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Creative Nonfiction

Shithole, OH

My sister and I were sitting on a bath towel in my front yard when it first crossed my mind that Youngtown was a shithole. I was at the age when *Seventeen Magazine* was beneath me, but *Cosmopolitan* was still irrelevant, so I was flipping through a *National Geographic* instead. Tammy had brought out a *Teen Vogue*, but she was using it to balance her nail polish while she snacked. That's when she said it, between bites of her "S'mores" Luna Bar. "This city is a shit hole."

I looked up from my article on red dwarf stars and raised an eyebrow.

"I can't wait till I get to leave this hodunk town and move somewhere real." Her voice was full of venom. I wondered if some boy hadn't returned her flirting at school that day.

"What does hodunk mean?" I asked.

"It means a city that's super shitty and lame," she sighed. Only later in life, after using the word 'hodunk' would I learn that it didn't exist, that the real word was 'podunk.' But somehow 'hodunk' seemed right for that moment, something smaller and more trashy than 'podunk.'

"Oh," I said. My article on red dwarfs had me second-guessing my astrophysics career aspirations. I turned the page. "I don't think it's that bad."

She lowered her granola bar from its poised position and stared at me in disbelief.

"*Not. That. Bad?* Dorie. Are you on crack or something?"

"I mean, I don't know, what's so wrong with Youngstown?"

"What's *wrong?*" she barked, "What's *right?! There is never anything to do here, the weather sucks, and everything is falling apart!*"

“Oh. I guess I never really noticed before.”

The truth was, I hadn't. Youngstown was like a familiar face. One that you have seen so many times that, though you know logically the color of the eyes and the shape of the nose, the curve of the lips, you can't close your eyes and *see* what it looks like. Because I had lived in Youngstown since forever, I didn't know that it was a piece of shit. After Tammy mentioned it though, I saw the city through new eyes. That's when I first saw the rust.

If you'd never been to Youngstown before, and I gave you a tour, the first thing you'd probably notice is the rust. It's everywhere, green and orange and brown, on bridges and buildings and fences and roads. It flowers and buds like ivy- a jade and ochre doily ornamenting the city. Living in Youngstown though, you don't really notice it. You also don't notice the dilapidated houses and the empty factories, the pot holes and the smog. At least I had never noticed those things. But then, suddenly, there they were. How long had Fifth Avenue rattled my car with its uneven surface? When did the “S” from the “Home Savings and Loans” building disappear? I couldn't believe I had never noticed the poverty surrounding me on all sides, and yet, I still couldn't picture Youngstown as “shitty.”

Other people have no problem seeing it this way. They're probably the same ones who used our area code to nickname Youngstown the “Dirty 330.” We weren't always dirty though. We used to have the most millionaires per capita of any city in America. We used to have the most powerful steel industry in the country. We used to have wealth. But then the steel mills closed, the millionaires fled, and now the streets are crumbling and the mansions falling apart. Driving downtown, you can see the ghosts of Youngstown's former glory: marble office buildings, grand theaters, ten-story mini-scrappers with chipping paint.

My favorite of these relics is Powers Auditorium. Powers Auditorium looks plain from the outside, just sun-faded red brick, but the inside is more regal than a Czar's palace. In fact, the first time I saw it, I thought it was a palace. Holding my grandmother's veiny

hand, pulling at my itchy tights, I gasped at its sheer size. The ceiling seemed to loom miles above me, and yet I could still make out the intricately painted angels, smiling down with cherubic innocence. The gilded border and the red velvet seats, the mahogany railings and the marble floors all boggled my five year old self. But it was the chandeliers that took my breath away. There were four of them, one in each corner of the theatre, and a fifth one, even larger than the others, in the center of the ceiling. The four smaller ones sparkled like icicles, dripping with crystals and bright red and green gems. The central one, though, was even more beautiful than the rest. Shaped like a giant flower opening its petals beneficently over the audience, it changed color as the show went on. My grandmother had taken me to see *The Nutcracker*, but, squirming in my seat trying to get a better view, all I could focus on was that flower. It changed from pink, to blue, to purple, to orange, to green. It was magic. Even later, when my dad explained to me that there was a man sitting in a little box above the stage, controlling the flower, I still couldn't believe that it was anything less than magic.

For most of my childhood, everything in Youngstown seemed like that. There was magic in the way the slick water at Lanterman's Mill fell over the green rocks, and magic in the quiet December wind that shook snow from the trees lining the highway. There was magic in the pale green rust that clung to every surface like lace, magic in the orange glow of the security lights of the prison near my house. At that age I didn't know what all these represented. I didn't know that it was not normal to hear the siren call of an ambulance every day, not normal to have to have an alarm system and metal doors and a pistol because your house had been broken into so often.

The most magical part of Youngstown is the Market Street Bridge. It stretches between downtown and the south side, though when I was little I only knew that it was the way from my house to my grandma's. Driving down the Market Street Bridge at night, the lights of the city flash beneath you in a meteor shower, a thousand shooting stars of white and

yellow so bright your eyes throb. From the backseat of my mom's Explorer, peering through the condensation of my breath, my stomach would lurch at the sight of it. I didn't know then what made the lights shine so bright. I didn't know what made the shrill siren sound that pierced the darkness like crying. I didn't know what poverty was, or drug wars, or racial tension—I didn't even know the name of the bridge—but somehow I knew that this place, Youngstown—my home—this place was more than just a shithole.