a popular choice in this country. We talk for a bit about Seattle and the weather and the rain. I explain myself and what I am doing here (which is probably what he wanted in the first place), saying that I’m trying to get to know the place, and that I’m in grad school, working on my thesis. He wishes me a good day, throwing in a cheery “Go Seahawks!” and I can’t help but laugh, and I thank him, saying it was nice to meet him. And it really was. I turn and walk as he drives away in his white Mercedes Benz. When he’s gone, I jot down in my notebook: Met a very nice man!

I walk up the road away from the mosque, and in the distance I can see that as the road continues, the number of houses begins to dwindle. I feel on edge today and I’m not sure why. I walk for awhile, thinking about how strange of a coincidence that encounter just was. First of all, I was talked to. In public I’m used to being stared at (it still feels strange but I know I look strange so I don’t really mind) or ignored, neither of which surprise me. It was nice to have someone who didn’t need to, talk to me. (Later it is pointed out to me by my husband how odd it was that the first thing I say to this man was about a puddle. I look back on it and laugh, seeing what he means, and in my mind thank the man for not treating me like the deranged person that I probably seemed.) Secondly, the first person to talk to me happens to have gone to school in the place where I was born and love. How strange the world is!
I'm knocked out of my recollection by a strong rustling of palm branches, caused by the wind. I'm (still) alerted by every sound. I look up and the houses across the street catch my eye. I don’t know if it’s the setting of the sun or the number of expanses I’ve encountered (there are a lot of sand lots) but I’m finding this neighborhood very beautiful today. I photograph one house in particular that is a nice coral red color, the light warming it nicely and reflecting off of its golden windows, complementing the house nicely. I hear a motor in the near distance, but I know it’s not a car. I look, and see a man and a child riding an ATV and suddenly it clicks; the tracks in the sand pits are explained. I had been wondering why people would drive in them with their cars when the roads would be just as easy. This new realization makes me feel silly, but at the same time I feel happy. It’s nice to see these empty lots being used for something other than just trash collectors. And, the ride actually looks like fun. I remember seeing kids on ATVs on my first walk too, but hadn’t really thought much of it since they were just on roads.
I keep walking out, drawn by the relatively vast space ahead. In the distance to my right I notice a large dome that I recognize as being inside University City. After my last walk, I had been surprised when I went to route my walk, noticing that I was so close to the City but couldn’t tell. In the far far distance, the sun low and large, is beginning to resemble

Figure 20. W2P22
the color of pink grapefruit and is starting to touch the tops of a skyline, which I think is part of Dubai. I walk to the end of the road and step into the sand, covered in tracks. I take ten or so steps, realizing that this is the closest I’ve been to touching the desert. Whenever we go for a drive outside the city, I see abandoned picnic spots and cars parked in the dunes bordering the highway, but we have yet to venture off the road. We talk of camping out in the red dunes, but of course are waiting till winter. Beyond, I see a busy bridge of a freeway that crests over development. There is a completed house, one to the left under construction, and next, a tall crane lingers motionless above a large unfinished project. I go back to the road, continuing left of the T in the road, walking away from the sun. On the left side of the road, a house that has been, I think, abandoned mid-construction. It looms large, gray, and empty. In the front yard beyond the temporary fence, I see a large pile of construction waste, and maybe some furnishings. The sign marking the property developer is worn and weathered, the paper beginning to tear off of
the board. Directly across the street, a nice looking house, not abandoned, and I wonder how they feel with this view out their front door. How long has it been this way?

![Image of a building with a crane in the background.]

Figure 22. W2P40

It becomes clear to me that I find this contrast fascinating; I’m interested in the mix of developed vs. undeveloped in such close proximity. As I pass the house in use, I see that the large project with the crane is another mosque being built. There are so many mosques.
I reach the end of the road again and turn left, conscious of how long I’ve been out here. I’m sure my ride will be waiting for me and I know that the sun won’t. I pick up my pace a bit, and pass another small mosque to my left. On my right, more houses, with workers sitting outside the walls. I haven’t photographed many open gates today; I think that I’ve felt like I was under watch. I see a woman dressed in a simple cleaning uniform come towards me from inside one of the yards. I watch her as she closes the gate, *the gate heavy and solid*. *Lean as you pull.* This is the first time I’ve seen and heard one in motion, and I find myself surprised by how substantial it seems. Maybe it’s the way they look, with intricate metal works, that made me think they were more about appearances than actual function. She notices my staring and I look away, into the trees of the yard. *These birds are going absolutely nuts in these tall, thick trees.* I stop, and for a minute or two try to capture on camera the trees with birds coming and going, but I’m slow and not so successful. Watching where they fly, I notice that they cross the street and swoop to and fro above a sandy lot.
They’re catching bugs; it must be meal time for more than one type of animal around here. I walk past the trees inside the wall, still not believing how loud those birds are; there must be hundreds. The wall continues uninterrupted to my right, and in the distance I think I see the busy road that I start my walks from.

I look to the left and see the first sandy lot I encountered today. On the far side of the lot is a house, with an Emirati flag so large it covers the whole length of the façade. *How did I not notice that flag before?* Then I remember that I had been intrigued by the lot itself, and looking at it before, the sun had been in my eyes. Maybe that’s why I hadn’t noticed it. Either way, it shows me the benefit of making the journey a complete loop.

I pass a home that has nets around the date bunches on their palms. I had seen this before as well, and I remember thinking how genius it is. The birds can’t get to them, and when they drop at perfect ripeness, they don’t go to waste on the ground. At home, we have a date palm outside off our apartment building. The hallway runs right by it, and I make a
mental note that maybe I should try a net on it sometime. At this house, it smells like dinner and it reminds me of how early the sun has set here all year. I know that today back in the States it will be daylight savings time, a time which I hate despite the fact that it falls during my favorite month. I never liked the sun setting in the 5 o’clock hour; it always made me long for the hours of summer, when the sun would set so late, lazy like the days it produces. It’s reaching 5:30 now, and I know it will be dark soon. I find that it doesn’t depress me.

Figure 25. W2P50

When I arrived two months ago, the sun was setting around 6:30. Much hasn’t changed, and the days are now longer here than they are at home and it makes me chuckle. I’m happy for this advantage, since there’s so much that I miss.

November 2, 2014

It’s amazing to me how inconsistent the feeling of time is. A couple of months ago, I felt like it was all I could do to fill my days. The hours crawled by, each new one barely eliciting any visible change other than my growing impatience. I wasn’t necessarily unhappy,
but I was looking forward to the end of the day. I equate it to running on a treadmill. The treadmill is at its own speed. I know it’s the speed I should be running, but I keep running into the dashboard. If it wasn’t there, I’d go right off the front. Not every day passed this way, but for the majority I found this to be true.

Now two months later at the beginning of November, I find the treadmill catching up with me. The days roll into one another; I’m not sure where October has gone. I wake up and the next thing I know, it’s time for sleep again.

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November 3, 2014

There have never been so many people in this apartment when my husband isn’t here. The old chair, loveseat, and couch have been squished together in the dining room, waiting to be taken away. It’s a Monday afternoon at 2:00 pm, so our cleaning man is here (yes, we have a cleaning man, yes, I ashamed by this). Three University workers are also here, to relieve us of our old living room furnishings. They come to the door and ring the bell. I greet them, telling them what they can take away. We have been purchasing furniture slowly, so the University pieces will leave in stages. From my desk I watch them carry away the ugly scratchy things, and I’m hit with a funny feeling. I’m sort of sad to see them go. I didn’t like the pieces in the least bit, not the color, the shape, the comfort, none of it. I’ve only been here two months, but I feel as if they’re carrying away a part of our home. Maybe I am beginning to feel attached.

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Walk Three

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I hope that I'm walking as people filter back from work. It's been awhile since I've been out on campus.

Besides the cars, it's hard to tell if anyone is home.

I really hope they don't visit our backyard. Just this week the bushes began to flower.

When I first got here, everything looked the same.

I feel strange documenting my own neighborhood.

This is the first time on a walk that I've stopped and sat.

I think the workers occupy this communal space more than we do.

Even “nature” makes itself known here.

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I'm waiting until the weekend to do my next walk of Al Juraina. Friday is the holy day of the week, and I'm planning to go as people in the neighborhood leave their homes to go to the mosque. The high temperature for Friday is forecasted to be a lovely 84° F, and if the humidity is low, I think a 10 am walk will be quite pleasant.

What is quickly becoming my most frequented spot in the house, this dining/office chair is really wearing on me today. While reading, I actually got up and walked in circles around the dining room to relieve myself from its discomfort. Sure, I could work in other
seats (our new living room furniture is especially comfy), but I find that I’m not productive unless seated at a table. Even though I’ve only completed two walks so far, I’ve found that they are quite a welcome and productive relief from this apartment. The next walk need not wait until Friday; I have a neighborhood right outside these walls that I have not officially explored and documented. I have until 5 pm; I decide to take the opportunity to walk the faculty housing.

As I’ve mentioned before, I live in University City. Typically, I describe it as a compound of universities. It’s walled in, and each university has its own security gate. Within this walled community is the American University of Sharjah (AUS), where my husband is employed and we reside. AUS provides housing for all faculty, and I think they are required to live here, at least for the first year. There are two entrances to campus, one on each end. The “back” of campus, as I call it, is where the faculty housing and facilities are located. The main road splits this area into mostly symmetrical halves. I tend to stick to the
half that I live in, besides venturing over to the faculty gym and pool. These visits have taken a sharp downturn. The housing is divided into blocks by type and location, and each cream building has its own number placed in an upper corner in large numbers. We live at the end of a roundabout; I guess you could call it a cul-de-sac. Before writing this, I’d never thought of our road in that way, so I suppose that’s an interesting development. Anyway, we live in the L block. Our section contains 5 two-story buildings that house one bedroom apartments. The unit we occupy is L57, second floor, end unit.

As I leave out the front door the sun pours over the colonnade, temporarily blinding me. I wish they hadn’t trimmed the tree in front; it hasn’t grown back and I miss its shade. I turn and walk past our neighboring units, and hope that I’m walking as people filter back from work. It’s been awhile since I’ve been out on campus.

Back in September after I recovered from jet lag, I decided to give myself some structure with a routine, thinking that it would help with managing productivity and balance. It was reasonably well thought out, according what I know about myself and how I would like to live, and how I could try to accomplish that in this new place. In retrospect, I tried to add too many new things at once, like waking at 5 am, meditation, exercising, an evening swim, and an early morning walk. All of these individual habits were refreshing, but it was a bad strategy to try and develop them simultaneously. This last item, however, was particularly pleasant. For me, especially coming from a particularly mild Iowa summer, it was so unbearably hot during the day that I couldn’t imagine leaving the air conditioning, but I knew I’d go crazy if I didn’t. Rising at 5 am and leaving the apartment at 5:30 am, I would be out at dawn before the sun appeared with its death rays. The temperature was warm still and the air heavy with humidity, but I could tolerate it. It was in these early morning hours, for about two weeks, that I first explored my new neighborhood.
As I begin this walk I find that I start along my old route, which weaves back towards the campus wall, over to the blocks that line the main road, back towards the big roundabout and past L block, forward to the road where faculty housing ends and women’s dorms begin, over to the blocks that line the edge wall, and back to my apartment. About two months have passed since I last walked this route, and at that time, faculty were just beginning to move back for the school year. I’m wondering if anything has changed.

Down the stairs I head to the roundabout, passing the rest of L block as I go. Besides their numbers, they look the same as mine. At the roundabout I turn right, passing the plastic lawn chair under the flowering tree. It's empty now, but at night guards will sit and keep watch on rotation. I walk to the road that runs behind my block and turn right, seeing a family out on a walk, a good sign I hope. Looking past them I see the back of a row of B block buildings, with their carports and big flowering bushes, which I believe to be
bougainvillea. Besides the cars, it’s hard to tell if anyone is home. Just blank cream walls face the sun; pavers marking the territory below. Continuing on the sidewalk, I look to the right at the back of my building, seeing the same condition. For all anyone can tell, they could all be empty. I walk past the hedges and chain-link fence that delineate the “backyard” for each unit. I’ve actually never stepped foot in ours, though the birds love it. Taking the opportunity, I venture into our plot on the end. My reasons (and maybe everyone else’s too; each plot has been empty since we moved in) for not coming back here are confirmed, like I suspected. It’s quite easy to see from the second story apartments into each plot, not really affording much privacy. Leaving, I exit our yard and head away from our building. This path takes me through part of the N block, which lines the street on the right and faces a small center park that is sometimes visited by kids in the evening. It’s empty now. I see more carports, cars, and bushes to my left as I walk by the second side of B. I pass a campus bus stop where no one is waiting, and I’ve reached the back edge of campus.
Turning left, I walk along the row of plants and the tall campus fence, its metalwork and stone marking the boundary of our community. Immediately behind it I can see a road, then some sand, and in the distance, a building with an Emirati flag. Although I don’t care for the fence, I do love the variety of plants and trees that have been planted here, and I remember this being my favorite section of the route back in September. When I first walked back here, I thought that these plants and the sand beyond campus would be a great view for this back section of B block. I envied the people who lived in these units, and still do, not only for the view, but also because I know they have more than one bedroom. Not that we need it; we barely have enough stuff to fill this apartment. Once a faculty member gets married (like we did), has a baby, or gets promoted, they’re given a larger apartment. This would have happened for us, but housing is full. Until someone moves out, we don’t move. I make a mental note as I recall this, that I’m thankful the view we have now overlooks a bit of the grounds and isn’t just the back of someone else’s building.
As I come to the end of the road and turn left, I see a university truck and some groundskeepers. They’re picking up large piles of yard waste. I look around and my stomach sinks, seeing that they’ve pruned the shrubs lining this section of street down to the limbs. I’m not the praying type, but I send one out; *I really hope they don’t visit our backyard. Just this week, the bushes began to flower.* A week after we moved here, they made a similar tour and hit our area. The shrubs in our “backyard” had been so lush and green, surprising after making it through the kind of summers they have here. They came around one morning, I remember being awoken by the sounds of their electric trimmers. By the time I gave up on sleep and went out to the living room, they were done with us. The shrubs were 90% bare, skinny and sickly looking. It took them until mid-October to grow back. Now, the sections that receive more afternoon shade are beginning to sprout beautiful pale pink flowers, and I hope they go untouched.
Thinking about this, I walk down past the end of B on my left, and past two small P blocks on my right. All the bushes have been trimmed here; it’s ugly. I come to the roundabout again, having made a large circle. I walk to the center of the roundabout, with its palm tree and grass, thinking that it’s such an odd place for a tree. I walk into the road and onto the sidewalk by the Epicenter, which is where the kids daycare and activities are held. Like all the buildings on campus, it is also cream, and besides its small playground, doesn’t stand out much from the rest of the community. *When I first got here, everything looked the same to me.* The buildings are so uniform, and there isn’t very much signage; it was really hard for me to tell what was what. Even driving into the campus entrances would confuse me. I can still picture a couple of car rides when (late September, October), after seeing a sign marking boys dorms I asked, “Oh, they have boys dorms over here too?!” Following this, we’d turn in the opposite direction I was expecting and drive into the faculty housing area, when I’d thought we had been on the other side of campus. It’s really quite embarrassing how long it took me to get acquainted with the layout.

Now, enough time has passed and enough attention has been paid that I know where things are. Even though I don’t go out and walk it like I used to, I do feel somewhat like this is my area. This becomes apparent to me as I take this walk for the sake of documenting. *I feel strange documenting my own neighborhood.* It almost feels like my task at hand is a nude self-portrait; it’s a little uncomfortable and taking the photographs feels like an invasion of my own privacy.

I take a loop around the small K block, and this one is different from the rest. There are signs of life. These signs are in the form of bikes, adult ones, children ones, and toy ones. They’re in the small front yards, or parked on the stoops next to the front doors. I photograph them carefully; there is a family exiting their vehicle and I don’t want them to
catch me. I walk by them, smiling at the little girl hanging on to the pole of the parking shade structure. She smiles back. I go on my way, continuing the loop. I exit through the side of the K block, and walk on the street that runs next to a playground. I decide to sit across the street from it on the curb, unsure of where that urge came from.
This playground is the first landmark of this campus that stuck in my memory. When walking to campus, the shortcut we take brings us past it; it sits behind the L block, opposite our apartment building. My hope to see people coming home from work hasn’t really been fulfilled, so I decide to wait for a few minutes. *This is the first time on a walk that I’ve stopped and sat.* I look around, trying to ignore the university truck on the other side of the street. The workers have left it running, and gone to check for garbage in the nearby dumpsters. The noise of the engine drowns out all other sounds. Thinking that they’ll be back soon, I don’t get up. I really want to see someone, and I know at the right time of day, this park fills up with kids and nannies. As I wait, I stare down the road to the right as it leads into the J block. J block resembles L block quite a bit, but because of the door spacing, my guess is that they’re two bedroom units. They also have steps that run the length of the first floor colonnade. I spot a man standing in the corner between two of the buildings. I wonder what he’s doing, just hanging out there, not going anywhere. I watch
him; he strolls around in a circle for a bit then heads in front of the building towards the parked cars. I see his and realize he’s a taxi driver. He’s not leaving and I wonder, who calls a taxi and then doesn’t show up? The stall he is parked in is facing an apartment door, and right next to it I notice is a laundry drying rack with garments. It’s the first sign of life that I’ve seen besides the cars and bikes. I want to photograph it, and I hope he leaves. The groundskeepers haven’t come back to their truck, and no one has come to the park. I must be too early; I was afraid of this. The ants are beginning to crawl on my feet anyway, so I get up and head toward J block. Of course, as soon as I start to walk, the truck is occupied and moved. I don’t know where the workers have come from, or how I missed them, but I’m relieved that the sound is gone.

As I stroll down the far side of the block, I see that the taxi has left and I missed that too. I must not be very observant today.
Reaching the J building with the laundry rack, I see that their front windows are full sized, unlike ours which are clerestory. I can’t see beyond the tinting, and I have no idea if anyone is looking out. At the end of the colonnade, I hide behind a column so no one from other buildings can see me, and I take a photo down the length of the hall, avoiding the windows. I exit along the corner of the block, a shortcut to my building.

As I turn to the right, I see a bunch of bikes next to the wall, and one ahead in the bushes. I hear men talking in a foreign language out of sight, and my guess is that they’re workers. I continue walking and as I enter my block, a man in an AUS tan and maroon
uniform rides past me on his bike. He’s part of the cleaning crew; groundskeepers have green uniforms. I think the workers occupy this communal space more than we do. I see them every day, riding their bikes on the roads, heading to different apartments to clean them, or to do maintenance work. Groundskeepers can be seen at all hours, walking from section to section, turning the sprinklers on and off. As I reach my building, I notice the bougainvillea bushes are beginning to stretch their pink and orange flowered limbs into the hall. The dipping afternoon sun casts large shadows of them onto the wall of the building, covering entrances. Even “nature” makes itself known here.
Walk Four

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I don’t care for walking on this busy road between the two sections of the neighborhood.

The homes here on the edge seem larger.

Cars slow down as they pass me even though I’m well off the road.

A little haven.

Even on Friday I hear construction and it surprises me.

This large house is where I heard the noise.

Madam and photo were all I understood.

I feel my face beginning to sunburn as the call to prayer begins.

“Are you lost?” “You know this place, this area?”

I hear voices behind the walls.

Doves coo in unison.

Roosters crow from all around.

The smell of firewood.

I find some shade as I wait, and from my spot I can watch the large mosque fill.

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As promised, I arrive in Al Juraina on Friday morning and begin my walk from my usual corner. This is the first walk that I’ve come on with a predetermined goal. Today is the holy day of the week, and people head to the mosque between 11:00 am and 1:00 pm. I have come at this hour because I am hoping to see families out and about, migrating from their homes to their place of prayer. This is the goal, but the route remains unplanned. My previous walks in this neighborhood have told me that there are plenty of mosques around; whichever way I walk will ultimately lead me past or near one, so the chance of missing out
is not likely. It is also my first morning and weekend walk, and I am excited to see if this difference brings about any change in the activity of the neighborhood.

I don’t care for walking on this busy road between the two sections of the neighborhood. From my starting place I have decided to head straight this time, walking on the side of the main road instead of turning left or right into Al Juraina 3 or Al Juraina 4. This section of road connects two roads that run parallel, one along edge of University City, and the other at the end of Al Juraina, near the large mosque. These main arteries have much more traffic than the half pavement, half sand streets that wind through the quiet neighborhood. As I walk along the side of the road, sand kicks up into my sandals and as I step, I feel pain. I stop to dump out my shoes. Worn bits of glass and small hard rocks mix in with the grains of sand. Vowing to be more careful and step out of the debris, I slip my shoes back on and take a few steps. I still feel small points of irritation. I wipe my foot on my pant leg, wishing I didn’t have to stop walking on this busy road.

Between the street and home walls are sections of pavers that change color with the change in property line. They look like they form small personal parking lots, which I find strange since there is usually ample room for parking (from what I’ve seen) inside the gated wall. I wonder why they need so much parking, if that’s really what the space is for. They sit empty now. The houses here on the edge seem larger. More of their profile sticks up above the walls. The space of the yard appears larger as well; the buildings don’t look so close
together. There is still a mix of finished and unfinished houses, but the finished ones look particularly orderly. No construction debris or landscaping waste is strewn over the street or sidewalks. I don’t find any dumpsters, no trash is floating along with the breeze. I wonder if this is due to the condition of living on the exterior of the neighborhood, or if it relates to the larger size and probably larger expense of the house. This terra-cotta red house on my right is particularly tidy. Small trees line the walk up to the gate in the wall, which stands open.

Figure 40. W4P7

Lining the outside of the wall are landscaping materials: pavers, bricks, small palms, bags of rock, but they are stacked neatly, not discarded or stored in haste as I have seen before. In orderly fashion, the house and walkway are decorated with the black, white, red, and green flag of the UAE. Flag day was on November 3rd, and I see that this family is extending the celebration. The holiday commemorates national pride and unity, and is held on the anniversary of Sheikh Khalifa’s rise to UAE president. Flags lined the University
streets, were hoisted on car antennas, and raised on building fronts. It’s nice to see that this expression of solidarity extends to the private sector. I quickly photograph this house and move on. Cars slow down as they pass me even though I’m well off the road. I want to keep moving so that none of them stop, and I think it will help if I don’t look lost or suspicious. Even following my pleasant encounter with a citizen the other day, I still feel wary of being out here alone and prefer not to draw attention to my presence.

Feeling uncomfortable, I look for a way off the main road into the neighborhood. In the distance I can see that, luckily, there is a dirt road that turns in before the roundabout in the main road. It’s the only entrance besides the corner from which I started. As I walk, I notice the difference between late morning and afternoon. A strong northern breeze is at my back, but my hair is starting to mat against my neck. I pull it out from beneath my camera strap; I hate that feeling. As the black strap rests on my neck, I can feel how hot it has gotten from sitting in the rising sun. The sun has been up since 6:30 and is about to
reach its apex. Normally when I take my walks, the sun is on its way to setting. It has been
awhile since I have been outside at this time of day, and even with the waning heat, the sun
is still wicked. My palms are sweaty and my jeans are beginning to stick to my legs and I
regret wearing them. I’ve barely been out here for 20 minutes, the walk is going to be a warmand one.

I turn on the dirt road and see a corner up ahead. I’m unsure of which way I want
to take. Right at the corner, four low hanging trees line the sidewalk, two on each side. I
head for the shade. If I’m unsure of where I want to go, there’s no use melting in the sun
figuring it out. I step between the trees and feel relief. I quite like this spot; as I lean against
the wall I watch the palm shadows dance on the pavers. A little haven. As I recover in the
coolness of the shade, I decide not to turn at the corner, for it would probably lead me to an
area that I covered on my first walk, whereas this far edge has not yet been explored. I peek
out from under the trees and walk along the wall. An old red sporty-looking car is parked
next to it, but it is covered in sand and has no license plate. I cross to the other side of the
street, away from the houses. This side is lined almost to the end with sand.

As I go along, I stare at my feet, thinking about these walks that I’m doing. I worry
that they’ll become monotonous and boring, or that I’ll lose interest in writing about them. I
suppose I have felt this way every time, with exception of the first walk, but something
always reveals itself as interesting. I have yet to be disappointed; I’m not sure why I doubt.

Even on Friday I hear construction and it surprises me. It pulls me out of my reflection, and
I look toward where the sound is coming from. I hear the noise best when I face ahead and
to the left, which means that it is either coming from the edge of the neighborhood or from
within University City. Other than the construction, it has so far proved to be a quite
morning, so I decide to head towards it and see what I can find.
Looking with more focused attention I gaze across the deep sand lot at the buildings, and something catches my eye. I'm not sure what I'm feeling, if it's surprise or shock or disbelief, but I feel my eyes pop open and I stop short in my stride. Is this the feeling of unexpected familiarity? A large white building sits in the distance before me, and on one portion of it is a gable roof, running the length of the building. Not all roofs are flat here, but if there's a pitch it usually is on a small towered part of the house. This is a big, full blown roof. Mixed with the white of the side walls and the evenly spaced windows, it ironically resembles a typical, small Protestant church. It stands out like a sore thumb in this context, and I'm insanely curious as to what this building is and why they built it in this shape. It looks like nothing else I've seen here. And, I have to admit, it reminds me of home.

I quicken my pace, hoping beyond hope that there is a road coming up. I really don't want to cross the sandy lot, mostly for fear of trespassing. There must be a road on the
other side of the building; this back wall has no gate. I keep walking parallel to it, and I come upon a sunny yellow house, the first on this side of the road. Just beside it is a small dirt road, leading to the busy road next to University City. This will take me to the gable roofed building. I walk down to the end of the block and turn left onto the sidewalk. It’s three houses down and I walk quickly. As I get closer, I realize that whatever this is, it’s huge. The construction noise is getting louder as I approach, and as I reach the gate, I realize that *this large building is where I heard the noise* come from. The gate looms tall, probably 20’ is my guess, and the building behind it is immense. On this side it is still under construction, scaffolding scales the front of the building, which opens up in the shape of a V. I see a few men standing around in the front yard, so I stand off to the side of the gate to not disturb them. One of them comes running towards me, so I smile as I turn to leave. He comes underneath the arch and calls to me, “Madam, madam!”
I turn and smile at him, “Hello!” He is wearing blue pants and a red polo shirt with a white collar. He says, “Please!” and then begins speaking quickly in what I think is Arabic, and I don’t understand him.

I smile and say, “What?” He looks at me and says, “Photo, photo!” More words in Arabic follow, but by his gesturing I come to understand that he wants me to take a picture of him in front of the house. I laugh and say ok, and he poses beneath the arch, fists on his hips, chin in the air. I take a few photos and give him a thumbs up.

“Is this a house?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, and he points to the house and back to himself.

“Is this house yours?” I point to him as I say it, and he responds in the affirmative. I can tell he is happy to share this with me; his expression shows a hint of pride.

“Wow, it’s big! Very nice.” I say little, not sure of how much English he knows. He begins speaking in Arabic again; madam and photo were all I understood. He gestures towards
himself and the front of the house, and I don't grasp what he wants, but I say ok. I stand
and wait. He runs toward the house and up the front steps. Standing between the supports
of the scaffolding he poses again, and comprehending, I bring my camera up to my face. I
take a couple of pictures; for one of them he jumps in the air with his arms raised but I hit
the shutter button too late. I give him another thumbs up and wave. I begin walking down
the sidewalk and he comes back out and walks along the wall. I stop, he says, “Madam....”
and tries to speak to me again. I really wish I knew what he is trying to tell me, and I can
feel the confusion show on my face.

“Ok, ok, thank you,” I say smiling as I turn to leave. I want to see the houses down
the street. I start walking to the next house and laugh to myself. I thought he would tell me
that he didn't want photographs taken of the work site, but it proved to be the opposite case.
This makes me glad; I always feel that cameras make people uncomfortable, especially if the
attention is unsolicited. Of course, I don’t want to make anyone feel uncomfortable, so this event is a welcome surprise.

As I come to the next house, a man’s head is poking above the wall at the gate. I jump a little, not expecting to see someone’s head that high. This house is under construction as well, and has not come as far as the white one. I stare at it a minute, take a photo, and turn around to walk back. I don’t want to walk down any farther, or else I’ll have to make a circle around the block where I’ve already walked. The man is still at the wall; he must be working on it. I still wonder why they’re working on Friday.

Walking past the white house I look through the gate again and see the men still standing there. I stop to look at the house on the corner; I didn’t pay attention to it the first time around. This one is mid-construction as well, but no one works here today. Behind me I hear, “Madam!” I turn, and it’s the man I’ve photographed. He speaks in Arabic, and I shake my head to tell him I don’t understand. Then, he says, “1, 2, 3, mine,” and as he does so, points to the house on the corner, the white house, and the one on the other side of it.

“Are these three yours?” I ask, to confirm that I’ve understood him.

“Yes, yes!” he exclaims, clearly happy.

I tell him that I think it’s great with a thumbs up, and then I say goodbye with a wave.

He says, “Goodbye, madam!” I turn to leave, disappearing around the corner.

I think about this crew and my photos as I walk up the sandy hill, and a cat crosses my path. I crouch and try to get him to come to me, but he doesn’t. I come to the sunny
yellow house on the corner and turn left. There’s an L in the road to the right and I follow it. I’m facing the sun again; it hasn’t cooled off any. I feel my face beginning to sunburn as the call to prayer begins. I check my cell phone for the time; it’s about a quarter to 11:00. I hope people will begin to come out for prayer. The mosque that the sound of the recording came from isn’t far. It’s to my left, and I see the parking lot is empty. No cars are heading towards it. As I walk, I see a car sitting in the road ahead of me. The driver is talking to a man in the street. They finish, and the car
pulls up to a gate but doesn’t enter, making the white SUV block my path on the sidewalk. I walk close, stopping ten feet from the car and look inside.

Smiling, the driver asks, “Are you lost?” A man who looks to be in his 30’s is wearing a white dishdasha and has a Bluetooth earpiece. His passenger is a woman, with a black abaya (robe) and hijab (head scarf). She’s also wearing a niqab, which for her, is a separate piece that covers her mouth and part of her nose, though from here I can’t tell if it’s made of fabric or metal. I’ve seen both here before, but they’re not as common. Most women that I see just wear the hijab with their abaya. She says nothing.

“No, I’m not lost,” I respond.

“You know this place, this area?” he asks.

“This neighborhood? Yes, I know Al Juraina,” I say. I follow up by telling him that I’m from University City.

“Ah, ok ok,” he says. He smiles and waves, driving into his gate.

I walk with a purpose when I’m on these outings, only stopping to take photographs or write in my notebook. I wonder if he really thought I was lost, or if I really am a strange sight. I imagine it’s a bit of both.

Across the street there is a low wall which I can see through, and on the other side I see grass. I cross over to the fence and stop, looking over the wide expanse of green. It’s probably the size of three house lots, a few palm trees dotting its area. It must be the neighborhood park, the first one I’ve seen here. Come to think of it, Al Juraina doesn’t have much designated public space. The park stands empty now, but I bet it gets used quite a bit in the evening. I walk along its fence, and man walking on the road goes by me. I assume he’s on his way to prayer, and I hope to see more people doing the same.
I turn right down another street, making my way back to my point of reference. I told my husband to pick me up in an hour, and if I don’t head that way now I’m going to be late. I haven’t walked on this road before, or if I have, I don’t recognize it. Walking quietly next to the walls, I can smell food being prepared for lunch. Something else is new, I hear voices behind the walls. Mostly women and children, in words that I don’t understand. I keep walking, listening. Doves coo in unison from the surrounding trees. Roosters crow from all around. I look in the gate beside me, but don’t see any of the roosters. At the next open gate, I see a front door close, but I’ve missed the person. I turn down a road to the left, and I think I recognize this road. Past another tan walled house, and the smell of firewood smoking wafts in my direction, but I don’t see any smoke. The smell reminds me of summer campfires and cool evenings, and this memory mixes strangely with the reality of this warm weekly day of rest.
The street comes to an end and I turn right, seeing the busy road beyond, and the familiar wavy wood construction fence that marks the edge of a house by my point of reference. My walk is nearly over, and I find that I'm disappointed by the lack of people out on the streets.

I come to the corner, and my husband hasn't come yet. It's blasted hot now; I'm sweating through parts of my shirt and the last thing I want to do is stand on the side of the road to wait for him. To my right are trees that I walked by at the beginning of my route.
They have low branches, and it’s almost impossible to see under their canopy. I duck and enter their protection. Flat-topped rocks just large enough for me to sit on lay on the ground, dried leaves filling the cracks between. *I find some shade as I wait, and from my spot I can watch the large mosque fill.* Cars filter in the parking lot, and men in Emirati and Pakistani dress walk up the front steps, chatting as they head to prayer. I don’t see any women, and wonder if their entrance is on the other side of the mosque.

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The weekend is different, but subtly so.
November 9, 2014: On Independence, and Other Feelings

I’ve been thinking about this subject for three months now, and have thought about writing on it multiple times. I don’t know what has stopped me, but I better get it out now as my departure closes in on me.

Today is November 9th, and yesterday marked two weeks until I fly home to northern Iowa for the holiday season. I can’t believe it’s already here, that I’ve already been here three months, that the fall semester is about to come to an end, that the next time I’m here it will be another year, and I’ll be another year older. I can’t believe any of it. I’ll be going back to life as I knew it, living with my parents, and some things will return to normal, and others will never be the same. Let me see if I can explain what I mean and avoid writing in tired clichés. I think I’ve been watching too many movies lately.

Things that are different, that will never be the same.

I’ve only lived alone once. In 24 years I’ve lived in 25 different homes, lest I forget some. Each one has its own memories. Some were short term, with stays of three months, and others more permanent, like my parents’ home, which we’ve lived in for 10 years now. Others are somewhere in-between. The one time I lived alone was for three months, during the summer of 2010. I had just finished my sophomore year in college at Iowa State, and was set to study abroad in Rome the following semester. The town I grew up in (technically, near) has a population of around 200 people. I wanted a summer job, and thought I would have a better time of it if I lived in Des Moines. My dad rented an apartment for me, and it was there that I lived alone. Between the two jobs I worked that summer, I was gone so much that I didn’t really notice.

I’ve lived with parents, spent two summers with extended family, and seven school years with anywhere from one roommate to six. I’ve never had a place to my own, never
had an address that was just mine. Even the time I did live alone I wasn’t on my own; I couldn’t pay for it myself.

Not that I’ve ever wanted to live by myself. In fact, I’ve always secretly dreaded that day when college would end, friends would go their separate ways, and I’d be faced with finding my own place in whatever city I found a job. The idea was thoroughly daunting, and I was sure I wouldn’t enjoy it. I may have wished at times over the years that my roommates would disappear, so I could be alone and not bothered, but that feeling would quickly fade into the comfort of knowing somebody, anybody, was around.

Now I’m married, and living alone is not in the foreseeable future. I’m surprised by where I find myself. I always thought I’d have those years post-college pre-30 where I’d be lonely and constantly on the brink of an existential crisis. I’ve wondered what those years would be like, whether my introverted self would have a rough time of it making friends without the forced proximity of peers that education has provided. What would I do for fun? For hobbies? Would I change? How would I handle a 9-5 job, swiftly or with angst-y rebellion? Where would I explore, hang out? Would I become a hermit? Would I bravely be open to new things and new people, and face the world without fear? How far would I go?

I’ve always assumed I wouldn’t like it, this living alone. But one positive to living alone I have looked forward to, and that was developing a stronger sense of independence, mentally, financially, emotionally, physically. Moving to the UAE, at least in these first few months, I have gone the opposite way. I suppose that is why I feel the need to write about it now. To me this issue is multi-faceted, and I fear that it won’t come out as clearly as I would like, but I suppose that’s what editing is for.

For the first time in as long as I can remember, I feel very dependent. I might even venture to say that I’ve never felt this way. Back in the days of limited driving, curfews,
asking for lunch money, at least that was where I was supposed to be. A child, a student, provided and cared for by parents. This was typical. As I got older, I became more independent. At 15 I could drive. Throughout high school my curfew got later (though not enough, 11:00 pm on a Saturday? Really, Mom?). The summers after my junior and senior years of high school I got jobs, and made a little of my own money. As the four years of undergrad went by, I lived in different cities, traveled on my own, paid for most of my education with scholarships. The decision to go to grad school brought more independence from my parents, and more dependence on the government and jobs as a teaching assistant that I was lucky enough to land. I was signing leases on my own, going where I wanted when I wanted, and visiting my parents enough to keep from going crazy with stress, which was often. I had one year left, and then I would get a job, move away, and learn how to grow up and be alone.

So now, in the middle of that last year, things are quite different than I had grown up thinking they would be. I’d like to preface this next part with a disclaimer, that I have no one to blame but myself for how I feel.

I feel very dependent.

I can’t be a teaching assistant from overseas. I have chosen not to get another form of employment so I can fully concentrate on finishing my thesis. The last time I had this little money to my name was when I spent more than I had budgeted for living in Rome. I had to call home and ask for money. It was embarrassing, I was ashamed, and I cried.

I also have a limited mobility. It’s nearly impossible to walk anywhere from where we live in University City. It would take hours, even all day once the round trip was complete. Really, it’s quite unthinkable. I could drive with my Iowa license if I wanted to, but I’d rather have an UAE license, which I can obtain now that I’ve received my residence ID. My husband and I were fortunate enough to be able to afford to buy a car, which we did at the
end of September. We bought it used from an ex-pat family that lives in Dubai; it's a little 2002 silver Mini Cooper. Unfortunately for me it's a manual transmission, which I don't (yet) know how to drive. I could take a taxi or the bus if I could figure it out, but I'd rather save the money, and the time and headache, respectively. So, by condition, consequence, and choice, I'm stuck with the apartment and walkable vicinity. Anything beyond that, I depend on my husband to drive me. Honestly, I'd rather have him come with me anyway.

How can people work from home anyway? With nowhere that I need to be, no classes to attend, no meetings to go to, and a lot of work to do, it's very easy to pass multiple days without stepping foot outside. Home is supposed to be your haven, the place you go where you can get away from it all if you want. But if you work at home, eat at home, relax at home, where are you supposed to escape to?

These walks in Al Juraina have been helpful to me in this regard. I never believe that just getting outside and walking will help with my state of mind, but I'm always surprised by how much better I feel afterwards. Even if I don't see anyone, it seems that the act of walking has a calming effect. Thoughts appear without forcing them - writing is easier, thinking is clearer. When the walk has ended, I have such a positive outlook on everything. Worries that troubled me before are gone. The stress in my shoulders from craning over a desk has loosened its hold. The back of my legs tingle from the movement, my muscles seemingly twitching from excitement. There's never a bad time of day to take a walk - in the morning, I feel accomplished, like my day has already been productive. In the afternoon, they're a great way to bring the day to a close, releasing all the tensions that have built up over the hours, allowing the mind to reflect on the events of today, and dream about the ones of tomorrow.

Back to things that are different...
So now as I’m faced with leaving and living with my parents for six weeks, I’m not really sure how to feel. Of course I’m happy - I love my family and am excited and grateful that I’m able to spend so much time with them. But I’m 24 and I’m married. I act (I think) like an adult, but feel like a child. I live 7,000 miles away from my home country but can’t afford my own plane ticket. Their time of responsibility for my well-being has come and gone, and is now supposed to be on my shoulders, but I’m less independent than ever. I feel like a walking contradiction, like I have hit a second puberty and am becoming awkward all over again, unable to navigate these new definitions and unsure of what to do with them. I’m tired of being a burden. I want to give back, to say thank you, but I don’t know how.

What is my parents’ home to me now? What is it supposed to mean to me as it is no longer my primary residence? I’m thankful to have such a fun, fulfilling, loving relationship with my family. I know that home will always be one that I can return to and will be welcomed. Not everyone has this, and I feel lucky.

It will be hard, I think. It will be hard to go back. Back to the open fields, blowing with biting, harsh winter winds that whip swirls of snow across the driveway, the exposed south side of our acreage unprotected against the four long months of Mother Nature’s wrath. The homes dotting each section of the square miles turn inward, warming the bones and spirits of those who dwell within them. Back to the home where I spent my later formative years, with its large picture window in the living room, looking out onto the trees, farmland, and creek. Back to long carpet, cozy enough to support Sunday naps in the sun spots on the floor. Back to my bedroom, with its north and west facing windows that barely let in enough light to wake me before 10:00 am. Back to quiet dinners at the kitchen table, followed by watching TV, with me inevitably falling asleep on the couch by 8:30 pm. Back to my mother waking at 5:00 am to run on the treadmill in the basement. By the time I
stumble downstairs mid-morning, the coffee has gone cold; she’s been up for hours and I
smile because I feel a little guilty - she’s so active and I’m, well, not.

I cry on and off as I write this, and I know I’ve touched on something. It will be
hard to go back to what I know and love, because I know I need to move on. It’s time to let
go. It will be hard to go back, because it’s hard to let go when you don’t know what’s going
to change, or what’s going to come next. I love my family, I love that house, I love Iowa. I
just want to be able to love what comes next as much as what has come before.

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November 11, 2014: On Cooking

My ass hurts from sitting in this chair. I don’t want to write. Mostly because I don’t
know where to begin. Also because I feel that lately my writing has been coming out very
uninspired. Emotionless. Not very descriptive. Rushed from part to part, not lingering on
building the story, but hurrying towards the conclusion, like I have the answer or something.
I think I’ll do stream of consciousness for a bit...

Patrick is home between classes; it’s a Tuesday. He’ll leave soon. He’s watching
some show about monks, the devil, the Codex, and royalty. I have no idea what it is but it’s
blaring loudly. Or maybe it’s not so loud and I’m just easily distracted today. That’s been my
way lately. I made him lunch. I started doing laundry. I’ve actually begun doing laundry on
a regular basis, usually mid-week, and I find it quite remarkable and a little bit freaky. I
cooked dinner last night, another oddity. Stuffed peppers, fried potatoes, and brownies. I
really don’t know what’s gotten into me. Maybe it’s because I’m going back to the States
soon. Maybe it’s because I work at home and it’s just easier to do those things now. Maybe
I’m becoming a person who cooks dinner and doesn’t hate it. The last one, I doubt. I still
don’t like cooking for myself - I’ve only eaten a brownie today, and will probably have
another; I don’t even feel drawn towards microwaving leftovers. Sad, really. But I don’t care.
Mmm, they’re so good. I stuck a knife in them when the timer went off and it came out clean, but they turned out quite under-baked. I love them that way. Rich chocolate, fudgy (how is fudgy not a legitimate word yet? I’m typing it anyway), gooey texture. The best. Patrick likes them that way too I learned, so that’s a plus. I made them out of a box.

Yesterday I went to the ladies’ store (the small store by the women’s dorm), to buy things for dinner. I didn’t have a plan. I went aisle by aisle. The first thing I picked up was an instant chai latte packet, Lipton I think. The past few times that I’ve been to Caribou Coffee, I’ve craved an iced chai, but haven’t seen it on the menu. As I look at the powder packet, I’m not sure if it will be like that, or if it will be like the creamy, spicy red tea that I had at a small hole-in-the-wall restaurant under a stairway at the Blue Souq, downtown Sharjah. In its little styrofoam cup, that tea was hot as sin and just as delicious, but a poor choice on a 99° day after a surprisingly spicy sandwich. Either way, if this chai tastes like one of those experiences, I’ll be happy.

In the next aisle, I see that they have a few Pillsbury dessert mixes - vanilla cake, chocolate cake, fudge brownies. I’ve always been a dessert person. If a restaurant doesn’t have a good dessert menu, it’ll never reach the top of my list, no matter how good the entrées are. Patrick and I order delivery quite a bit. Most of the restaurants we order from have cheesecake and tiramisu on the menu. I like tiramisu quite a bit, but cheesecake is my favorite food. Yes, not just dessert, but food. It trumps all. I love it so much I wrote a speech on it in 5th grade, and had my mom make 12 of them for my high school graduation party. I’m very particular. The only reason we set out cherry topping was because of guests, otherwise they would have been nowhere in sight. Blueberry allegiance forever. Just the white and the blue, no red please.

The one and only time we ordered cheesecake with our meal, it was a real disappointment. I don’t even remember what the crust was, I think I was so devastated by
what my mouth was expecting versus what I actually tasted in the filling that I couldn’t comprehend anything else. The texture was all wrong, it was like pudding. And there was not one bit of cream cheese taste, not even a hint. (How do you make cheesecake without cheese?) There have been puddings, creams with crunchy pastry, red velvet cake with no dark cocoa, and lots of things made with honey, rice, milk, and more crunchy dough. The ice cream at the grocery store tastes like icy milk, and is much more of a crystal texture than cream; it crunches when you bite it. In the malls they have Baskin Robbins and Haagen Dazs, and those have been redeeming. I’ve been reminiscing about good dessert for months, so I pick up the brownie mix and hope it does some justice.

Turning the corner past some college kids, I see the canned vegetables. The fresh produce they have at this small branch of Sharjah Co-op is limited and usually not the best (quite the opposite from the large store in Al Juraina), so I want to check what the cans have to offer. Most of the cans are of the brand American Garden, which I have never heard of before and also find ironic. Our country has come a long way from the days of the home garden competitions, the best receiving a blue ribbon and community bragging rights. I wonder which large scale commercialized garden these cans were grown in. I try to stop my mental satire; I’m blocking the cramped aisle. I pick up a can of peas and rejoice that they also have beets. I check the back and in relief see that the ingredients are: sliced beets, water, and salt. The last time I had a craving for beets, we bought a jar from the Waitrose (British supermarket) in the Dubai Mall. Patrick warmed them up with dinner that night, but I could only eat a few of them - they came in water and vinegar. Beets are so much better without the sour taste of vinegar.

Down five feet at the end of the aisle I grab some oil; I need it for the brownies and at home we only have Greek olive oil, which has a very strong olive taste compared with others. Not the best for brownies. A couple men unpack boxes of product, so I turn back
and advance the other way. This place is so small. I grab some eggs from the refrigerator, thinking about how orange the yolks will be. I’ll use one for the brownies, and don’t know what to do with the rest; I hate eggs. Hard boiling sounds easy and I love to peel them. I might do that for Patrick. Beets, peas, eggs? Doesn’t sound like much of a dinner, or a good one.

I check the produce and see that they have a four pack of bell peppers, one of each color. They look pretty great, tiny but no bad spots. I think of the rice we have at home and decide to make stuffed peppers. Nothing else looks very nice. Pale tomatoes, tiny zucchini, and the rest is fruit.

‘Round the corner in the potato and onion bin, I come up short on my hope for a sweet potato. I take two Russets and go to the check out counter, ready to get out of here. I see the flower case by the soda; I’ve always wanted to buy some. I pick out a single red rose, unsure of what to put it in at home; we don’t have a vase. A sign on the register says they don’t have change today, so I pay with my credit card. Walking out with two bags in hand, I head home, wondering how my cooking will turn out.
Walk Five

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Why all the honking?

Kids scream behind this wall of orange on orange.

My pace is fast tonight. I'm ready to be here.

Three mosques resound, a cacophony of sound.

Nothing here is very tall; I can turn and see the full spectrum of the sunset.

A mosque ahead glows green, and with the busy road crossing it, I know where I am.

My cat count is now up to seven and my camera is dying.

Orange yellow white I pass fluorescent lights, and the skeletons of undone houses spook me.

The interior lights and the loss of the sun provide me with a glimpse of the living, not just the lived.

I can't even see the road, partially because there isn't one.

I make the decision to actually walk through the park.

I see license plate 62 and I know that guy is important.

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On the edge of darkness I enter Al Juraina, departing from my usual spot. This evening, I want to walk straight as far as I can. Heading away from the busy road I steer right, the sun beginning to dip behind me. The air is mostly calm with a touch of coolness,
and I’m glad for my sweater. Why all the honking? A white SUV has pulled off onto a side street in front of me, honking incessantly at a blank wall. Someone shouts out the car window and more honking follows, short annoying beeps, like when a person pokes you repeatedly to get your attention. I can’t imagine how this could prove to be more efficient than just walking in, but it’s a lovely evening so I ignore it. A few houses down, my attention is caught by a more fitting sound. Kids scream with delight behind this wall of orange on orange. In front of this orange wall is a tree, with big green waxy leaves, and bunches of orange flowers that burst forward in contrast, like fireworks in the night sky. Photographing them, I think of how much I like this time of day. The window is small, but it packs a big punch. As the sun sets, new things come alive, and that’s what I’m on the search for.

My pace is fast tonight. I’m ready to be here. Along the edge of development sites and empty lots that I have seen before, the softening light of day brings out textures less apparent with a taller sun. Blue graffiti paints a tan wall, black graffiti marks a white one. A dune of sand has built up against a temporary fence, its winded ripples working with the
muted purple and blue of the sky above, softening the concrete and exposed steel rods between them. As I cross in front of the large empty lot, the houses in the distance, cream with purple and pink twirl pattern adorning the second floor façade remind me of a cake that you might find at a girl’s birthday party. Rocks hit the sand with a soft pfffth pfffth sound, and across the street I find a man, standing at the corner. Dressed in jeans and a blue t-shirt underneath a palm tree, he’s throwing rocks across the road into the sand lot. Next to him, a large pile of small gray rocks sits. He sees me and ceases to throw, and I pretend not to have noticed. Evening is a time for people to keep to themselves, to breathe slowly and enjoy the closing hours of the day. I do wonder about his chosen past time, why throw landscaping rocks into an empty lot? But then I think that why not is just as good of a question, and resolve to forget about it. I turn and look back, he’s not throwing but he hasn’t moved, and I get the impression that he’s waiting for me to be out of sight to begin again.

With my path chosen as forward, allowing no turns besides ones forced upon me by the shape of the road, choosing where to go loses its priority. The experience of space compresses and I’m forgetting the path, focusing instead on details. The setting of the sun certain things pop to the foreground. A wall, its ground line eroding and exposing its paint-free concrete truth. The seams in the walls, where tan on brown halts and becomes cream with inlay, the houses behind them matching and marking ownership. Things yellow in the
landscape echo the golden color of the sun, a pop can here, two boxes and window glazing there. Even the subtle colors show there differences at this time, dusty green, rust, gray blue, the brush mixing together to create a complementary palette of the desert floor. I’ve crossed a paved road by now; this road being the farthest point on my first journey here to Al Juraina. I’ve made it far fast, the space blurring behind me into a wash of color memory.

The sand path stretches out in front of me, deeper here. My fast pace and careless walking thoroughly coats my feet and pant legs in tan powder, the sandiest they’ve ever been. I pass more construction. I wonder what this place would look like if they finished, and if everything was put away and cleaned up, if progress was over.

I’ve come to a wall in the road, and must jog with it to continue my straight path. I want to go straight and I want to go far, to see how far I can go before I need to turn around again. My last walks have been quite the loops, and tonight I’m interested in a line. After a short jog I resume heading forward along my line. Adjacent to the road, another
empty sand lot, surrounded by houses. As I look around the circle, one after another, one, two, three mosques begin chanting the call to prayer. *Three mosques resound, a cacophony of sound.* The three together, timing off, remind me of a mismatched round. I listen to the discorded trio and it has a sort of beauty, but the sublime kind. There’s a haunting tension in the melody, like a beckoning tinged with longing or sorrow. One after another, they fade away, and I am again left with the soothing calm of the setting sun.

Here in this opening, it is this sun to which I turn my attention. Head tilted towards the sky, I gaze across the expanse before me. The tallest house in this neighborhood is three stories. The thin spires of the mosques rise above all in the skyline, but they block little of the view. *Nothing here is very tall; I can turn and see the full spectrum of the sunset.* Spontaneously I snap pictures of pure sky, trying to catch the variety of colors.

![Figure 60. W5P28](image)

The sun has set, and between two of the houses far in the distance I can see the outline of the Burj Khalifa, tallest building in the world. The shape is unmistakable. It must
be a clear night in the atmosphere, very little sand kicking up, or it wouldn’t be so easy to see. The clarity explains the color show tonight.

Straight I walk, photographing things at intervals that catch my eye. With the sun having set, the lights of the neighborhood are beginning to turn on; entrance chandeliers, globes in intervals along the walls, a lonely street light. Brightness fades into the dark emptiness of the unfinished lots, they’re sparse forms black against the cheery sky. A mosque ahead glows green, and with the busy road crossing it, I know where I am. Across sand dunes, an empty lot, and a roundabout, I see the lights of the Sharjah Co-op. I’ve walked the right edge, made it to the far edge, and so have come to the corner of Al Juraina 3, and the point where I need to turn. I stand and watch the cars driving in circles before making my way to the left.

To keep from making a loop, I decide to turn back on the next road I come to. The path ahead is dark, a wall of trees lines the right side, buildings to my left. A few feet in
front of me I see small shapes in the street, and in the dim light I barely make out that they are cats. As I approach them, they scamper into an abandoned construction site, as if the bones behind them are their home. They watch me with wary eyes. *My cat count is now up to seven and my camera is dying.* This must be the time of night they prefer to come out and hunt. I saw four of them right at the start of my walk, by the yelling SUV. They were on the prowl next to some dumpsters, chowing away at who knows what, quite oblivious to the interruptions and the onlooker. These three I leave be as well; I have nothing to offer them and hope they are successful in their quest for food.

Orange yellow white I pass fluorescent lights, and the skeletons of undone houses spook me. Without light to fill them, their voids appear especially deep and hollow. With nothing to occupy them but space and passing cats, they stand weak and crumbling, speaking of loneliness and broken promises.
Turning the corner I pass shadows, the repetition of walls and sand blur into a single unit as I walk. Night descends and silence falls upon me, and I become distinctly aware of how loud my shuffling steps are. I feel my eyes widen as they adjust to the darkness and intermittent light.

With the disappearance of the sun, the wind has also died, and I sense the closeness of the knit sleeves on my skin. My camera blinks up at me from my chest, warning about its waning battery life. I wonder of what use it will soon be to me anyway. I pass a man walking by his translucent front gate, illuminated from behind. He floats like a white shadow, but I think it would be a stretch to call him a ghost.

Beaming up ahead, a residence, ensconced in the confines of its barrier. The lights upon it cast shadows of me in every direction upon the road. I count eight of them. I feel a dark speck in the warm glow of all these lights. They’re too much, really. A condition I have not met before presents itself before me. The interior lights and the loss of the sun provide me with a glimpse of the living, not just the lived. Drawn back curtains frame the warm room and a doorway in the distance. In the next room, a desk piled with clutter, a picture hangs on the wall, an empty chair sits waiting. No one appears so I allow my stare to linger. It’s quite a chance to be able to see beyond the mask of wall and glazing, determined to keep all out. The wall ends and the light drops off, the road and empty lot adjacent black. The lighting is
sporadic, most of it comes from the residences themselves or the mosques. The streets remain nobody’s property, and quickly sink into darkness.

Ahead, my path runs into the neighborhood park, tall white streetlights the exception to public darkness. The grass is bright green below them. I hear kids gleefully playing within the confines of the fence, the only one in the neighborhood that isn’t solid wall and is also short enough for me to see over. I make the decision to actually walk through the park, something I haven’t done on my previous walks, regardless of how close I was. A few cars are parked outside of the gate, their families inside. Entering the park, a security man in a white and black uniform asks to see my card. He gestures to my camera and the park and says ‘photo’ among other Arabic words, and I’m worried that my camera will keep me from being allowed to enter.

“No,” I say, “I just want to walk around the park.”

He asks again to see my card, and I’m not sure what he means. I hand him my Emirates ID; it’s the only card I can think of. He hands it back and says no, telling me to talk to the supervisor. I walk over to a middle-aged woman dressed in a black abaya and hijab, and ask her about needing a card. She explains that I need a paper to get a card, and I need a card to get into the park. I thank her and leave, having neither of those things. Three men enter the park, laughing, as I walk out. I know they’re laughing about something else, they’re own conversation, but I’m embarrassed and they might as well have been laughing about me. I walk parallel to the fence in the sandy side of the road. On the other side walk the men, keeping the same pace. I reach the end of the park and they turn without me.

At the corner of the street sits a small mosque, and in front of it, a store that I’ve never noticed before. It’s bright white backlit sign spells out cafeteria in green letters. Cars parked outside honk at attendants. Can’t anyone get out of their cars here? It’s a theme that
is quickly beginning to wear on me. It’s jarring in the otherwise silent spot of town. If I had some money and some courage, I would go up to the window and order a snack of some kind. A small kid of about eight wearing a white soccer jersey runs from the park to the window. As I turn to continue my walk, for it’s getting late, a man on a motor bike comes out from behind the store, toting white paper bags in his crate behind him. I wonder if he’s delivering.

I have to pass around the park to rejoin my street. I’ve caught up to the three men in the park; they’re still laughing and conversing. One falls behind as he checks his phone. I leave them to their precious grass, turning into a row of streetlights, an anomaly. I find that I’m thankful for their presence.

Nearing a half hour past sunset, it’s now quite dark and I myself am not very bright, pun not intended, and I feel more comfortable under their glow. It’s a long straight road ahead. I walk on pace for awhile with a man carrying a white bag, and I wonder if he got
food too. Stopping to take photos, even though I know they’ll be blurry without a tripod, I fall behind him. This road is paved and busier than others, and I stay to the left walking against traffic. Two teenage girls cross the side street next to me, chatting. Cars and motorbikes pass me as I pass more lit houses, and I find that I’m strolling now, enjoying the new kind of atmosphere that night brings to the neighborhood, calm but buzzing with the energy of playful freedom.

Lights ahead of me, I hear nothing until it’s already passed. A car has raced by, only a few feet from me, coming from nowhere, going to fast in a few seconds. My stomach feels light, my pace quickens, the palms of my feet begin to sweat. I just saw a sign for the speed limit, 40 kilometers per hour, and although I don’t know the conversion of how fast that is off the top of my head, there’s no question in my mind that that car was going way too fast for this road. The car is running hot; the smell lingers, acrid in the air behind in its wake, and if I knew more about cars I might know what the smell came from. Thankful for the big shoulder, I’m tense. The cars are coming off the main road where I begin my walks; it’s just up ahead. One measly speed bump clearly does little to slow them, and I wonder what the rush is. It’s not as if the darkness conceals their speeding. The calm of the evening is gone; this is a side of the neighborhood I haven’t seen before.

November 11, 2014: On American Familiarity
Have I found it easy to maintain my semblance of an American lifestyle? Yes. Do I even know what that means? Not exactly, and I find it improper to generalize, America is a large, diverse country after all. So I suppose the proper way to phrase that would be, the lifestyle that I led in America. And still, yes. Conditions have changed, mainly being married and working from home, but I don’t have major breakdowns completing my daily domestic habits and rituals. Staying home all day affords me the ability to forget where I am. For all I know, this apartment could be anywhere, in any city. Save for the big three-prong outlets with switches, the Italian washer/dryer combo that is under the kitchen counter, and the bidet that is being used as a bookshelf, our apartment in form and function is pretty Western standard. Is this place, the UAE, Westernized? Americanized? I would venture to say not in the least bit; although there are a few aspects that stand out as familiar, the rest is foreign to me. What is strange? What is familiar? My aforementioned apartment. Light pollution. Traffic, though it resembles something more like Los Angeles or New York, definitely not Central Iowa. Consumer culture. This last item, for better or worse, reminds me the most of America, and probably contributes the most to me being able to continue my known lifestyle.
I haven't done any work today. I didn't want to do any work today. My concentration has been whittled away to nothing. I sit, two minutes later I stand. I can’t stand still, so I walk around, only to sit down again and stare at the table. I can’t write. I can’t read. I can barely think. The only thing I seem to be able to do for any length of time is daydream about nothing. My mind is a vacuum, where half formed thoughts go to disappear.
I haven't been on a walk since Tuesday, and it seems like an eternity has passed. In all honesty, I haven't wanted to go anywhere. Not to Al Juraina, not to Dubai, not to the grocery store. I want to be at home, and I want to be quiet.

Attempting to get out of whatever funk this is, I decide to go on a walk through my AUS neighborhood. The sun has set and the temperature has dropped. It's dark out, and I know that any photos I take will have long exposures. I walk my usual route: over to the roundabout, back behind the backyards, up to the campus border, over to the end of my half of faculty housing, and back down to my building.

Unlike during my other walks, my mind is uncharacteristically empty. No thoughts bubble up as I walk in the cover of night. Armed with my notebook and pen, I find them unused, the pages marked only with date and time.
Sodium street lamps cast orange light over the yards and buildings. A few people are out walking their dogs. The night is calm, cool, and a little humid. The atmosphere reminds me of the spring when I spent a few nights walking around Ames, my previous home.

A few scenes catch my eye and I photograph them, and the more I walk, the more I see. I realize after a while that the strong shadows are appealing to me this evening. I photograph my own shadow, split in two on the pavement beneath me. I think about how this is my last week here, and that I can’t believe the last three months have passed so quickly. Saturday I fly home, landing in Minneapolis. My parents will pick me up and we’ll drive to Iowa, where I’ll be staying at their house for the next six weeks or so. I wonder what it will be like, how I’ll feel, living at my childhood home. Will it feel different than it used to, or will I
slip back into old habits and feel right at home again? My shadow is a visual metaphor for how I feel, torn between the duality of my identity. American, daughter, student. UAE resident, wife, student. Independent, dependent. 24, caught in transition of home and life.

I begin to feel anxious for my departure.
November 25, 2014: Upon Return

My last week in Sharjah was uneventful and unproductive. I didn't do much other than binge on Netflix. Thanksgiving break came a week early for me, I suppose. I feel guilty for not working; it was my last chance to walk and journal before coming back to the States. The next time I have the opportunity to do so, it will be a return to somewhere that I already know, and I imagine I will see things differently. At the same time, the break was necessary, and a condition of the anxiety I was feeling about leaving. Everything I did felt like it was a distraction from that fact, postponing the reality, not a product coming from a true desire to learn. The result would have been contrived, my mind unable to focus on tasks at hand. I just didn't feel like forcing it.

Nineteen and a half hours on a plane later, I landed in Minnesota. 10:00 am, it was foggy, cloudy, and around 50°F. Coatless and wearing sandals, I wasn't quite ready for my arrival. After a lovely lunch of stew, salad, and lefse (soft Norwegian flatbread) at my aunt's house, my parents and I began the three hour drive back to Iowa.

I have to say, so far it feels weird to be back. I'll try to elaborate in more descriptive words than 'feels weird'.

Driving down the interstate, I sat in the passenger seat and stared out into the farmland landscape. Being November, the fields lay fallow during this restful season. Deciduous trees stick up out of the ground, bare, dormant, and brown. Normally this time of year looks so drab to me, but now the variety of colors pop forth from the foggy backdrop. The bare soil is unbelievably black, blacker than night or oil, or the darkness that comes when I close my eyes. Atop its earthy richness, dried remnants of corn stalks scratch the surface of the unplowed sections, giving the fields a light tan crosshatch. Brush in the ditches lining the road and groves of trees add patches of rust and dust to the palette. White farmhouses and red barns dot the horizon, and above it all, the softest color gray
covers the scene like a light blanket. The pleasant sights mix with the hum of the car and the steady rhythm of traffic, and within an hour I'm asleep.

I awake, it's 4:18 am; I've fallen asleep on the couch. Outside the wind howls winter's warning, stuttering through trees, screaming lonely down the highway. The walls of the house suddenly seem, in my mind, frail and thin. I've never liked the sound of winter winds; they're dry and hollow, and seemingly penetrate to the core everything they encounter. I shiver and cover my head, hoping to drown out the noise.

I don't want to be home alone. I go with my mom to work.

Coming from the year-round summer of the desert to the winter plains of the Midwest is quite jarring. I've missed the transition period of fall, and I feel the effects. I'm reminded of times as a kid when I would eat too much candy or sugar, and would go from being hungry to having a stomach ache in no time at all. The instant stomach ache, that's what it feels like.

Even home feels different, like I've stepped into a memory. I feel a distance, like I'm nine feet tall looking down at everything around me, and it's so small. I'm happy to be back for the holidays, to see my family and friends, to celebrate. It might be one of the last times I'll get to spend so much time at home, who knows what things will be like next year. Not many people get this opportunity, and I'm grateful. But I can't help but feel a difference. Maybe this feeling will fade over the coming weeks. Can four months away really change everything?
Monday, January 19, 2015: 5:56 pm - 6:58 pm

Walk Seven

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Matted mud 'neath my shoes.

Cleaner lines, more litter.

Things new; my time at home has undone me.

I actually saw into someone's house!

I feel as if I'm a kid who's coloring outside the lines.

Pouf' pouf' pouf, I keep looking behind me to see my neat little footprints.

Playfully I stroll along.

I feel giddy, I feel brave, I feel fearless, I feel....stupid!

I feel as if I have front row seats at a race track.

I imitate the sounds of vehicles as they go by.

Most of these homes are still dark inside.

I did it!

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Tonight was a night of firsts. The first walk in Al Juraina after returning from my six-week visit to the States. The first walk after a rain. The first time I walked on the perimeter of the neighborhood. The first time my walk took me out of Al Juraina 3 and 4. A momentous night, indeed.

I of course started where I always do, the corner across from the large mosque on the road that runs between sections 3 and 4. I turn to go into section 3 just as the sun dips below the horizon. Big, puffy, tropical looking clouds mimic the building skyline. They’re gray for a moment, neon orange blanketing the sky behind them. It has rained off and on.
all day, the first time since that brief 30 minute bout back in October. This had been a marathon. More than enough fell to need an umbrella. Stone walking surfaces became instantly slippery. Places in roads near speed bumps filled with inches of silty, sandy water, the rain washing dust off every plane, pooling at the low points. From early in the morning, before the birds awoke, the thunder clapped and rain hit the windows. Clouds, low and dark, skirted along, carried quickly by the moderate north winds. Off and on it rained and rained; throughout the day it was easy to pretend that I was somewhere other than the desert.

Figure 73. W7P2

It did not rain during my walk, but the effects of its wash were present. *Matted mud 'neath my shoes,* the sand had been slowly pounded flat by each little drop that fell. I look around at the street corner, and in the fading light of day everything looks new and shiny, the typical layer of dust gone.
Things are different, to be sure. Someone has fixed the old wavy temporary board wall that greets the beginning of my walk. The plain sheets of board have been replaced with taller, white, sturdier sheets. The miniature dunes of sand that had formed at the spaces between the sheets are gone; the ground is level. The wall and building across from it look different too, but I know it’s the same from the blue graffiti sprayed on its surface. Maybe some scrub brush lining the wall has been cleaned up; I can’t remember if any used to be there! The neighborhood seems to have cleaner lines, more litter. Trash litters the side of the road, kept from blowing away by the scrub brush that still exists. I’m sad to see that this hasn’t changed; the condition has almost gotten worse. Where does all this trash come from? Maybe it has come here on the high winds today, which are still blowing.

I keep going, excited for the walk, to see what I recognize and what I don’t; will the neighborhood finally be familiar?
To my right is a construction site that is radically different from what I remember. I recall photographing it back in November, it’s buildings still fifty feet from the road, with piles of material laying in the front yard, and big dunes caught behind the wall. Now they’ve built right up to the road, concrete block one story high. I walk up to the edge of the site, where forms have been dug and laid into the sand, waiting to be filled with concrete and become the oh so familiar property wall. But now it lays empty, exposed; I can see its guts. Rebar grows in clumps out of the ground, reaching tall in front of me. Its roots travel deep, maybe 7 feet, so no one can mistake its place. Its line snakes in front of the building, takes a sharp turn at the corner of the lot, and travels back out of sight. I stay in a distance within my comfort zone, not stepping close enough to fall in or to trespass. As I examine it, I can’t help but feel like I have the upper hand against the wall. I see how it works, how it’s made, where it begins and where it goes, how it comes to be this boundless boundary that I can’t go one walk without experiencing. I now know some of its secrets.

I thought by this point I would say, ‘Oh yes, that pattern of that wall belongs there, and there’s that crooked door I recognize, and oh yes, that rock is in its place, just where I
left it!’. I'm not finding this to be the case. *Things new; my time at home has undone me.* My six weeks away widened the distance, both literally and figuratively, between myself and this neighborhood. I feel almost, almost, as if I'm back where I started. Every time I walk, there are new details that I notice, new things that don’t have the chance to be taken for granted. The time away, the rain, the night, everything has been made fresh again.

The wind rustles through branches on nearby palms. If I close my eyes and take a deep breath, I can barely catch a tinge of salt lingering in the air, carried to me from the waters of the Gulf. The salty sounds and my healthy imagination put me for a moment on some tropical island, far away from everything except these small sensory delights. Not that I want to be on a tropical island, for I can't imagine (or wouldn't) something more pleasant than a healthy cool breeze on a 65° evening, fresh with the wetness of rain. It seems as though all this does me well, the breeze brushing my hair as I raise my face towards the sky and stare at the leftover rainclouds, the cool temperatures calming fiery nerves, the wetness
bathing my lungs with content breaths. I bring my eyes back to the neighborhood and a smile spreads on my face. Isn’t it just lovely?

Still walking straight ahead from the corner, I come upon the first house. A car drives down the side road, running over reflections of the trees puddled in fresh tracks, its lights bobbing ‘hello’ up and down as it drives over smooth bumps. Globes of light topping the walls run up the street, bright and white they go to the gate, which is open. Pavers spread beneath two cars under the carport. The house sits nestled snugly in the corner of the property. Light in rectangular form streams out from the lot, cooler than the wind. A quick peek, arms holding and folding laundry, clothing hanging on lines in the background. Here, another first: I actually saw into someone’s house! I scurry away with more stolen secrets.

Crossing the road I come to the big open sand lot which looks upon the busy road and the houses that look like cupcakes beyond it. The sand is flat, little tiny dimples making its surface pocky. I can hear the sound they make; it’s a soft plop plop plop, little mini
craters like the surface of the moon. I bet if I could get real real small to be with them, it would feel just like standing in a crater on the moon.

Figure 79. W7P40

Cropping out of the middle of the lot is a square rock, quite like a step stool. I walk out to it and step up, and the rock is just big enough for both of my feet. I slowly spin around, catching the sunset lit tops of Al Juraina 3, the busy road, the large tan wall of the building next to the lot, Al Juraina 3 dark in the distance, and back towards the sun, photographing this panorama. I claim this odd little rock in the name of newcomers everywhere, its six inches supporting my endeavor.

As is customary, tonight I don’t much care where I go or what I see, knowing that just going and seeing will lead me to something better than what I could have conceived anyway. To follow the flow of newness, I decide to turn on the informal road just past the sand lot, which leads out away from the heart of the section and towards the busy road. To the perimeter.
I walk along the 100 feet of wall, stepping in car tracks that have been laid since the rain. Stopping to look across the lot, in the distance I see a man walk along the wall, coming into the neighborhood. I watch him as I walk, and eventually, with the sand lot between us, our parallel paths cross. I wonder where he’s coming from, and where he’s going.

I reach the road, busy with traffic. Following its streetlights down, I see the large mosque, lit but quiet. The call to prayer has already come and gone. I turn and walk away from it, down in front of large houses with large walls and long driveways lined with bushes.

My imaginary walking path affords me three feet of safety as cars zoom by in the night. I’ve never walked on the edge before; I feel as if I’m a kid who’s coloring outside the lines. It’s almost as if I have somewhere I should be walking: ‘Here, here’s the shape, we’ve drawn it out for you, you just fill in right here and all will be fine.’ But the kid has gone out of control, coloring blue hair out in a halo ‘round the head, pink spilling out of boxy shoes with lace, neatness
falling to the wayside. Rules! There are no rules. Down with shapes and zones; I’ll color what I like, thank you very much.

Figure 81. W7P48

Figure 82. W7P54
Walking along, I take notice of the neighborhood across the street. I’ve never been over there, and I wonder what it would be like. How would it compare to Al Juraina 3 and 4? Would it be set up the same, with a strange jogging grid? Would it have sand streets and paved streets, tall walls and unfinished walls? Would it have more color, less color, more noise, less noise?

A car comes down the road close to the edge. I step back and wait for it to pass so I can cross the next driveway safely; there isn’t enough room in front of the line of bushes.

It’s just me and the sand and the dumpsters over here, cars streaming by one after another, never ceasing. *Pouf pouf pouf*, I keep looking behind me to see my neat little footprints. They hold in the wet sand, rounded little indents just deep enough to see their outline. I walk funny, with feet angled outward like a penguin. The shoe prints look like kidney beans. Their pattern makes a chevron, and I like the thought of this. A kidney bean chevron.

*Playfully I stroll along,* just altogether happy to be back and to be out. A man walks in the median, the cars between us. Between two driveways, in a big spot of sand stands a street marker. I look to the left and see the wall; it doesn’t break, only changes from brown to tan. So here’s this street marker, in the middle of nowhere, marking a thing that’s not really there. This amuses my current playful attitude, and I talk to it as I photograph it, telling it that it’s silly for standing there, not doing anything. Silly street post. I laugh and hop along. *I feel giddy, I feel brave, I feel fearless, I feel...stupid!* Stupid, oh so stupid. Walking like an idiot near a busy road in
the dark wearing a big black raincoat. How do I come up with these things? A taxi slows and I ignore it.

A paved cross street interrupts the path in front of me, and I must cross it if I want to continue in this direction along the perimeter. The street leads into Al Juraina; I can see trees and lights and walls lining the way. Down at the end I can barely make out the outline of a house, with one pendant light hanging below its eave. I squint and recognize the lamp, knowing that I’ve photographed it on a previous night walk. Continue I will! Tonight is the night of the new.

On the other side of the street, tall bushes line up to and along the corner, impeding my view of the busy road and any turning traffic. Instead of walking out and checking to see if anyone is coming, I take a breath, clutch my camera hard and run across the street, ducking through the person-sized space in the bushes. Stupid! Playful me is not a cautious
me, but at least it’s alive. It must be the excitement: the excitement of cool weather, of continuing my project, of coming back to Al Juraina.

Out of the bushes is another landscape, that of a long parking lot and, behold, a sidewalk! A woman in an abaya and a hijab, both black with neutral and patterned trim walks onto the sidewalk. She has come out of the security checkpoint of the building next to us. As she passes, she looks at me and smiles, and I realize that it must be because I have a big silly grin on my face. Regardless, it makes me even happier.

![Figure 85. W7P65](image)

It’s the first time here that a woman has smiled at me. Usually, if they notice me, they look me up and down, mostly at my clothes I would guess, and then continue on their way. This woman looked at me, at my face, and beyond that, she smiled. A new night indeed.

Coming out of the parking lot, I am faced with another landscape: the corner. My perimeter walk has lead me to another perimeter. I have walked to the northeast corner of Al Juraina 3. To my left I look back on the neighborhood, quiet, little orbs of light dancing among tall trees and dark streets. Ahead of
me is the Al Juraina commercial center, with a large roundabout that shoots traffic out onto the busy road. Beyond the roundabout is the Sharjah Co-op, and upon seeing it an idea forms about where to walk next.

One of my personal goals for the beginning of 2015 is to eat healthier, and I’m currently on a plan to test food sensitivities that I might have. Without going into all those details, basically what this means for me is that, oh ye of-little-desire-to-cook, I find myself in a position where I actually need to be conscious of what I buy and put into my body. This requires that I make the effort to grocery shop, prep food, cook, etc. Quite a transformation from my normal eating habits, the subject is therefore, on my mind a lot. Seeing the Co-op reminds me of what I had planned to make for dinner, which is quickly approaching, and that I am in need of some chicken. I decide to walk to the Carrefour at the Al Juraina Matajer (matajer is Arabic for shops) to buy chicken, and judging the time for the walk, that would be the end point.

Approaching the roundabout, I lean up against a tall light post and watch the traffic. I’ve never been this close to one this large without being in a car. The light post behind me shakes and sways with the wind. Cars rev and rush in my direction, then slow as they hit the curve, driving away. With the lights and the speed and the loud noises, I feel as if I have front row seats at a race track. I watch a little bit longer, knowing that later as I arrive at the Matajer, I will have to cross the street.

But for now I can frolic in the sand for as far as the eye can see. To my left is Al Juraina 3, my right is Al Juraina 2, and I am walking west in the direction of University City.
The space between the road and the walls of houses is large again, still with no sidewalk. I could walk in the median since there are pavers there, but choose not to brave that tonight. Again it’s just me and the sand and the walls and the cars. I look at them all zooming by, and wonder where they’re going and where they’ve come from. *I imitate the sounds of vehicles as they go by:* neeeceerruuum put put put. Wooooommp wooooomp wooooomp. Bubabum babumbabum. Each vehicle with its own voice: little cars, big cargo trucks, old cement trucks, big shiny SUVs. It’s like I’m trying to converse with them, to ask them these things that I wonder. To my left and right the neighborhoods are dark: the streets, the driveways, the yards, the windows. *Most of these homes are still dark inside.* I stop and look around, finding one house out of many that has interior lights turned on. Really, where is everyone? If these people on the roads are not for these houses, who is?

Figure 88. W7P77

I get this feeling a lot when I’m on these walks. Not that I’m alone - I know I’m not, people do live here and I’ve seen the evidence. But I would think that I would see more. I
don’t feel alone, that’s quite impossible with all the traffic, but I feel by myself, if that makes any sense. Maybe it’s that sense of being by myself that has lead to this attitude of play and bravery.

Two more taxis stop thinking that I need a ride and I ignore them. It’s dark now and the temperature has dropped; I’m facing the wind and put the hood of my sweatshirt up to keep warm. I can’t believe this, that I have to try and keep warm right now. I love it. The Matajer is up ahead, its lights and backlit signs drawing me in. I wait for a break in traffic and cross to the raised median. Grass, palm trees, and light poles. I stand here for a minute, taking photographs of being in the mix of it all, and then wait for a break in the traffic on the other side. Waaaait wait wait go! I cross and arrive fully intact. I remember awhile back saying that I would never walk along the busy freeways here, and this is probably as close as I’ll get. Close enough.
Outside of the Matajer, people sit on benches chatting, watching the fountains. Cars park, people come and go as I enter the automatic doors. A wave of food smells from the restaurants hits me, as does the brightness of all the fluorescent lights. I feel as if I’m some wild thing coming in from outlying lands, even though in reality all I did was walk down the street. It takes me a minute to adjust to it all. *I did it!* The first time a walk has taken me beyond sections 3 and 4. The first time a walk has connected to a place that I visit in my ‘normal’ life.

Upon arriving home, the rain starts up again, pitter-pattering on the living room window. A momentous night indeed.
The smell of coffee floats over the coffee colored wall.

A big yellow school bus.

Images of past walks rise to the surface of my mind, and even though these memories were formed here, I feel as if they are from somewhere distant.

What do I have to do to make this feel like home?

What was I expecting, to just take a few walks and a few photos, and then magically one day it would all feel ok?

So many things to write, how can I possibly explain all that happened, and all that was said, all that was learned? Just as I was longing for social activity, feeling discouraged, this happened.
On this sunny Thursday, white puffy clouds stream across the sky. Mid-afternoon light casts slight shadows over the walls, through the palm branches, below my feet. I walk, turning and thinking, spending a lot of time looking at the ground. The neighborhood is mostly quiet; two men, one in brown, the other in white, talk next to a parked car. In the distance, children play, their squeals of delight faint. The smell of coffee floats over the coffee colored wall. The afternoon feels of relaxation and calm; I feel exposed, like my walking is too active, the sun tries to shine me into guilt. I slow my pace, lingering for a minute in the trails of the coffee scent. A big yellow school bus clambers past me, its presence too large for this place; it towers over walls, noisily and narrowly squeezing between cars parked on either side of the street, quickly turning corners to make it to wherever the bus stop might be.
Deeper into the section I head, photographing places along the way. A two story commercial building stands alone, the metal doors drawn closed, papers and signs peeling away from inside the glass. The blue plastic awning says it’s a stationary store, though it doesn’t look open, contrary to the hours posted. At the corner, a stop sign hangs crookedly from its post. Haven’t I seen this all before? It should seem more familiar but it doesn’t. Beyond the sign I see a fence with sections of white corrugated metal fastened in even increments, stretching to the street between an empty lot and a bare cement block wall. I know I’ve photographed this before, and down at the end of the road I see familiar unfinished buildings that I must have encountered via a different street. I find it funny how my recognition of this place really depends on the angle at which I approach it.
Two kids ride their bikes in empty lots and down sand streets; I wonder if they came from the school bus. I watch the sand and gravel and clumps of brush as I continue, not yet enjoying being here, spending a lot of time thinking. I think about familiarity and images of past walks rise to the surface of my mind; even though these memories were formed here, I feel as if they are from somewhere distant. These pictures percolate slowly, coming from old mental images that somehow made an impact, or photographs that caught my attention upon reflection. Pictures of walls, construction, spray painted numbers on electrical boxes, cracks in pavers, tire tracks, roaming cats, looking down at the ground as cars drive by, the way the skyline looks through holes in unfinished buildings. These swirl with caws and cackles of crows, crows of roosters, chirps and squawks of birds I can’t see and don’t know, the drone of engines large and small, the pff pff pff of my feet hitting the sand, the presence and lingering echo of Arabic chants radiating from intermittent towers, cascading through the streets. Moments mix and mingle but remain fragments, never forming into one impression of place, unwilling to be taken from that hour of time and associated with now. Where is it that I find cohesion?

This line of thinking has brought me down; I barely look up from the street. The open gates I see don’t even phase me now, looking only lends a view of pavers and cars. Without bringing the camera to my face I continue to photograph, hoping that shooting from the hip will frame what I want, but thinking that it doesn’t matter all that much.
I’ve wandered to the side edge of Al Juraina park which is empty, a shame on such a wonderfully weathered afternoon. A primary colored jungle gym and swing set sit in the corner, its bright colors almost luminescent in the sunlight. The long stone avenue cuts through the center of the park, lined with palm trees and too many vacant stone benches. I recall the first time I saw the park from here, the east side. It might have been the first walk, I’d have to check my notes, but I remember thinking that I had come a long way, traveled far. I had turned around not exploring beyond the park, thinking the road looked like a busy one that maybe marked the end of Al Juraina. Subsequent approaches to the park never linked to this first one, on those visits I saw tennis courts and yards of grass, not realizing that it was all the same park. Lost connections.
Strolling on, today beyond the park, past a mosque with a cafeteria in front, past a house layered in white marble, men working and singing on the front steps, my mind gets lost in its thoughts again. *What do I have to do to make this feel like home?* This isn’t the first time I’ve moved somewhere. Are there steps that I’ve taken, actions that I’ve done, to assimilate new places to home, or was it just a matter of time? I’m calling this place home; it has to be. It doesn’t matter that my stay here is temporary; the way I see it, every home is temporary. Nobody lives somewhere forever. We all move on somehow, whether physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Short-term or long-term, temporary or ‘permanent’, where I live has to be home. I don’t bide my time, waiting for the comfort and security of that idea, reserving it for the memory of a place from my past, refusing to pass it on, or saving it for some future place that I may or may not ever make it to. I make home where I am, because all I know is what is happening to me right here, right now. I have to allow that feeling of home, that idea, whatever it is to me, grow here. But how do I feed it, water it,
nurture it? How do I help it manifest? Calling a place home is one thing, an easy thing. Feeling it, especially when you desperately want to, is another.

At a standstill, I sit on a curb under the shade of a palm tree. The wall across from me is tan, the color of a camel, or caramel. Pallet strokes of stucco curve and glide across its surface, their movements interrupted by the vertical seams. Staring at it, I get lost in the continuity of its texture. *What was I expecting, to just take a few walks and a few photos, and then magically one day it would all feel ok?* That some day I would cross an invisible line and everything would appear before me, simple and clear, its meaning its role my role, would all show up like neat little ducks in a row for me to understand? What am I expecting myself to feel? What are my subconscious standards, do I have any? I see it all for what it is, its face value: the desert, the grains of sand, the half paved roads, the unending walls, the pavers, the sun the tan the blue the birds the heat the cars the fast the vast the close the emptiness the precious park the day the night the palm the brush the trash the dumpsters...seeing doesn't imply
understanding the true meaning, and inference isn’t knowing. If I could only just know what
it means. But is the true meaning of these forms important, or is it what it means to me that
matters? What does it all mean to me? What am I to identify with?

A silver van pulls up, the driver looks and waves, I hold my hand up in recognition
but don’t get up. Red taillights, he’s backing up. We exchange hellos, and he asks where I’m
from. Sharing that I live in University City, he says, “No, where are you from?” I tell him the

United States, Iowa. He says, “Oh yes, I am from Minnesota!” I give him a doubting look
and say, “Oh really?” He gets out of his van so he can hear me better, leaving it parked in
the road. He sits down next to me in the sand, wearing lightweight tan cargo pants, a teal
blue t-shirt with a black geometric pattern, and a red hat that says ‘UAE’.

“So what are you doing out here?”

“Oh, I’m walking the neighborhood, exploring, trying to get to know the place.”
According to him, Al Juraina was only a few years old. It was all new compared to old Sharjah, where he lived. The dunes, and evidence of what used to be, were only minutes away.

I was to call him M&M, like the candy. This stood for Minnesota Mohamed, on account of his living and studying in St. Cloud, Minnesota for his master’s in urban planning. He lived in America for 14 years, in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and California.

“Physically, I am from here. But my mind, my heart, my soul, I am American. I left here for America to get culture and an education, because life’s a bitch and then you die.”

We sat there talking, him laying in the sand, me on curb. As cars drove by staring, maneuvering around his parked van, he carried the conversation, sharing stories about his life in America (he’s a big fan) and in the UAE, and the history of the UAE, specifically explaining the rivalry between Sharjah and Dubai.

“When I was back, I would go to functions and seek out the American people, because in my mind, I am American, and I missed American people. I wanted to talk with them. One time, they reported me to the embassy, thinking that I was some sort of threat....Another time, I went to a softball club in Dubai, thinking softball is American, there I will find some. I arrived to find that it was all British and Irish people and, well, that’s not the same.”

“So now I am here, and I live in Sharjah. I go to Dubai every day, come back every day, and I pick things up for my family.”

A horn blares behind him, and we watch as a blue car has pulled up behind the van, not trying to go around, but instead choosing to sit and honk repeatedly. He grudgingly gets up, and I imagine this will be the end of our chat. To my surprise, he moves his van out of the traffic flow (the honking lady drives by) and parks beneath the palm tree next to me.
Returning, he finds his spot in the sand. He marks in it with sticks as he talks, writing out numbers, drawing maps, making his points. Peppering the conversation are jokes about not ‘badgering’ me about Wisconsin, thoughts on life, and quotes from Merle Haggard, which I didn’t catch on to. I’m not much of a country music girl.

There was one thing I really wanted to know from him.

“I’ve been here six months and haven’t met any locals. Where should I go to do that?” I was hoping he would give me ideas of places to hang out, clubs to join, times to go to public places, or ways to strike up conversations with the Emirati.

“I will introduce you to my family,” he says as he gets up. I get up as well, thinking he’s leaving, and tell him I would like that. I stand there as he walks away.

Turning, he says, “Come, come!”

“Oh, you mean now?”
“Yes, yes of course! Come! I will take you to my sister Amina’s house, it’s right here.” I was finally going to make it behind the gate.

So many things to write, how can I possibly explain all that happened, and all that was said, all that was learned? Just as I was longing for social activity, feeling discouraged, this happened.

Four hours and six houses later, I had met his three sisters, three of his nieces, and countless, really countless, of his great nieces and nephews. Everyone we visited learned who I was and what I was doing, and Mohamed had told me what each person did, where they studied, who they were married to, how many kids they had, their names and what they did. By the second house I was already overwhelmed. I myself have no siblings, nine cousins, six sets of aunts and uncles, and I have a hard time keeping them straight. It was impossible for me to imagine doing this with the numbers of their families. Mohamed was nice enough to help me take notes for each house, including the phone numbers of his nieces and great nieces, who he said I could call up any time. His niece Yomna (daughter of
Amina) and I talked about getting together for her to learn English (though I thought her English was great) and in exchange, I could learn Arabic.

“K-fick?” (How are you?)

“Hamdullah.” (Thanks Allah, I am fine.)

“Ana ismi Tess. Ma ismuki?” (My name is Tess. What is your name?)

I drank zhai (tea), qahwa (coffee), juice, and water, ate figs, nuts, and Arabic sweets (similar to cotton candy), sat in their living rooms and walked through their houses and yards, meeting them when they were about to go to sleep or had just woken up. Mohamed told me that people here tend to get off work at 3 pm, sleep until 7 pm, wake and have dinner (prepared in a separate kitchen behind the house, adjacent to the domestic workers’ rooms) around 10 pm, and gather at a relative’s house every night. It wasn’t uncommon to stay up until 3 am. The meetings would rotate between family members, and as we drove to each house I got the sense of how pleasant that could be. Everyone lived either in or close to Al Juraina. First cousins marry first cousins, and sons and daughters, even if they’re married with kids, can live with parents until they have houses of their own. Of course, it helps to be connected with the Sheikh (king), for he can give you money for buying or building a house.

Through all the visits, Mohamed would talk, never ceasing in his stories. After the sixth house, the sun had set and night was in full swing. He drove me back to AUS, and we exchanged numbers as he dropped me off.

“Now, you have six families of friends, and one brother.”
Walk Nine

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My hands are cold. Stepping out into the afternoon sun feels good.

It seems as if they’re trying to grow sunflowers. I’d like to grow flowers too.

Is the secret just to keep doing things? To fake it till you make it?

The pedestrian gate is locked.

I think about these trees and bushes, and how underneath their lush, green, waxy leaves are scraggly, dry, crispy twigs. They’ve been exposed.

Signs of life are cropping up over the neighborhood.

Petunias and marigolds...

The streets are a lot more active.

I walk by our old apartment and don’t miss it.

It’s funny how different this campus feels just from having a different view out the window.

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Our new apartment is housed in the J block, adjacent to our old home in L block. Ironically, the apartment is in the same position in the building: second floor, right end unit. J46. This one, however, is a two bedroom, two bathroom unit and has a balcony off of the living/dining room. Out I go for another walk, this time around faculty housing. *My hands are cold. Stepping out into the afternoon sun feels good.* I haven’t officially walked here since I’ve been back, since we moved apartments, but I have been going for walks at night because the weather is just so nice (highs in the mid-70°s) and I don’t get out much otherwise.
J46 December 2014 - Present

Figure 104. J46 Apartment Map
I follow our road out of J block and into K, with its four two story buildings surrounding the roundabout. The weather is so lovely, with the cool temperatures, a slight breeze, and the setting sun, its really all I notice.

Turning right out of K takes me past the daycare center, toy cars and bikes left to rest in the yard. All this really does feel familiar to me now, probably because it all looks so similar. I wonder if I should stop walking here because of that.

I haven’t been over to the other side of faculty housing in awhile (if you remember, the area is split into mostly symmetrical halves, divided by a busy road that heads out of University City) and decide to head over that way. I really should start going back to the faculty gym over there. I turn left, passing the Epicenter; I think they hold activities and classes for faculty children in this building. Next to the chain link fence, it seems as if they’re trying to grow sunflowers. I’d like to grow flowers too. They’d probably survive this time of year.
That’s what’s funny for me about the weather here. Coming back in January, it felt more like summer to me than it did August - December. It could be because of the below freezing temperatures I experienced (and avoided) during my six week stay in Iowa that made the return feel like summer. But there’s something about the way the wind blows, and the soft cotton clouds that every now and then make an appearance that reminds me of the summers I’m used to. Granted, it’s quite a bit more pleasant than Iowa summers with the mid-70s temperatures and low humidity. But before, it was just beyond, way beyond summer. The heat, the burning wind against your eyes, the breaking out in a sweat as soon as you walk out the door, all of it was just beyond summer. It was more akin to walking on the sun. Now, you can actually go outside and live. The palm trees outside our new windows even make me feel like I’ve found a bit of paradise. I’ve always had a healthy imagination.

How is it that a place begins to feel like home? Is the secret just to keep doing things? To fake it till you make it? To spend your days busy, filled with things you love to do, people you
care about, a section of earth to call yours, doing things and living, till one day it all feels normal and right?

I walk up to the gate that separates our side of faculty housing from the men's dormitories and the main road. The big black iron gate has a large door for allowing traffic through, though I've never seen it used. On the sidewalk there is a pedestrian gate, but the pedestrian gate is locked. A security man sits outside of it under the shade of a tree, but I don't want to make him get up to unlock it for me. I've never seen it locked there before, and I wonder why the change. I don't like being locked in or out of part of the community, and I hope that it's just a coincidence and not due to a safety concern.

I would have to walk all the way around, near the campus buildings, to catch the main road and go to the other side, and this is something I don't care to do. Resolving to stick to my half of housing, I turn right, heading towards the P block, or what I think of as the townhouse section.
My path takes me along sidewalks where the vegetation has been cut back. The shock of seeing this has worn off. Be Still trees and bushes are being severely cut all the time, and I know they will grow back, as witnessed by the other trees and bushes that are in the middle of the cycle. Everyone’s time will come.

I walk under the umbrella of some mango trees, next to trimmed border shrubs. *I think about these trees and bushes, and how underneath their lush, green, waxy leaves are scraggly, dry, crispy twigs. They’ve been exposed.* I can see behind their faces, the not so pretty parts that they’re trying to hide. I feel for them. I pick a small, hard, green oval-shaped fruit off one of the trees and carry it with me.

Weaving my way through the two sections of P block, making two U’s, I see that some things do change. *Signs of life are cropping up over the neighborhood.* At one home, small
pots in bright colors hold a cactus a piece. Another features succulents and drought tolerant plants in a few large pots. One house is even growing produce; two bags of potting soil sit next to a small plot featuring corn and other smaller vegetables, none of which have bloomed yet. The last house has many pots, probably twenty or so in various shapes and sizes, filled with petunias and marigolds...an odd sight with the palm trees next to the house. These flowers are a familiar sight for me, they’ve often been planted by my parents in the springtime back in Iowa. But here, they don’t really remind me of home, they just stand out, almost fake-looking, with their bright purples and pinks and clean whites, strange next to the dusty colors of the desert. They feel forced, resistant, like whomever planted them just can’t let go and accept the fact that they chose to live in a desert. That may be a harsh assessment, but that’s how I feel.

It seems as if there must be a line between remaining who you are and becoming someone new when you move to a new place. On the one hand, if you remain exactly who you are, the same habits and rituals with nothing changing in regards to your new place, doing these things even if they’re not supported by the place, even if what was once easy
and took little thought now is inconvenient, if one refuses to bend, you end up like a petunia next to a palm tree. Nothing about being a petunia is bad, and nothing about being a petunia next to a palm tree is necessarily bad either. But the misfit is palpable, you can’t ignore it; it’s obvious just like the bright purple against soft green. It feels as if the past is being clung to, like whatever change that could occur would never live up to the standards of what was left behind. On the other hand, if you become someone completely new, immediately adopting customs and practices that aren’t understood, pretty soon there won’t be anything that is recognizable, and suddenly everything that made you you has been abandoned for the sake of fitting in, like a desert shrub next to a palm. What is the compromise? How do you feel like you’re still you, while at the same time feeling as if you belong, as if you’re at home, in a place completely foreign to what makes you, you?
The streets are a lot more active than what they were six weeks ago. Children play in the parks between the blocks, adults walk their dogs, overall there are just more people out and about and it’s nice to see. I continue my walk around towards K block, and I walk into the

Figure 113. W9P33

Figure 114. W9P35
grass that our old view used to look out over. *I walk by our old apartment and don’t miss it.* I don’t miss how small it felt, how confining all the white felt, how temporary it felt. Our new apartment feels more like a home, with the amount of space it has, the separate rooms with separate functions, the spare bedroom that means others can visit us, the balcony that gives us space to be outdoors but still be at home. We have slowly but surely acquired more furniture, and have plans to frame prints and artwork once time and money afford us the opportunity. I even have plans to paint the bedroom, but that’s more of a dream than anything. Here, I feel as if I have room to breathe and room to settle. In a word, I feel more comfortable. *It’s funny how different this campus feels just from having a different view out the window.*

Figure 115. W9P40

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Monday, January 26, 2015: 3:11 pm - 4:10 pm

Walk Ten

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I don’t want to go towards the sun, but I need to walk through Al Juraina 4 again.

Sand and dust fly in the air.

Judging from the state of this neighborhood, paired with my new knowledge that this area is only a few years old (whatever that means), my guess is that Al Juraina 4 is the newest section.

Weighing the risks...

I play with the boundary, wondering if anyone will see me, or if anyone will care.

I like it over here.

The sand is powdery soft.

Cool warm, cool warm.

A man sits against the wall across from me.

I can’t tell if this gate belongs to AUS or not, but my mental map tells me that would be impossible.

The longest wall of all: University City.

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It’s 3:00 pm; I know that kids will be getting off the bus and families, if they’re anything like Mohamed’s, will be starting their afternoon naps. I don’t want to go towards the sun, but I need to walk through Al Juraina 4 again. Dropped off in my usual spot, I get situated with my camera, notebook, pen, and other things in the pockets of my jeans. I turn, photograph the mosque, and I’m off to the left into today’s hot sun.

My first impression today is that it’s quite noisy. A bulldozer flattens sand in an empty lot, dragging its bucket back and forth. Saws cut and hammers pound in the distance, birds singsong in some nearby trees. Looking back over my notes, I realize that I’ve only
walked in Al Juraina 4 once, on the second walk, back at the beginning of November. I recall enjoying the walk, and wonder why I haven’t come back to this side until now.

Maybe it's for the same reason that I hesitated today, the powerful sun. With all this construction commotion, I'm betting it will look a good deal different around here.

Avoiding traveling the same path as last time, I turn right on the first street I come to, bringing me closer to the bulldozer. I cross the street into the shade of a wall; the sidewalk ends with the end of its property line, and I am left to walk in the sand.

Sand and dust fly in the air, and I catch grittiness in my mouth and my eyes. Reaching the end of the wall, I turn left, heading down a sand street that ends in emptiness.
Judging from the state of this neighborhood, paired with my new knowledge that this area is only a few years old (whatever that means), my guess is that Al Juraina 4 is the newest section. If this neighborhood really isn't all that old, I wonder what it was like to live in University City before it was surrounded. AUS is fifteen years old, and I don't know about the rest of University City. As long as that surpasses the ‘few years’ of age that Al Juraina has, it was once on its own. Even with all of this outside its walls, I still view the campus as being very isolated, by itself, as if it still were surrounded by sand. I can't imagine how separated it must have felt when it actually was. I think that's the effect the walls have on me. Even if there is something beyond it, all I see is the blankness of the wall, continuing behind it into infinity. Sort of like when things are out of sight, out of mind.

Veering off onto another sand road, a site catches my eye. Over the last few months, I’ve been seeing buildings in various states of construction, but I’ve never found one this early in production. The temporary metal wall is pretty poor, and there’s a large opening at
the mouth of the site. Dunes are piled up and have yet to be flattened, the two buildings sit up above a small pit, higher than the level of the road. *Weighing the risks...* I ponder venturing into the site. I *really* want to explore this one, to feel what it’s like to occupy its space. All that each building currently consists of are two slabs, the foundation and the roof deck, with columns supporting the load at critical points. No walls, no rebar, just a clean one story space waiting to be filled. *I play with the boundary, wondering if anyone will see me, or if anyone will care.* Quietly I stand for a long time, looking in
all directions. There’s a sign posted out front of the site, but it’s in Arabic and I don’t know what it says. I’m not sure what the punishment is for trespassing, or if this would even be considered that. Behind me is another house under construction, this one a lot farther along. Its cream stone has been fastened to the façade, other outbuildings are almost there. Multiple men in blue suits are working on various parts of the house: one is up on twenty feet of scaffolding adding stone trim to the roof line. A couple sit right behind the metal fence; I can see them resting. Someone towards the back of the house yells something to them. No one is paying attention to me. I drum up enough courage to top the dune immediately in front of me, and this brings me level with the buildings. I’m comfortable here on top of this dune, but it’s as far as I’m willing to go. I consider coming back in the cover of night when everyone is done working for the day.

I hop down from the dune and begin to walk off, planning my secret excursion. Sure enough, I’m twenty paces from the site when a worker comes from behind the house across the street and stares at me. It was a good choice to leave.
I decide that I like it over here. The activity, the variety of places and stages of construction, the amount of sand that still covers the land here, the reduced presence of walls, the increase in expanses; all this makes me happy.

The road comes to a T at another build, and a medium-sized white bus sits out front, empty. I see these kinds of buses all the time on the highways between Sharjah and Dubai, but then they’re not empty. Fans blowing, they transport workers to and from home and work. This one sits, waiting for the end of the day; then it will be its time to go to work. Beyond the bus is a large lot of sand, similar to the one that was occupied by the busy bulldozer. In the distance is a paved road and the University City wall.

My first excursion to the desert happened last weekend. I was invited by a group of people (some of whom I knew, some I didn’t) to partake in a barbecue and bonfire. It was splendid; I have been wanting to go out into the desert since I moved here. The food and company were great, and the fire was soothing to watch, almost meditative. It had grown
dark by the time we got there, so I was only able to appreciate the starry side of the landscape; seeing contours of dunes and plants only on the line of the horizon, or in the harsh glow of a headlamp. I am still looking forward to my chance to see it in the daytime; this sand lot that I walk across is nothing like it, but I pretend anyway.

I take off my shoes, the sand is powdery soft, tan and deep beneath my feet. I squish my toes beneath the surface till the sand is up to my ankles, and lift my toes back out, spread, so the sand trickles through them. I do this a couple of times as I look out over the surface, marked and textured by tire tracks and wind ripples. When I walk, I make sure to drag my feet.

With each step I scoop sand into my sandal, cool warm, cool warm, some parts from the shady side of the crest. I go slowly across the lot,
photographing the different textures I come across. My diagonal route takes me to the corner of the neighborhood, and I look both ways before I cross the busy road towards the University City road. Looking up (for I spent most of my time looking down at the sand), I see that a man sits against the wall across from me. Not at a bus stop or a taxi stand, not near a door or another street, it’s just him and the sidewalk and the wall and the shade.

Crossing the street, I (giving the man some space) walk next to the wall up to an iron gate that reminds me of the fence at AUS. This gate terminates the cross road, the busy one that separates Al Juraina 3 and 4, the one where I begin my walks. I look inside of it, and the cream stucco buildings with their two stories and carports and walls with bougainvillea creeping their way up and above remind me too of AUS. I can’t tell if this gate belongs to AUS or not, but a couple minutes of thinking, my brain places my body in my mental map and tells me that would be impossible. It’s still strange how familiar it looks.
I look down the road, with its median full of street lamps, the curbs going yellow black yellow black yellow black yellow black, with a rhythm like something stuck in your car tire going thump thump thump thump, and I stare at it stretching next to the longest wall of all: University City.
Friday, January 30, 2015: 5:13 pm - 6:08 pm

Walk Eleven

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It was a hot day but it as cooled down adequately.

Things are starting to feel repetitive; I’m photographing less and less, or at least that’s how it feels.

I feel as if I’m caught in limbo between strangeness and familiarity. Familiar enough so that if I’m not careful, I walk without really looking. Strange enough that I still don’t affiliate these forms with home.

My stomach hurts, anxious at the thought that I might not be any closer than where I began.

I don’t care what anyone says, dogs scare me.

Do I like it here? I don’t not like it here.

Is it beautiful? In its quirks. Yes, the buildings are quirky.

Location, location, location.

What am I missing?

Flatness, and the sky goes on forever.

Existing on a thin three story plane, pressed between miles of sand and sky.

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I've fallen into some trap of time. This week snuck up on me and then proceeded to creep past without me noticing it. I haven't walked since Monday, and I don't know what I've done since then. It's late in more ways than one, and I've got to get going.

*It was a hot day but it as cooled down adequately.* I don't know where the winter cool has gone, but it's been warm in the house today. Since our windows have northern exposure, we get all the coolness of the air without the heat of the sun. Since I've returned, I haven't been able to sit around the house without anything less than pants and a sweatshirt or
blanket. But today, it was warm. I almost felt like going to the pool, but then I remembered
the week that slipped away. So I find myself entering Al Juraina 4 in the quiet of the setting
sun.

![Image](image1)

Figure 131. W11P2

As I begin, I have half a notion to visit the construction site I was so enamored with
earlier this week. It’s holy day, almost night, and the neighborhood seems still. To
deliberately seek it out seems forced, so I resolve to be pleased if I find myself happen upon
it later.

I don’t know why I spend so much time looking at my feet these days. I look up to
find a car coming in my direction and turn right because I don’t want to deal with it. I’ve
just walked for what seems like too long without writing or photographing anything. Things
are starting to feel repetitive; I’m photographing less and less, or at least that’s how it feels. As if nothing
of note stands out and says ‘capture me, capture me’.

Halfway down the block I stop and lean up against the scratchy stucco surface of a wall. I stare up at its height against the sky. The globes of its lights seem to me to be noses in the air, stuck up against my leaning. Ten feet ahead, a metal construction signpost is all bent out of shape, its legs looking as if they’re trying to break free of their spot in the sand, poised to run. Leaning against the wall I stare across the street, looking over the tops of the two houses. I feel as if I’m caught in limbo between strangeness and familiarity. Familiar enough so that if I’m not careful, I walk without really looking. The whole of the neighborhood could be traversed without event. Still, it remains strange enough that I still don’t affiliate these forms with home. Maybe I would if I lived in one. It’s just so easy to forget where I am within my apartment, within its protection, if that’s what it should be called. How would I feel if this was my every day? If the mosques were right outside my door, if I had a square wall of my own, if I had a little yard with a tree or two that sat beneath the desert sky, if I heard the roosters crow every day, if the traffic and fabric of the road wove around outside my door. Would it be familiar then? Would home find me faster?
I walk out into a large undeveloped area of sand and turn round in circles, looking for it. My stomach hurts, anxious at the thought that I might not be any closer than where I began.

I aimlessly wander over the sand, searching for something, anything. A big reflection on the ground catches my eye, and I notice that it's rippling. Upon approaching it I discover that it's a puddle, a puddle being continuously filled. Clear and six inches deep, a foot wide, spilling out of its depression and traveling beyond, a black hose held down by two bricks fills the overflowing cup. The hose appears from beneath the sand, no plants surround it, and the closest house is forty feet away. I can't imagine that anyone
would want this water to run here, I mean there’s trash and debris strewn about. But the bricks signal intention, and little paw and claw prints seem to show that all is not wasted. Kneeling next to it in the sand, I photograph it. I say to myself, ‘hmm, a little oasis’ and chuckle at my sarcasm.

A dog barks at the edge of the road and it doesn’t sound happy to see me. I stand and look at it, trying to see if it’s chained up. It’s a medium sized dog (one of the first I’ve seen here) standing right outside the owner’s door and barks again. *I don’t care what anyone says, dogs scare me.* I had been meaning to continue in his direction after my stop at the ‘oasis’, but start heading the other way, not too fast and not too slow, because I don’t want to get any closer to him. I must have been on his turf or something. Maybe that was his ‘oasis’ and I need to go find my own. I step on to the road, trying to look at him in my peripherals, always moving away from him. I can’t see him so I look back, and he’s moved closer, to the edge of the sand lot that I just left. I turn my back to the dog, which I don’t want to do because it scares me, but I want to ignore it and get on my way. Why can’t dogs be cats and just leave me alone?

At the end of the street I turn right, aiming towards the back edge of Al Juraina 4, where construction hasn’t taken over yet. In the distance lies a busy highway, power lines, an unfinished mosque under the supervision of a crane. In the foreground, more sand. To my left is the busy road (I should really find out the name of it), and I think this might be the edge of the neighborhood.
I set out to find if I'm right, but don't make it. At the edge of the sand lot is a sand road, two feet below the level, like it’s been scooped out. I step down into the road, cross it, and sit on the mound edge. Looking out across the expanse, houses line the three edges. I set down my notebook, lay the camera on my lap, and just sit. I take a good hard look at my surroundings, trying to take it all in, trying to internalize it somehow. How different do you have to become to assimilate?
That’s the thing about walking; you’re always moving. Always encountering something different, each step leading you in a slightly new direction, progressing progressing progressing. Sometimes, I just need to stop. Tonight is one of those times. For a good long time I sit, sometimes taking a photo. I can’t help it; it’s minutes away from being dusk, and I love watching the spectrum of the sky change. It’s cloudless and empty, save for the sun, moon, and the frequent plane.

It becomes nothing but a flow of color, washing away the day. When it’s like this, it’s my absolute favorite thing.
So I photograph, but mostly I look and think. I think about here, where I come from, what home even means. Home is so simple, so given, that I’ve never had to look so hard to figure out what it means to me. When I look closely, it becomes tricky and elusive. I struggle not to slip into common generalities. Universally speaking I’m sure they do ring true on some level, but what about individually? What makes my home different from the universal home? Is there anything, really? Or do we like to think we’re different, because it makes us feel better about existing?...

*Do I like it here? I don’t not like it here.* I suppose what I mean is, I get along all right. In the grand scheme of things, there’s nothing that I can truly complain about. There are annoyances, like how little it rains, how pervasive the sunshine is, the way people drive...too fast, too slow, and all over the place. But everywhere I go, things annoy me, so these are no reason to not like living here. There are aspects of living here that I enjoy, like mild winters, good produce, friendly (if few and far between) interactions, and the variety of cuisines to be had. There are also facets to living here that intrigue me, like the cultural differences and
the desert landscape. But do I love living here? No, not yet. I’m decidedly undecided. If I had to choose somewhere to live, I don’t think this place would make the list. Not yet.

Is it beautiful? In its quirks. Yes, the buildings are quirky. Now, to clarify. The houses, the commercial buildings, the planning, just human built things in general here are quirky, to me. I mean quirky just as it is, not bad nor good, just quirky. And I tend to admire, appreciate, and affiliate with quirky. I like when people aren’t afraid to be different and peculiar. I value that I perceive things, whatever they may be, as quirky, that things are capable of standing out in that way. I think the world would be frightfully boring if nothing ever seemed weird. I myself quite enjoy being peculiar; a day isn’t complete if I don’t do something completely odd. Because of all these things, I find quirkiness beautiful. But why even ask if I find a place beautiful? Why did that come to mind? Does a place even need to be beautiful?
All these questions come to me and I answer them, but really I just end up asking more questions, some of which I can't answer right now. I think of how everyone says that buying a house is all about 'location, location, location', and I think of how we're always balancing proximities, proximities to landscape, to people, to ideals. At the juncture, maybe that's where you find home. *What am I missing?*

I look around again, maybe seeing here for what it is for the first time. It’s flatness, *and the sky goes on forever.* That word, flatness, calls me back to Iowa which I admit isn't always that flat. Where I'm from, it is. Flat as can be, and you can see houses with groves pop out of the landscape for miles, like little hills. And here it's flat too, really really flat, but the immensity and firmness of the flat don't hit you as hard as it does in Iowa because within the city, the flatness loses its friend, space. Beyond what you see, the world extends into blackness; we're the ones that fill it with our preconceptions and knowledge. This time, I fill in the blackness with flatness, and in my mind I see it.
It’s so fine, like a film, *existing on a thin three story plane, pressed between miles of sand and sky.*
CONCLUSION

Wednesday, May 13, 2015

In the nature of things beauties are incompatible. The spring cannot coexist with the autumn, nor day with night; what is beautiful in a child is hideous in a man, and \textit{vice versa}; every age, every country, each sex, has a peculiar beauty, finite and incommunicable; the better it is attained the more completely it excludes every other. (Santayana, 1955, p. 91)

How does one coexist with the beauty existing in a new place (once it is discovered), when you are of one kind of beauty, a product of where you are from, a place different from where you find yourself? How can I find harmony where the farmland meets the desert? Maybe that is why we make home, to be surrounded by harmony when we find ourselves in unfamiliar territories. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost. (Bachelard, 1964, p. 6)

I’m afraid to write this, mostly because I’m not sure where to begin, or if I’ll get everything out, or if it will do justice. I’ve been meaning to write this ending for some time now, but chose instead to finish other tasks related to this project. Illustrations, formatting, editing, these I focused on before delving into this, which is strange since this is the part that has been weighing on me for a couple months now. I suppose that in a way it’s fitting, to write the end last, as a final task, putting a nice conclusive bow on the effort that has come before. But I know that’s not why I waited. I know.

Henri Cartier-Bresson was a well-known French street photographer in the mid-1900s. His stunning black and white’s are captivating and breath-taking; action frozen in
time Henri is probably most famous for coining the phrase ‘the decisive moment’: the split
second in which a photographer chooses to capture a scene, the stroke of genius that
suspends unrepeatable moments in light forever on film. My favorite image of his consists
of a man jumping over an undisturbed puddle in the street. It leaves you wondering what’s
going to happen next. Does his briefcase pop open, spilling its contents into the murky
water? Has he jumped high enough, far enough, to land unscathed? Why did he leap over
the puddle in the first place? Is he a playful fellow, or impatient and late for a meeting? Are
there other puddles down the urban street, and would he cross those in a similar fashion? It
wasn’t until recently that I learned that originally, the photo had a much larger frame,
showing more of the city landscape, and darkroom editing by Cartier-Bresson lends us
the image we have today. This doesn’t make the image itself any less compelling to me, but
it sort of taints the mystery of the moment.

If memory serves me correctly, I’m now living in my 27th house in 25 years. A quarter century of packing, moving, unpacking, buying, donating, settling, and living has passed. Even when places were relatively similar, such as the five different apartments in Ames that I occupied during my college years, even with furnishings and décor moving with me each time, it’s impossible not to say that each home has been unique and carries its own memories. Whenever someone asks me, “Where are you from?”, I always hesitate, and then give them the very condensed version of ‘where I’m from’, from the beginning:

‘I was born in Seattle (I can’t let that go) and then when I was one and a half we moved to Newport, Oregon. My parents got divorced when I was three; my mom remarried and decided to move to the Midwest to be close to her family. My grandmother’s cousin had a house in Fenton, Iowa that she wasn’t living in, so we moved in. We’ve been in Iowa ever since, so essentially I’m from Iowa.’
In some form or another, that’s always what I tell people. I don’t know why giving them the full version is so important. In middle school I used to say that I was from Seattle, and my friends pointed out that I had lived in Iowa most of my life, so I wasn’t from Seattle, I was from Iowa. I recall getting angry, but realizing they were mostly right. I’d never thought about it before. My life in Iowa seemed so compressed in years, like living on the West Coast hadn’t been that long ago. What does it take to “be” from somewhere? Since then, I haven’t really been able to reconcile the two, so I give up and tell people the full story because I don’t know which is the right answer.

Since moving to Iowa, we’ve moved a couple of times, my dad moved from the West Coast to be nearby and so I could visit him every other weekend and alternating holidays. My mother got divorced and we moved again. She remarried and we moved again. A couple years later we had a house fire that took with it most of my possessions. To this day I can still remember watching, from the driveway, smoke and fire pour out of my bedroom window; the smell of the charred, black remains in the burnt skeleton of my room, the rafters and framing bare and scarred, the once hot origin point marked on the floor. Three moves and a year later, we arrived at the house that my mom and stepdad still occupy today, and where I’m currently living. I finished high school, moved on to college and graduate school and five apartments, summer stays with extended family, and a semester abroad. Before my last home in Ames, my storage unit was broken into, things were stolen. Worse than the lost possessions are the images of opening the unit door to things tossed and scattered, broken and spilled, stepped on with dusty footprints still visible, the lack of respect that was glaringly obvious, and the echoing feeling of insecurity and vulnerability that followed me around for months like a shadow, the new home visibly darkened from the recent experience. And of course now, a marriage, a move, and two apartments overseas.
All of these events have made impressions on my life to be sure, but I’ve always been optimistic and resilient, and bounce back quickly after change.

Never before February 7th had I felt a moment so decisive, in which time stops in its tracks, and every edit falls away, giving a glimpse of context so devastatingly meaningful, only to watch it fade out of reach, forever unattainable, leaving me stranded in a void filled by memory.

On February 7th my maternal grandmother, Marie Silrum, passed away.

Having three parents has given me the gift of four wonderful sets of grandparents. My step-grandmother Eldora, my paternal grandfather James, my maternal grandmother Betty, my paternal step-grandfather Lowell, and my maternal grandfather Edwin have all passed to their final resting place. At the times of their deaths I mourned, but it felt more like a distant numbness than anything else.

Now with Grammy gone, it was like I felt the weight of the loss of all their lives at once. I received the news of her passing a few hours and 7,000 miles away. Before this moment, home felt like I was a tree, with a big solid trunk deeply rooted in the rich, black, fertile soil of Iowa, and whose green, bushy top was pulling so hard to the East, stretching its branches long and taut towards the sand that the tension made the strong trunk bend like rubber. At once there was no longer a tree. My Grammy is dead. My Grammy is dead. My Grammy is dead. My Grammy is dead and I wasn’t with her when she died. I wasn’t with her two weeks before when she learned that her pneumonia was really congestive heart failure. I wasn’t with her when she insisted on no extraordinary measures, or when her last breath left her fluid-filled lungs. I wasn’t with her, and will never be with her again.

There was no longer a tree. There was a weight impossible. It was as if I were a rocky cliff, like the ones you see in pictures of Ireland or England coastlines, tall and barren, with waves that crash upon it intermittently. I had become this cliff, and the impossible
weight was the face sheering off, collapsing into the cold crested waters below. This is now what home feels like. This is what the decisive moment feels like.

With her death, I felt a connection slip away, one that I had never fully realized before it was gone. Gone was everything ancient and ancestral, my distant relatives in Norway, customs old and traditional, the kin who settled in Minnesota and Iowa centuries ago; the tether that linked me, in my mind, to a whole nation and heritage of people, to the biggest feeling of home, one that doesn't require ‘being’ there to feel, that was the loss I felt. That is how home feels.

I had seen it, heard it, smelled it, touched it, tasted it, but I had never felt home, or its absence, to this extent before. I can't get away from it.

After her funeral and interment, I found myself at my parent’s house with boxes of her belongings. This was actually pretty typical; every time we would go to her house to visit, she would always send us home with something. Bags of snacks and kringla or little gifts and games would pack the backseat next to me. It was always guaranteed that you would leave Grammy and Granpy’s house with more than you came with.

I always thought that this habit came from her being a grandmother, or was a result of her overwhelming generosity. Both of these reasons are true, but in recent years it had become about more than that.

When her and Grandpa moved, of their own will, out of their house and up to the Twin Cities into an assisted living facility, they of course downsized. Children received what they could use, and the rest of what they were parting with probably found its way to a charity, a church, or a secondhand store. Even after this they lived comfortably, and each subsequent visit had us coming back with more.

After Grandpa passed away, the ‘sending home’ slowly changed. Each grandchild received small albums of photos that had been given to her over the years; she was now
gifting them back. I would be spending the weekend with her and she would say, “Oh Tessia, I was going through my things and found this in my closet, would you take this home to your mother? I’d like her to have it.” Family gatherings or trips by children from distant states would lead to bags and boxes finding their matching new owner, who was receiving such items for one reason or another. One time, she asked me to put my name on the back of a picture of my choice, to receive after she was gone. I did so, selecting a framed print of a Norwegian table prayer that had been hanging in every kitchen I remember her having. And the thing is, she wasn’t dying. She wasn’t even unhealthy. At 92, the only medication she was taking was the occasional baby aspirin. She wasn’t clearing house because she was dying. She was clearing house because it was time.

Being a pastor’s wife, she too was no stranger to moving. Over the years, she went from Minnesota to Washington and back again. Yet little in this apartment was new. They didn’t remake home every time they relocated. And after dozens of moves and a few decades, all that was left were items and belongings with intense meaning, that had stood the test of time and distance.

Everything that was left in her apartment wasn’t there out of happenstance, folly, or fashion. They were there because these were the things she cared about, that marked points in her life’s journey.

The Norwegian table prayer print. Her desk chair from the 1930s. The green and brown ceramic pot that held her “Christmas tree”, an evergreen plant. A flower print featuring a faded poppy. The purple and white prayer shawl that I helped her knit ten years ago. The Norwegian kitchen witches that hung above her stove. The set of dominoes and a few necessary pennies in their wooden box. Her notepad that she kept games scores in, even when she played right hand versus left hand. The needlepoint church and garden scene wallhanging, gifted to them a long time ago by a member of one congregation. The bibles
that she and Grandpa had been using since the mid-90’s, tape on the spines and verses underlined. Norwegian sweaters that fit me because I’m built like her.

This is what I collected for myself, sent home one last time from Grammys with more than I arrived with. In these things I see her, and I don’t think this would be true if her house and everything that made it was anything but honest and authentic.

Making home is a process, and not an easy one. It takes time, energy, and truth. But the feeling, the emotion of home, that is instantaneous. Walking into a room, sitting in a garden, happening upon a street corner, exploring the heights and depths of a city - these can be moments when a new place immediately feels like home.

These are moments of love, acceptance, contentment.

My grandmother Marie was the best at accepting her place and all that came with it, and showed nothing but love to anyone she encountered. She was the epitome of what it looks and feels like to make an authentic home.

It wasn’t until I was unpacking my ‘new’ collection, integrating her belongings with my own, in my old bedroom at my parent’s house, that I realized that my Grammy is the perfect example of a lovely room of death. She wasn’t clearing house because she knew she was dying, she was clearing house because it was time.

What a beautiful moment.
June 10, 2015: On Things Unanswered

Committee: You opened your heart to your reader but why didn’t you allow the reader inside of your “home(s)”?

Response: Ironically enough, I have a feeling that this was done (unintentionally) because at this point in the transition of moving and at the early stage of research, that the physical, ‘building’ meaning of home wasn’t as important to analyze. The forms of the interior, the fixtures, the layout, these were familiar to me in their functionality and organization. Not that my reactions to this familiarity aren’t important, but merely that there were so many unfamiliar things that I felt needed attention first; these were what I focused on. In this case, and at this point, I sought to share my feelings and reactions in relation to the larger condition in which I found myself. I think these things still focus on home but in a broader sense, one that we don’t always focus on in interior design studios. I already knew how to cope with the apartment that I had been given. It was pretty clear to me what I liked and what I didn’t like, and at the same time I didn’t have the capacity to do much about it. When I did, for example with glasses and a couch, I discussed them. But I was more drawn to describing that with which I didn’t know how to cope: the weather, the landscape, the suburban form, the social interactions. Through this process of walking and writing, I was beginning to understand what these conditions meant to me, how they made me feel. With more time and more exploring, I think this will grow into learning what I need from my physical home in order to thrive in this new environment, and that’s really the point I wish to reach.

Committee: You focus on the exteriors of the houses behind the high walls and never the interiors. Was this intentional? I know you did not have access to them but even when you were at Mohamed’s place, you chose not to describe the interiors. Why?
Response: For the majority of the walks, it wasn’t so much intentional as it was just truthful. The experience of private residences was relegated to what I could see over the walls, which usually was the top third of the house. I managed glimpses into some yards through open gates, and these I captured through photographs, the length of these matching the length of time I felt comfortable lingering and looking.

That day I met Mohamed I remember in flashes of clarity and swirls of chaos. In the six houses we visited (none were his) he dominated the conversation, in some cases because he had the best English, in others because he was the most outgoing. As soon as I met him, my goal was to try and connect with him and everyone he introduced me to so that I could return for future visits. Each home and portion of his family deserved their own entry, that was clear. In the entry of that day I focused on Mohamed because without meeting him, my views and potential future views inside would not be possible. I meant for it to be an introduction into that side which I had been excluded from for five months. If I had known how the following months were to transpire I might have written it differently. But the way it stands, both the reader and I are left wanting more on this subject, how the ‘Other’ lives. When I return, I want to get to know all of them and their stories. I want to learn how they feel about where they live, how they see it, how it compares to what I’ve written. I want to learn Arabic from them, to help them with their English, to become their friends. I want to learn about them, what they do what they do and how they live; I want to learn what home means to Mohamed and his family.

Committee: Did you get together with M&M and his relatives afterwards at all? I thought your observations would take a different turn after you met him.

Response: I didn’t have the chance and wish I had. I told his family that I was returning to the U.S. and would be back in September and wanted to get together with them then. After the day I had with them, I had thoughts about which aspects of the
neighborhood might appear differently to me after more meetings with them, but I'll have to wait and see. One change I really hope happens is that I begin to feel less like an outsider, or at the very least feel as if I have a place there, regardless of my outsider status.

Committee: I wanted to know if you ever socialized with the Emiratis and the other faculty members. Or, was your life really as solitary as it sounded?

Response: The only social interaction I had with Emiratis was with Mohamed and his family. In the five months that I was there, I went to three social gatherings made up of AUS faculty members, one of which was at our apartment. Patrick has one good friend that is a faculty member, and the three of us get together a few times a month. Patrick's college roommate and his family live in Dubai; we saw them a couple of times. So yes, even though occasionally things happened, it really was as solitary as it sounded. It was insanely refreshing to go to the mall, which we did most weeks. I rarely bought anything; I was just thankful to see people.

Committee: I would like to see the pictures of your first purchases, e.g. the couch, glasses, etc. Why were they the first items you purchased? Necessity? To have the control to choose for yourself? You talk about it a little bit.

Response: They stemmed from a list of priorities, created by necessity, regulated by economy. The glasses we had were of thin glass and kept breaking. We needed more, but the ones we chose were based on a combination of what we needed and what we wanted, which sometimes I find to be a blurry line. I wanted glasses that I cared about, that brought joy to the kitchen, and that also wouldn't break so regularly.

The furniture provided by AUS was extremely uncomfortable; my back and neck would go numb watching a movie. Once we could afford it, and once we found one that we both liked, we bought it.
So these purchases were based on necessity, yes. Environmental control, for me, comes in the form of organizing: the fridge, the cupboards, the counters, the closets. I obsess. I have a big affinity for things, but not in the way of consumer-based materialism. It's a subject I need to explore and write about. But things play a big role in how much a space feels like home. I can't stand being surrounded by things that I don't like, or that are out of place or don't have a place. Order is how I exercise control. Maybe that's why I like things so much: they listen and don't mind being subjected to my whim and will.

Committee: I wish you had a longer period of time to cover. It would have been extraordinary to read about your observations and experiences, for example, after a full year of continuous living in UAE.

Response: You and me both. I really thought I was starting to get somewhere.

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June 15, 2015: Looking Ahead

During this endeavor, there was always a fear at the forefront of my mind. Fear that I didn't fully understand how to implement visual autoethnography, fear that my project wasn't legitimate research, fear that every time I went on a walk, nothing would happen. But the biggest fear of all was the fear of writing; that nothing I typed or penned would come out right, its sound falling flat once read instead of thought.

Sitting in front of my computer, fear, white in form, would seep into my mind; white from the walls surrounding me, the blank page before me, bled into my brain threatening to white was my thoughts before they could be recorded.

Memories were my only defense. The more I visualized the walk, the scene, the feeling, the farther white was pushed to the periphery. The more vivid the color, the stronger the scents, the more suffocating the heat, the dustier the sand, the louder the call to prayer, the weaker the white of fear became. This was the condition in which I wrote; the
remembering and the writing of the memories were the only ways to combat the fear of writing.

In all these cases, however, it wasn’t really the fear of the process, but of the potential outcome. Which in a way is even more frustrating; how illogical it is to be afraid of something that doesn’t even exist as a truth except in the mind! And how very real it seems. The desire named perfection often times produces the opposite effect. A need for rightness causes a crippling, all-consuming fear that prevents perfection (or some attainable ideal) from coming about. Fear is full of can’t: it can’t be done, you can’t do it, you can’t succeed. The fear is ultimately of failure, or falling short of the attainable ideal. In this state, ideas fail before they are put to use because they are born less than perfect and require cultivation to grow. The fear prevents investing the time and effort of cultivation in an imperfect idea. In this state, nothing ever happens. White becomes the moment.

I can’t stop writing.

I am all too guilty of spending hours, days, sometimes weeks soaked in the white space of fear, letting my mind toil in fighting anxiety, which always turns out to be more exhausting than doing the actual work that I put at the source of the worry. How many times I’ve looked back and thought, “If I knew at the time that this idea would produce this good of an outcome, how much less I would have worried, how much more I would have worked.”

It’s time to make white my favorite color, to make fear my best imaginary friend, to use it as a catalyst that drives curiosity, learning, and production. And I need to start immediately.

So what am I afraid of now?

Unanswered questions.
I found that the writing of this thesis created more questions for myself than it answered. I learned that walking stimulates thoughts and ideas; my mind is much more active outdoors and walking than when I sit stagnant at a desk. I’ve learned that the visual story the photos tell doesn’t always match the story I wrote; images often say things that I wasn’t aware I felt or noticed. It’s valuable to maintain both narratives and to compare and contrast the two. I’ve also found that writing can be therapeutic, especially when it feels as if there’s no one to talk to, or as if there’s nothing to say.


To answer these questions, I need to keep recording how I feel, but not just on walks. I would like to make my autoethnographic writings follow a more consistent schedule, one that allows me to dig deeper, to more thoroughly explore my reactions to place and their triggers.

I also think it would be telling to analyze my past homes. What do I remember? Where were they, and how did they (or not) meet my needs? How did I experience joy within their walls? How can answering these questions help me navigate the present?

During the process of this thesis, I wrote relatively little about my experiences back home at my parent’s house in Iowa, where I spent six weeks during the winter and five months in the spring. Before returning to Sharjah in August, it seems important to write about this home that I have known for the last ten years. It’s the last American home I will have until my husband and I return. How has my place in this home changed since I left last year? What does it feel like to temporarily live at your childhood home again? Do I regress into any old habits, preferences, or patterns of thought? When I’ve been back, what have I
missed about living in Sharjah? When I’m in Sharjah, is there anything I long for about this home in particular, or is it just Iowa, or familiarity?

In the longer term, I would like to continue to utilize this method each place I live. I imagine that as I change, the definition of my authentic home will also change. And I never want to stop trying to define it. I would like to examine the different scales and media through which the feeling of home can be transmitted. Which do I find the most important? Is it the city? The home garden? Friends? Looking out the window on to a rainy day? The American Pacific coast? A cat within petting distance? How will the priority change as I age?

In a couple years I could see expanding the project to include stories of other expatriates that live at AUS. The major objective of this expansion in scope would be to gather different perspectives of people from a variety of backgrounds, who have gone through the same process of transitioning home to the UAE. The principle aim would be to investigate how the individual’s sense of home affected their adjustment to a new culture, or vice versa. It would be fascinating to have other participants do visual autoethnography, while participating in semi-structured interviews. I’m interested in how this margin of the population defines home, especially as the ex-patriate group continues to grow in conjunction with an increasingly globalized world.

Ultimately, I’m interested in studying visual autoethnography, or a process inspired by this method, would be a viable tool for residential interior design clients to use to discover what they truly want and need to live in harmony with their home and larger environmental context.

In conjunction with these research ideas, I think it is paramount to continue to develop not just what I write, but how I write. It’s important to me that the stories be written, and also that they are written well, with truth always and proper amounts of
emotion, dialog, recollection, premonition, and detail. I find that the more I read and write, the better my work becomes. I’ve developed a list of books that I would like to read in the near future. These include:


June 17, 2015: Discussing A Lovely Room of Death

At 2:00 pm on the 12th we gathered in Gallery 181, College of Design, at Iowa State University. My committee, my mom, my dad, and I were present for my oral examination.
We spent two hours discussing my thesis, and I could have listened all day. I found the
different reactions to my work more fascinating than the work itself. Different passages
brought about a variety of memory associations. Scenes described in writing but not shown
in image activated curiosity and imagination. Sentiments regarding, “I remember what it was
like 25,” were spoken; heads nodded in agreement.

We spent quite a bit of time discussing topics similar to the questions posed and
answered earlier in the appendix. All parties seemed to be in consensus that we were
intrigued by what could have conspired if I had had more time. Along this line I’m inclined
to agree. After spending several months with my chosen method, I got the feeling that I
wasn’t in control of the pace, the place was. Whether I tried to rush the writing or slow
down the walks, I always felt like the neighborhood had its own timing and revealed things at
its own convenience, regardless of how hard I looked. I think this process and the outcome
would be markedly different in another location.

The committee felt that I am still conquering space and need to delve deeper into my
relationship with my home itself. During the exam I showed photographs of my apartment,
which by their absence in my thesis, had left readers wanting.

“These are more telling than you realize.”

I don’t doubt it. I look at them and the word ‘nothing’ keeps popping into my head.

_There’s nothing here. There’s nothing going on. There’s nothing interesting about this place except the lack of anything interesting._ Still conquering space. To me this set of photos is interesting not on its
own, but when I compare them to what I know of my past apartments. Others probably
find interest in comparing them to how they live, or how they would live if they found
themselves in this apartment.

“Knowing you, I’m shocked that you haven’t put anything on the walls.”
I am too. I’m known to be an instant-occupier. I move in and four hours later every surface has been plastered with ‘me’, and that definitely includes hanging things on the wall. I’m not afraid of nail holes.

I remember the last place I moved into in Ames. It was a peach two-story duplex that I shared with two roommates. Our unit was the second floor, and my bedroom was smaller than my previous one. I don’t know the dimensions, but the closet took up one corner. By the time I had brought up my furniture and boxes, the rest of the room was full too. It was an August afternoon and we didn’t have air conditioning, so the room was less than pleasant, heavy with humidity after a long day. Patrick had helped me; in a few days he would be leaving to move to Sharjah and start working for AUS. He took one look around the room.

“Rockey, you have too much stuff.”

Tired and not enjoying the thought of watching me unpack, he left for a few hours. By the time he came back that night, I had finished.

“Where’s the rest of your stuff?”

“This is all of it. I told you it would fit.” His face told of his surprise; he conceded that it looked cozy.

This is how I occupy. It’s not done out of chaos, but with intention and determination. In the past, it’s what has made me comfortable. So that this hasn’t happened in either L57 or J46 is somewhat of a surprise. How do I occupy space when I don’t have my things? How does one make their mark on space in a way other than collecting, organizing, and displaying things? By doing hobbies? Cooking? Sleeping? Working? Allowing dust to build? Cleaning fingerprints off the window? Why didn’t I photograph activities in progress, or people? Do these not make up home too? Does the lack of objects reduce the legitimacy of an occupied home?
Maybe, maybe not. These are the sort of questions that I think, in answering, could lead me to learn how I feel about my walls.

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REFERENCES


