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Waverly House

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About the Contributor (Optional)

Lindsay Marks is a sophomore English major. "Writing this essay was a way for me to demonstrate my obsession, foolish as it is, with the house I grew up in and remember what it is that sustains this obsession."

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Waverly House

Lindsay Marks

I visit the house like one would a gravesite, going when I can to check up on things. I do not lay flowers, only eyes. I note the changes, do what old friends do when “it’s been a while,” and then I drive the half-mile home. 406 Waverly is the home of my early life, the home of my beginnings, of first steps and first words and of holidays and Kool-Aid stands and t-ball. Mom and Dad bought the squatty bungalow in Royal Oak with a few years’ savings, leaving them with each other, a few pilly orange couches, a record player, and a baby en route. My older brother Ryan was brought home to Waverly shortly after the move from my parents’ apartment in Sterling Heights. I moved in almost exactly two and a half years later.

It was deemed a good starter home by conniving realtors who sold cheap money-pits to newlyweds, most of whose white-picket hopes were crushed under the weight of property tax and babies. How much money was sunk into its makeover, I can’t be sure, but I am certain that all the time and sweat and wallpaper glue were worth the returns. The Waverly house cost my parents \$40,000 in 1979 and sold (after much ado over electrical inspections) for nearly twice that thirteen years later. Thirteen years: A long time to live in a glorified refrigerator box. I now understand the smallness of our life on Waverly. We had neighbors

that spoke to us (even called us by name), an unattached one-car garage that was safe to walk to the house from, a porch with rainbow-colored folding chairs, a neighbor dog named Sluggo, a fenced-in yard for our collie, trees and grass and gritty concrete. Where does that life go? What did we trade it for, or can’t we remember?

Dad moved to Royal Oak, Michigan in 1952, when he was two years old. It was considered an area “on the rise” in the 50’s when the idea of the subdivision was a novelty. Situated about twenty miles outside of Detroit’s industrial hub, Royal Oak became a family town, a place for blue-collar dads and bee-hived moms and mischievous kids with cowlicks. My dad has now spent fifty years in this city. Half a century in the same city. I wonder, is it fear or familiarity that keeps him within a mile of his old house? Of course after that long, Dad knows things about the city and not things like “the heritage” or “the richness.” He knows things like Frenz Hardware and the three generations of Frenz brothers who could tell you how to fix anything and would give you the right parts for cheap. Things like Barney’s drug store (he still calls it Barney’s—it has been Save-On for years), just up the street and around the corner, which stocked the essentials. Dad has watched his city sell out to a generation of latte-drinkers

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who forgot or never knew that at one time the theatre played something other than “film noir.” Of course, Royal Oak has become “yuppy-friendly,” settling coffee shops and vintage furniture stores in every available slot up and down Main Street. Dad keeps an eye on property value and laughs to think that our family wouldn’t be able to afford our present house if we were buying it now. We got here before the gold rush. I’ve never asked Dad what he thinks of the city now, but I think he’s grateful to it for keeping his family safe and for Jimmy’s Ice Cream, which hasn’t changed much.

Dad never took to the Waverly house—couldn’t wait to get out. It was always a thorn, an inconvenience, like a sickly relation that he didn’t have the wherewithal to support. His gripes began with the stubborn fireplace, the octopus stove, the chipped barn-red kitchen cabinets, the steep pitch of the roof, the cracked linoleum, the manual garage door. They *began* there. It was too cold in the winter, too hot in the summer, too brown in fall, too damp in spring... He was right about the summer, though. He was dead on.

In the summer of 1988, we felt the full effects of a non-air-conditioned house. With record highs in temperature and record lows in rainfall, it was a virtual Mojave, but worse—the humidity was suffocating. Our bodies were sticky and damp and the air smelled like roasting asphalt. I dreaded sleeping that summer; the air was too stifling to keep a sheet over my head and the darkness too menacing to sleep with no sheet at all, and every night I was afraid for my life. Huge box fans sat and rattled in our windows. These fans sucked in

the air from outside—damp, sludgy air—having no success in converting the mess into cool airflow. I remember, fondly I think, taking cold baths at night and letting the fan blast me dry until the cold seeped as far into my bones as I could stand. Ryan and I would talk like Darth Vader into the fans, “Luke, I am your father.” These were the perks, then, in the summer of ’88. And it is these things that I let myself remember best.

I went to see the new house on Glenwood and it was brick. It stood two houses off of Woodward, an eight-lane avenue running from downtown Detroit to downtown Pontiac, a stretch of close to thirty miles flanked by rotting hotels and tacky business signs or premiere restaurants and law firms, depending on the side of town. Glenwood was practically the midpoint on the line, a twelve and a half mile road heading north. Not too high-profile (there was still the Comfort Motel on the corner), but not derelict (our neighborhood is home to the mayor), Glenwood is an escape from the bedlam. Even now, now when I should be used to it, now when I should be deaf to the noise and fearless in traffic, I am relieved to dodge onto Glenwood for asylum. I hated the new house, especially its locale, and instantly resented my parents for their choice. My excitement expired right there on the curb: there wasn’t a porch and there wasn’t enough grass and there wasn’t a lilac tree and there wasn’t a pool and there wasn’t a neighbor Bill or a yelping Sluggo. This was my to be new home, the home we took seriously, the home we could really “show off.” Since when did we say things like “Ah,

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watch the carpet, watch those wood floor (are your hands dirty?), oh no, don't sit there... let's proceed to the living room." The Glenwood house reared me and shoved a rod up my back; it is where I traded childhood for adolescence, adolescence for adulthood. We also traded neighbors for strangers, a neighborhood for a highway. My parents call this a fair trade.

I had lived at Waverly for nine years when we decided it was time for the Big Leagues, time for tackling all the beautifying projects that had been unfeasible inside the Waverly house. I hardly contributed to the renovation of the new house aside from picking out curtains for my bedroom (they were pastel... a regret) and tearing up carpet stained from dog, cat, and bird compost never cleaned by our predecessors. I suppose the mother in that family missed the chapter in Emily Post about keeping house. The place was unlivable: filth on the walls, carpets, shudders, bathtub, ceilings, counters, curtains, mirrors. The smell of cigarettes and litter boxes (never cleaned) still seeps out in the humidity. The kitchen typified a 1970's color wheel: orange, brown, pea green, yellow. These colors were quickly replaced by neutrals: beige, cream, natural, taupe. Dad and Papa exposed the hard-wood floors previously smothered in blue shag, sanding and staining for days.

Other improvements came with time, years actually. This house, for my Mom especially, was a conquest. The Waverly renovations couldn't compare to the Glenwood overhaul. Glenwood was a Nobel-worthy discovery, an undertaking of magnificent

proportions, a sickening undertaking to see what was underneath the mess. I see now how eager Mom was to outdo, overdo, and redo everything that wanted for change, since she hadn't had that chance at Waverly. With Waverly, things were kept simple, sometimes even unsightly. Our kitchen there was an eye sore with barn-red cabinets and hideous linoleum, probably bought discount. But we made great grilled cheese and popcorn in that kitchen, and we could slide across the linoleum in our socks, and I could climb up on the counters to reach the peanut butter, and we could lick the cookie batter off the beaters there. At Waverly, practicality was our battle cry against an army of Ethan Allans and their rod-iron, poly-plush wonderlands of comfort and earth tones.

The last time I was home from college for the weekend, I swung by Waverly. I couldn't resist a visit. I see the ways trends take over and tastes and time. They've put on aluminum siding (typical) and it's yellow. Yellow, of all colors. There are new windows and I think they're dreadful, but mostly they are not mine. New windows, new paint, new steps, new shrubs, new kitchen cabinets, new front door, new brass knocker, all put there to replace me and my fingerprints and my mom's backwards style. It's amazing what one can see through windows at night; I can see in, but they can't see me. I drive by to appraise things and to make sure no one has done any damage to my house, that no one has attacked it with pastels or major reconstructive surgery. I expect someone has installed air conditioning

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units and probably stripped the wallpaper and redone the carpets. Good for them, they've done what we couldn't. Does the third step still creak and is the basement still haunted? I wonder about these things when I pass.

I especially wonder what my teenage life may have been like on Waverly. A first kiss on that porch would have been phenomenal. In the Waverly house I wasn't old enough to associate the house itself with a turbulent adolescence or coming in past curfew or sparring with my mom, or being embarrassed by the country-goose decor; we left just in time for this. I glorify the Waverly house like it's some place of pilgrimage, a mecca honoring 1920's architectural design. I will not pretend this. Our house was a wreck on the whole and in rain it looked drowned; it was a post-midnight Cinderella. But it is my child-mind that idealizes and creates and remembers and fantasizes about this house and its integrity, integrity best seen when far away, ten years away at the very least.

We were told a few years after moving that the bathtub had rotted through the floor and plunged down to the basement. I had to laugh when I heard this, picturing our pathetic tub with the chunky stainless steel handles plummeting to certain death in the basement below. What a pathetic scene. The new owners tried to sue us for the damage, claiming we hadn't told them how shaky the place was. I had half a mind to ask them what exactly they thought they were buying into when they invested in a feeble old bungalow

from 1925. Nothing was stable in that house, and it wasn't our fault—time was to blame. The Waverly house was booby-trapped, apparently; or maybe it was rebelling against its new owners.

I hold that the Marks' were the first and only family to really live there, not just occupy its space, but really live there. What keeps me there now are the things unseen. They are moments—intimate, laughable, embarrassing, pensive, mournful moments. Therein lies its worth. Our house on Waverly was a permanent investment, whether my parents meant it that way or not. I think what they meant to do was make me a home that was warm and give me carpet good for summersaults and a kitchen floor good for sock-skating. Everything they meant it for is exactly what it *has* meant. For this, I am changed.