

Material Cycle

Once, I came home from high school and found my mother lying on her bed amidst stacks of books and piles of unsorted clothes. Her closet was too full of puffy winter coats and about 2.3 million t-shirts for anything else to fit. I maneuvered closer to her bed, being careful not to trip over something. She was reading a book about Feng Shui.

I haven't always been the wise, responsible adult that I am now, complete with exponentially reproducing bills and a fair number of psychological complexes. There was a time when I didn't care about politics or environmentalism, or whether or not I had a job, because I lived with my mother in a two-bedroom, turquoise house in a middle-of-nowhere town in Wyoming. Wyoming is a state within the United States of America. It is square. The population is minute. Dick Cheney was a senator from Wyoming. Only a handful of people care about Wyoming. I'm not one of them. I let go of Wyoming.

Just like I let go of all the stupid poems I wrote as an adolescent.

My heart feels like a dog

That was almost hit by a car

Had I saved them, those tangible echoes from my childhood would be sitting in a box the size of a refrigerator in my attic. No purpose. After I'm dead, someone would find them while cleaning out my house and think to themselves, "these would be great for my fireplace."

My mom was crazy. Our house was small, but we had a big yard that my mom refused to water. She claimed it was wasteful. The green siding on our house was fluorescent against the prickly desert that surrounded it.

We were poor. Too poor to go to the movies or take vacations. We were too poor for my siblings or I to have instruments to be in band class. I wanted to play the clarinet. I never had a car in high school. Not even a CD player. I bought used cassette tapes from the Salvation Army. Billy Joel's *Nylon Curtain*, Prince's *Purple Rain*, and *The Kronos Quartet*.

My mother loved the Salvation Army. She considered herself thrifty. Every week she would load up on various doo-dads and gew-gaws to decorate the free space on our dusty bookshelves that were already double-lined with books. My mom could not resist anything that was free.

"Nothin' don't mean nothin' honey, if it ain't free"

She would make weekly visits to the public library to pick up boxes of discarded books and magazines. Our house was an obstacle course of *National Geographic*, *Reader's Digest*, *Time* magazines, and outdated textbooks. The clutter was embarrassing. I never invited anyone over.

I was a typical angry teenager. My main outlets were through working on art projects, writing angst poems, and listening to Marilyn Manson. Marilyn Manson was my key to pissing my mom off. Listening to music by a man who my mother thought should be burned at the stake was gratifying. I wanted to upset my mom, because no matter how much I begged her to let go of the useless religious hymnal books that collected dust and dog hair behind our front door, making it impossible to open the door all the way, she wouldn't listen. Instead she would pull out the recorder she found at a yard sale and do her halting rendition of *Praise Be the Lord For Thy Blessings*.

As much as I don't want to admit it, I had become a packrat myself. Hoarding paper mache materials and frayed paintbrushes for collages and other mixed-media art projects. Folders full of clippings from magazines lined my closet shelf: pictures of nuclear explosions, Khmer Rouge, Iwo Jima, and more.

I wrote a lot. I wrote more during those last few years as a teenager than I ever have in my life. It's too bad everything I wrote then was awful. It was page after page of hastily scrawled, stream of consciousness poems telling the world how lonely and depressed and miserable I was:

You always said you'd be there but you're not.

I'll be happy when I'm dead and I can rot.

I don't like anyone.

I don't like anyone.

They were bad poems. They weren't honest. I liked a lot of people. What was coming out of the poems I was writing was a condensed milk of all the frustration I felt from my mother, from our house, and from our lack of financial security. Someone told me once that I should always save everything I write. They said it was like a rule of thumb or something. So I saved all of those stupid poems for a long time. Tucked them away in a closet.

The week after I turned eighteen I moved out of my mom's house. I left Wyoming. I felt like I needed to take every single thing I owned with me, no matter how useless it was. It was like an ingrained reaction. Something I inherited from my mom. "You might need this someday."

1. The psychology textbook from 1972.

2. The tattered Lord of the Rings trilogy.
3. The paisley shirts that mom bought me from Wal-Mart.
4. The duct tape-repaired inflatable chair.

So when I moved out I got rid of most of my things. I don't have any of the old writing I did. Thank God. They are probably in the landfill outside of Sheridan, Wyoming. I hope no one ever sees them. I should have recycled them. Or burned them. It haunts me to know that they might still exist.

You can never really throw anything away.

At least, that's what environmental science tells us. I mean, of course you can throw things away, but they still remain somehow, in some form.

It's like how I can never keep a journal going. I've tried because, in theory, it sounds fun. But it never is. It's never fun for me to record my mundane daily routine. It's a waste of paper, ink and time. Why would anyone, specifically myself, ever want to re-read something like:

Today I had oatmeal for breakfast then I went to work. It was awful.

Or:

I live in a tiny apartment and I'm poor. I'm terrified of having boxes of anything in my house. There is a box of stuff I don't need by my door right now, waiting to be taken to the Goodwill. It keeps catching my eye. As I do the dishes I stare at it. Inside the box is a sweater my friend gave me (it's too big and it itches), a broken spice rack, boxes of incense that smell like anti-microbial, and the Kurt Cobain poster my brother gave me (my apartment has slanted walls). It's like as long as that box is there, I can't be totally focused on anything else. Some little part of my conscious mind circles this box of unneeded things, wondering why they are there, and if just maybe I might need them someday. It feels like I have a cinder block chained to my leg.

I mean, people would think I was crazy