RUSTBELT
RESILIENCE

Grand Rapids, MI

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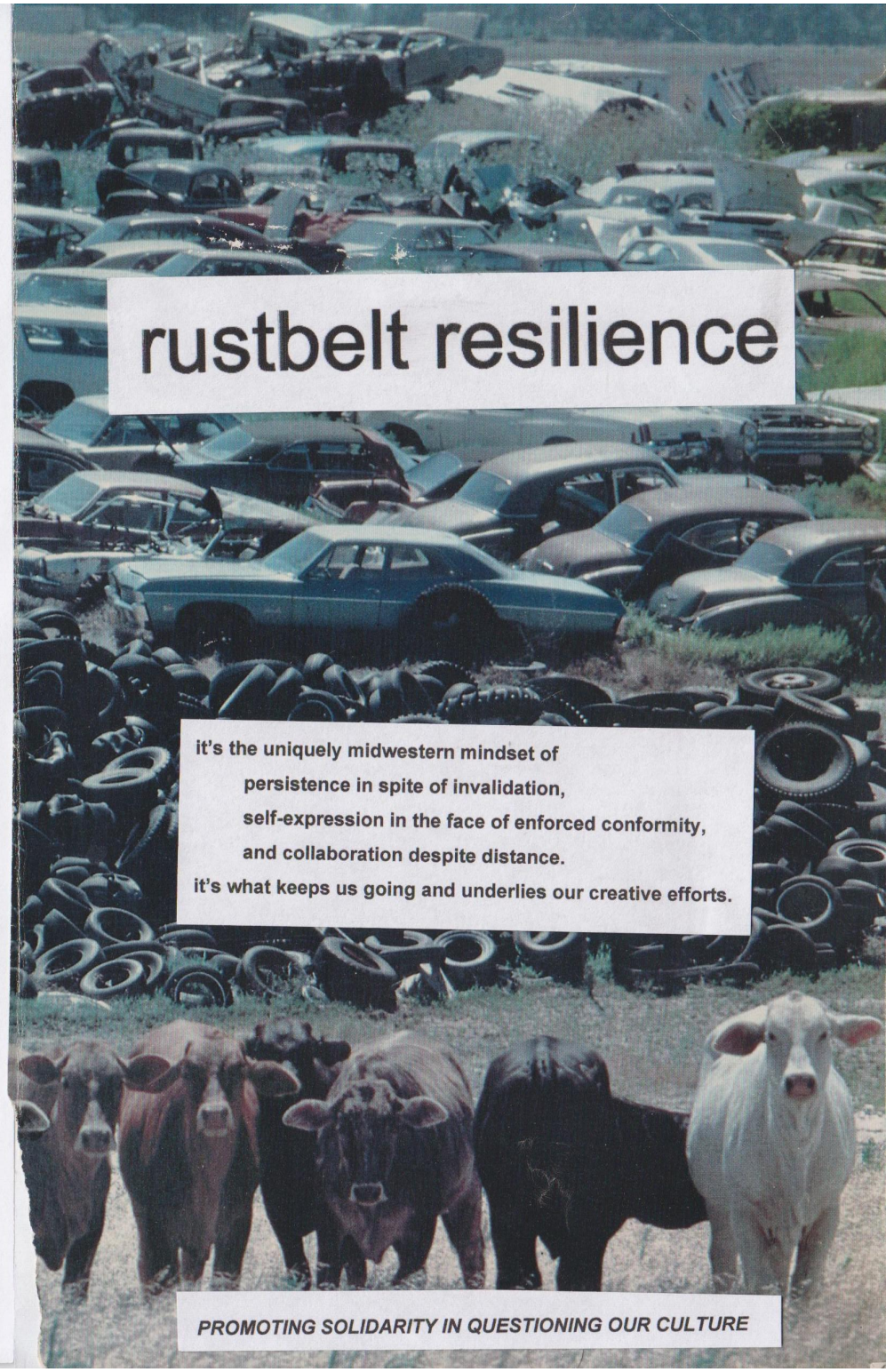
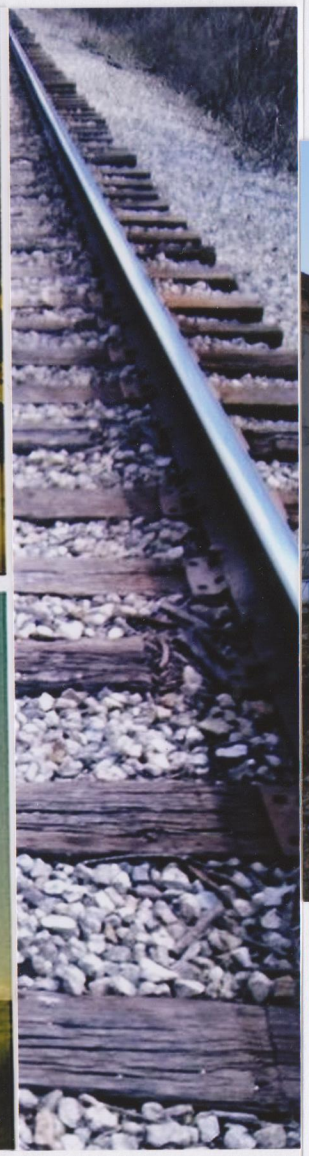
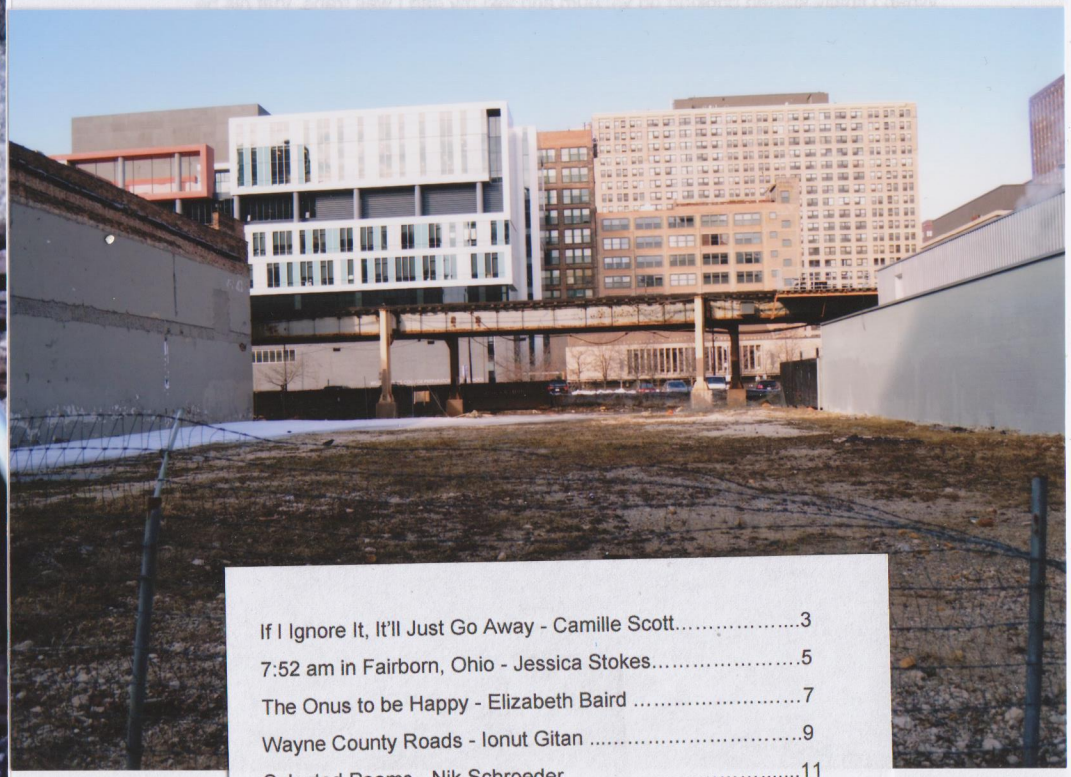


What is it that makes it so hard to find ourselves and be ourselves here in the midwest? How do you cope with our isolating and alienating culture?



The following submissions are in response to the above prompt. My apologies and deepest gratitude to contributors, thank you for your patience in addition to all your work.

This is the introduction to a projected series. Future issues will individually address specific topics such as mental illness, spirituality, sexuality, anything really - through a midwestern lens.



If I Ignore It, It'll Just Go Away.
Camille Scott

[Mild trigger warning for internal dialogue of internalized transphobia.]

I'm constantly ignoring things.
When you ignore something, you minimize it. Maybe you're not equipped, maybe it's too much, too heavy, if I don't ignore it I'll choke on it and I need to breathe dammit. And if you ignore enough things, you can really clean the world up around you. Enforce some simplicity! Create some "common sense solutions!" Mask enough things, and the world, and more importantly even you yourself, seems to become manageable.
Ignoring only eliminates things though. You choke in space just as much as you do underwater.
Up until the summer of twenty-thirteen, I had made a life plan out of ignoring, a plan devised some time in my early teens:
"I'm a fucking freak. I'm really fucked up. I'm so disgusting. I just need to not think about it. If I ignore it, it'll go away."
The plan was clean, squeaky clean, and my sense of self was the only casualty. I'd spend my life alone, ignore all *that*, be unobtrusive, avoid it at all costs and never, ever, ever open up. The obviousness of it is moot; ignore it, and it will go away.
Years fell away as they do, mostly ignored in the passing. As I ignored myself, I ignored the whole of life around me. When you ignore enough of yourself, you start to not really feel like yourself; you become like a barge being pulled through the straits by the tugboat of your body, cars drifting past to somewhere on the bridge above. Or perhaps like two pieces of space junk floating side-by-side, moving ever forward in parallel, or is it quite parallel? I really hope so, else I may eventually drift so far away from myself that I can't reach me, physics ensuring that I will tend to stay in motion, stay, stay, stay away, ignore the diverging lines and let yourself be swallowed up by the emptiness, soon there will be nothing, nothing at all to ignore. . .
In the midwest, you tend to keep careening into the void ad infinitum. Better to just let it slide than disturb such a perfectly straight trajectory. You're probably familiar with the pristine exteriors presented by most midwesterners, barren surfaces scoured as though by hellfire, for better hellfire now than after death.

And you don't even have to say anything to God out loud, after all; God in the midwest seems to consider ignoring something the equivalent of repenting for it.
If God is everything, then God is mostly empty space. Statistically, God is a vacuum.
When I finally started choking on vacuum and told my dad I was trans, that his he preferred she, he said, "I wish you were just gay, son." Gay is more manageable I guess – ignore! Ignore trying to fit gender into your smoothed sensible worldview. "I really think you should spend some more time thinking about this, some more time talking to a professional. Figure out your anxiety issues, and then, if deemed appropriate, proceed with the *other* issues." Then it can all be ignored a little longer, maybe forever, maybe the professional can fix you and we can just ignore that this ever happened. My mom kept saying, "I'm not trying to make you feel bad, but this is going to kill your grandparents... "and "I'm not trying to make you feel bad, but..." Perhaps we can ignore this whole situation right back down to the expected, and keep the bland scaffold of our privileged midwestern family intact. It worked for so long, didn't it?
When the artifice starts to lose its shine, when you stop ignoring things and let them be bent and curvy and knotted and weathered, you start to feel again.
And when you let things be nonsensical and non-comforming and non-euclidian, you somehow collide with yourself after you thought you'd lost you long ago. When you start to see that things don't just go away, you start to release them. You start to prise them apart, spread them, nay, spread you out and see that you are unending, you are folded upon yourself upon yourself upon yourself again and again and again and how did I ignore for so long the fact that I am something wondrous to behold merely for my complexity?
And that is how I nearly lost myself in the midwest. Ignoring away my complexity. The unbearable pressure to conform, to ignore what makes you wonderful. Eventually, I stopped ignoring – I started unfolding myself. And soon enough, even my parents stopped ignoring – they saw me unfold, saw that I was larger than they ever imagined, and they allowed themselves to unfold enough to accept me.
That's what you have to do. You have to stop thinking that if you ignore it, it'll go away. We all have to stop ignoring it.
Because it won't go away.
It won't go away.

7:52 am in Fairborn, Ohio
Jessica Stokes

gold leaf flaking into frosted flakes
revealing grayblack metal beneath
the ornate like the column half
greco roman half iron cross beam
displayed by the college for the arts
signifying something too blunt to be
understood. wasn't the cross made of wood?

breakfast cereal and a sinful child
a table sculpted in gold relief
not relieving any concerns
of andrew simon or soggy milk
grandma purchased a red twirly dress
to lure her to church in her sunday best
grandpa counting the sequins on her sash

trying to keep track: were there thirty?
she spun too fast for him to tally
was hers the dance of seven veils?
her legs were too thin her feet too curled
did blame rest in his genes or her heart?
the pastor's water could provide a cure
while leaving his questions without answers

a congregation of healing hands
concealing the child's unpolished feet
carpenter composed of iron
varnished cross looking down on aging
bodies curving in tan suits and ties
pastor slides his fingers on a gilt page
unknowingly wearing it back to plain

she takes off their hands and their red dress
dancing and limping in stained lightness
she will suffer in sulfur lakes
said someone shaking his hat and tie
she'll face first and second death so she
asked if they were naked in the garden
or if they were born in their sunday best

* POLAR VORTEX * LANSING, MI 2013 *

The Onus to be Happy
Elizabeth Baird

We are expected, from the moment we are born, to have a smile plastered on our face and determination in our footsteps.

This expectation exists everywhere, but it finds itself particularly at home sitting curled up in an armchair next to a Midwestern fireplace in the dead of winter. With the children of the household to bundle themselves up and go out to shovel the driveway during blizzards like this, it finds itself quite content to sip its hot cocoa and contemplate its influence through time. It was sitting in the same armchair five generations ago, watching the children of predominantly German immigrants chop wood and stoke the fire. The ethos of Midwestern hard work and friendliness was born in these Protestant settlers trying to conquer the foreign land and climate with their nose-to-the-grindstone attitudes.

The remnants of this time are still apparent. More so than in coastal United States, Midwestern children are expected to work hard, do well, not complain, and smile while doing it. When being socialized at school, We have not been permitted the freedom to openly and honestly struggle to discover who we are. Why should we be? Our primary aim is, of course, "to become a responsible and productive member of society" (words my father imparted when I was leaving elementary school). Knowing who we are is irrelevant to this objective.

Unless, of course, our personal health and happiness is at all a priority. Today's society places a premium on output when, for its own benefit, it ought to value mental health and positive relationships. From an economic standpoint, employees display better productivity and have more positive opinions of their company when they are encouraged to take naps, socialize with co-workers, and freely express creativity and individuality in the workplace. The argument doesn't even need to be made that self esteem is beneficial for the individual.

How, then, do we achieve self-understanding and self-acceptance? We have been conditioned to project confidence (if we're male, but that's a story for another day) and self-positivity but have been given no opportunity to develop them. How do we learn to love ourselves if we're surrounded by people wearing masks of contentment and completeness, the same one that we ourselves wear?

Answer: we need to be honest with ourselves and with others, and find people that are the same. The earlier that we strip ourselves of our masks and admit vulnerability and brokenness, the healthier our relationships with ourselves and those around us will be. Admittedly, it is difficult to find such a community, a community that shares in its triumphs and failures, its prideful moments and shameful ones, its strength and frailty. But finding one is critical.

This community can have many forms. It can be your best friend from elementary school. It can be your classmates from undergraduate art (or biology) class. It can be your tumblr group. It can be the hippies you met at a Sunday potluck and whiffle-ball game. As long as these other people are genuinely compassionate and honest, the group can help its members along their individual journeys to health and happiness. The main requirement is for you to feel safe. Judgment has no place here. A shoulder to lean on and a listening ear can do wonders, if only we are brave enough to claim our weakness before others.

We must fight against the imprinted instinct to pretend that we are "just fine." In all of us, there is so much potential for personal acceptance, growth, and blossoming into our true selves that can't be confined by society's expectations of normalcy. By finding a supportive group to help us overcome these stifling effects, we can each make progress toward a healthier self.

Wayne County Roads

Text/Photo: Ionut Gitan
09-25-14

It's a somber spring day. I peer through the pane looking out to the curve of the highway below. The pavement is a blackened wet. The clouds cease their pitter-patter, but they still cling just above the city's skyline. The retired warehouse and manufacturing buildings seem to shine their beautiful brick of rouge. The variation in colored tiers reveals history, each different color of brick an enterprising year for the business to expand a level up.

I am in one such structure. I look about to the empty, gutted space enveloping me. It is a reality of the Rustbelt — vacancy, unfulfillment, lacking. The entire floor is objectless save for one room nearly filled to the ceiling with furniture. They are antiques from the former Furniture City.

I rummage through the dusty lot in search of mid-century modern masterpieces. As a profession, I reclaim forgotten furniture to stow away in a shipping container bound for Tokyo, Japan. It's an unexpected outcome from all my years trying to escape to New York City. I often find myself back home — bound by blood and business.

At night over dinner at my parents' house, I attempt to describe the reason for my return. But just as I sing praises to Midwestern modern design, my words fall forgotten. They insist more meal upon my plate. Their son is home from a foreign city. They are content.

My eyes water and my throat swells. In the eight years I lived apart from my childhood home, I developed a physical repulsion. My own home rejects me. As the cats play at my feet beneath the dinning table, my breath shortens. They will be the death of me.

With the furniture freight shipped and my job done, I board my flight for New York. Back in the city, I amble the post-industrial gentrified corridors of a neighboring borough. I enter another emptied and repurposed warehouse. The night's band is a Detroit punk act calling out on triple beams. Among a scene of my own, I breath easily. I am home.

The 'new' Farmer

You can't re-treat a stuck record: like a
green-leafed tree surrounded by
smokestacks stacked on factories
stacked on hard soil stacked on
broken dreams and seven
forty an hour.
Minds corrode like iron in the sand—
like dirty, boxed wine: "One night only!"
in my hands. Help me! I'm melting
in a sea of pristine, cleaned,
faces. They wash
together in a sea of
Jesus! but, lo! They don't produce
the spirit—no one does anymore:
Hardworking, get-your-hands-dirty,
Midwesterner becomes hardline, hard-hating,
get-your-hands-dirty-we're-about-to-commit-mur
Prosperity died with chivalry and the ozone laye

Stale Academics

operate in dimmed, dead
rooms—knowledge has
constricted them—
squeezed their necks into
stiff ties, blowing their
heads into great balloons.
They contort and twist,
but fail to shake off the
dust of ancient, crumbling
books—the giants on which
they stand. They can never
quite make the animal shapes
they intend.
Here I come, though—
youth is
fresh and sharp and
with our razor minds,
pop. pop.

Echolalia
kids with haircuts saying words
insecure as flightless birds-
i think the way you live's absurd,
but who am i to talk?

Rustbelt Cadet (Fieldwork Badge)
Kelly Schwartz

Picture yourself in the woods, swaddled by soft pine needles with a warm cheek to squashed moss. Consider the symbioses between fungi and bryophytes. The competition is what makes this such a pretty place to lay down. Carbon sequestered in cuticles - nothing else can grow. Except by sharing and collaboration. The pines stretch and creek, busy whisper in the wind. Close your eyes. The bottoms of your feet are off the ground as you lay parallel to the forest floor.

The earth tilts and now you are slipping downwards, rapidly building speed. But to our mutual surprise, you are now standing on cement. You have shoes on, of course. The loamy wetness still lingering on your cheeks is now transmitting an uncertain cold twinge as the wind roars past your sleepy eyes. The kind of wind focused between buildings. City winds that split around you like breath through a reed instrument. Vibrating with your hands in your pockets, pull your wool coat closer to you.

Start walking. Can you see the sun rising up above the city in front of you? Good. Good for you. That's a brand new day that you've inherited. Congratulations: you made it.

Where, how, when are not as important as why. But that's the big reveal, and I hope you'll forgive me if I save that bit until the end.

A sense of place is often misleading. Where are you? Well, that depends on when. When are you? Well, that depends on why.

Lost, similarly, is an opinion expressed at the intersection of where and when. Distance and time. Moss and gnarl. It's quite obvious to any college freshman these days that one can only truly know direction or position, but never both at the same time. Whether we accept it or not, we can exist as quantum particles on any timeline. From one thing, we can know all things.

So if even we don't have a straight shot down our timelines, how does it look to others when we encroach on theirs? Circumspection is gift of foresight, assuming your point of views line up. Listen to others, patient as a bathroom mirror. Aural hallucinations bloom and intensify, flashing you into the middle of a conversation you'd drifted from.

It's your boss, with graphs and charts. You wonder what the difference is between polyclonal and monoclonal antibodies.

Next, it's a man explaining to you how computer graphic cards have improved in the last two years, and the unique capitalism of resource allocation. This has nothing to do with woodland moss gardens. Or does it have everything to do with the forest?

You realize you have your laptop open, a phone in your hand, and an anxious roommate pacing in the kitchen. When did it become normal to accidentally access the internet from two separate devices at the same time? Why?

And now your mom is texting, asking why you don't call more often. You ask her what day it is, and she tells me she is concerned for you.

Who?

It seems like you are doing everything in your power to confuse yourself.

How can we be simple again?

Listen.

Look up. Perpendicular. Parallel to the trees. In the air, tangled into air currents with curls of sunlight wrapped around your graceful limbs.

Close your eyes. Understand the deep torpor of a turtle in a cold river. Understand the stretching of the scapulas backwards to relieve the biceps. Understand the acute loneliness of a gaze turned out of-doors. The distance between inside and outside is the length of one day. The distance between home and not home expands beyond this value. All so quantifiable. All so functional.

Well, you might as well know.

The Why: sum of heat and pressure and time. Can you accept that for an answer? It's nothing more than beautiful. Even if it's not the answer you needed. You can choose to enjoy, or not enjoy the space around you. Just like you can choose to ask, or not to ask. It's all up to you in the end. Asleep. Awake. Daydreaming.

Confused? Go and listen. If you see spring, understand that it is not Whole without you. Learn that there are no short cuts in personal growth, just seasons and nutrients and sunlight.

It's only isolationist society that tells us to be unworthy of paradise; that each of our contributions to the world exist in isolation to be propped up for public ridicule. That our best isn't good enough. And yet, by isolating ourselves, we can simplify the message and turn down the gain to soothe the drone. Go to the woods.

One cheek on the soil, understand everything. You are in that everything. You are so beautiful. If you were to suddenly disappear, all creation would all tumble into chaos. You are holding reality together at so many points. You are here because it is energetically favorable for the universe to continue according to the laws of physics. It makes no scientific sense for you to not exist, having already done so.

If we fed ourselves more from our back yards more often, would we feel different about boundaries? As if our very lives depended on parsing apart the world we inhabit, fear would turn to curiosity overnight. We would learn to pronounce new words (phenylpropanoids) and pass this language down to our children. We would stop hurting ourselves so much to feel alive punishing ourselves for being unworthy to receive the world which cannot exist without us.

Dream of returning home. See a rainbow rip through the dark heaving sobs of a long dark night, over top your strange new home. To know one thing is to know all things, and instead of swaddling your fears in fiberglass insulation, grow outward as children grow upward. It's not your fault that you were born so young. But we can't stay young forever. Use your inexperience, burn it, grind it up for flour. Breathe new life. Use the air we all share. Consume the seed husk of hope and swallow. We are all handsomely grown from dirt. Don't be embarrassed, it's where we all come. Promise yourself to learn the chords of patience. And, above all, please do not be afraid.

Everything is as it should always have been.

Fogged Up Glasses in December Rain
Christina Winningham

Masterpiece,
Hung up -
Made.
Painted, you're a harmony of shades.
Not everyone can see your glory.
Can see all that you portray.
With their glasses on they have their script -
Their ideas of what is great.
Blurs without their prescripted shades.
Let me admit, I have no idea what I'm trying to do.
What I'm trying to say.
I'm just trying to wake up,
and feel a smile on my face.
Feel lighter vs. feeling winter's wrath day after day in a personal cloud
hovering over my head.
Asking me if I'm wishing I were dead.
Filling me with words I've never thought to have said and freezing rain.
I haven't cried in a number of days,
but now I'm a cumulonimbus cloud ready to pour.
I am cloud with many words holding a load of rain.
I am a cloud with many words
With no idea how to portray.

Some Songs to Fight the Feels

sufjan stevens - say yes! to michigan!
the death set - negative thinking
paul baribeau - 10 things
weakerthans - aside
johnny hobo - harmony parking lot song
spoonboy - kids in michigan
nana grizol - circles round the moon
dowsing - midwest living
tyvek - wayne county roads
wilco - sky blue sky
BEYONCÉ - crazy in love
omar s - rewind
bomb the music industry- Sike! life is awesome
almanac shouters - going places
greg laswell - comes and goes
defiance, ohio - condition 11:11
regina spektor - folding chair
your heart breaks - warm in winter
devendra banhart - michigan state

suggestions from zine contributors and friends
re: posi, relatable and/or midwest relevant songs