ENGL 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
Professor Briallen Hopper

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Maia Hirschler

Laura Lee, Ink on Skin, Personal Collection of the Artist

by Maia Hirschler

Some facts about my friend Laura Lee: she averages 14,000 steps a day. The walls in her childhood bedroom were neon orange, and she had no furniture. She grew up in Elko, Nevada, which, according to her, is "radically different from any place you've ever been or will be." She only has one fallopian tube. The dark scares her. She goes to UVA because she picked the college's name out of a hat. She can make a campfire in any weather. As a child, she aspired to be an Olympic fence jumper. Also, she's mailed 500 letters and packages over the past 382 days. That's an average of 1.3 letters a day, mostly sent from her apartment in Charlottesville, Virginia, where she's unsurprisingly on a first name basis with her mailman and the post office staff.

Over the past few months, I've gotten two of those pieces of mail from Laura Lee: a thick parchment card with Latin phrases printed on the front and a dizzying pen sketch drawn inside, and a large poster tube containing a textured, abstract finger painting. LeeLee is a creator, an artist: collage, paint, sculpture, models, anything. (She once took a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*, ripped all the pages out, poured candle wax over them, rubbed them with deodorant, and called it "The Secret Study Guide to *The Catcher in the Rye*.") I'm an owner of two pieces by Laura Lee, pen on parchment and acrylic on linen paper**.** All the other people to whom she's entrusted her art are also the curators of their own private collections of Laura Lees, and we all save and cherish the things she has written and crafted and painted and touched. She sends us her handwriting, spiky lines that scrawl out our names and addresses, and she mails us her thoughts

so that we can keep them: “The majority of what I’ve written doesn’t belong to me, they are words that I have given away,” she wrote once. We don’t own pieces by Laura Lee or pieces from Laura Lee—we own pieces of her. “There should be some passion in it. You should be able to feel some of me in it,” she told me over the phone before I picked up the poster tube from the post office. I can see them, 500 pieces of Laura Lee, scattered in mailboxes around the country and the globe for her friends to safekeep.

Another fact about Laura Lee: she has a different brain than she did last November. She doesn’t remember anything between November of 2012 and March of 2013. She doesn’t remember how she got back to Elko for winter break, doesn’t remember Christmas with her family, doesn’t remember flying back to Charlottesville for the second semester of her junior year. She didn’t understand a single thing that was going on in the classes she kept attending, and she would forget what day of the week it was and what class she was sitting in. There are certain points she can pull out, but for all intents and purposes, that period of her life doesn’t exist—it’s been swallowed up by her traumatic brain injury, a TBI.

November 2012, probably late at night, the witching hour for architecture students. Laura Lee is working on a model in her studio at the architecture school. She’s had the flu, so she’s tired and her body’s drained of food and water. She falls, she trips—“who knows what”—and hits her head on the corner of her desk. She wakes up in a pool of her own blood and goes to the UVA hospital, where she gets six stitches. The doctors don’t do a brain scan or an X-ray, so they miss a little bit of brain swelling. And what probably was a concussion turns into a TBI. And Laura Lee is gone. (When she tells me this, I’m reminded of “the literary self-portrait” she wrote when she was 15: *Laura Lee. A balcony that overlooks a brilliant view of nothing spectacular.*)

March 2013: spring break at UVA. Also, the worst week Laura Lee can remember. Later, she will describe this as the hardest moment of her life. She spends eleven days by herself; the only living people she sees are doctors and the mailman. “I had no cognitive functioning, and I was alone. No friends, no people, no transportation,” she tells me. Her voice floats out to me from the speaker of my phone, from Virginia, from deep within her. It’s a slow, careful monotone, so that everything she says carries equal importance. She talks about having to survive spring break, about having to pull into herself and having to dig to find herself. *Where are you, LeeLee? What are you?* (A piece of wisdom from Laura Lee: “We’re all grown and developed human beings, so I’m going to call us trees… To really understand you, you have to find the initial seed that was planted, to find out what really is the essence of what makes you *you*. There’s always one seed that starts everything off. I found that in myself.”)

“I’m a totally different person, not perceivable to a lot of people, but I’m a different person because I have a different brain.” She says it in that simple monotone, accepts it, accepts that she is two halves, two Laura Lees, separated by a void of empty memory. She tells me that her verbal comprehension skills are in the 98th percentile and that her visual comprehension skills are in the 30th. In April, she made a series of graphs about our summer camp; she drew them by hand, partially because it’s the camp way but also because she didn’t remember how to use a computer. And yet: “It’s the most worthwhile thing I’ve ever done. There’s nothing that I would rather have done than create the person I am now.” LeeLee started doing art in April, after the injury. “I decided to be myself; part of that meant doing things that are scary,” she says. She tells me to go look at some black and white photographs she took this fall, when she was recovering in Elko. The first are a series she took at age 15, the second an attempt to recreate those photos seven years later— “Two Images Together Transcend Tyme.” She’s superimposed

a lot of the images, “Combining 15 and 22,” and given these palimpsests of herself titles that “end in –ING, moving forward.”

A confession: I didn’t know about any of this until months later, when Laura Lee arrived at camp for the summer. She had come all the way from Elko, just as she does every summer, which takes more than a full day of travel. I remember that when she emerged from the camp van, the sunlight poured in around her body. There seemed to be less of her, somehow, and it wasn’t until later that I realized she had lost weight. Twenty-five pounds, to be exact. Her brain stopped sending her body signals to eat, so she just didn’t—you don’t eat food if your brain doesn’t tell your body that it’s hungry. She had to buy an entirely new wardrobe—shirts, jeans, underwear, everything—because she was swimming in the clothes of the person she had been before. And then she packed all of it, everything she owned, in two suitcases and a backpack and came to camp.

She took the Greyhound from Elko to Salt Lake City, then a flight from Salt Lake to New York and then New York to Manchester. Miraculously, she didn’t lose any of her luggage—I know because I helped her carry it out of the back of the camp van before going to sit by the lake. And then, five minutes later, Laura Lee came running. “*What do I do if the suitcase I just opened isn’t mine?*” It’s an airline mistake, I thought, she’ll call them, they’ll fix it, find her luggage, happens all time. She spent the next few hours on the phone, frantically calling the airlines and then Greyhound, trying to locate her belongings in the vast void of public transportation. They were gone. She was the last person off the bus in Salt Lake, and some stranger, noticing the digital camera slung around her shoulder, took her suitcase and left her with a pile of dirty, oversized wet clothes. He stole almost everything she owned that had value. Her clothes, shoes, computer hard drive—gone. And 16-year-old Laura Lee’s journals, evidence of her past self,

pages of handwriting, gone too. Also: all her neurological records since November, the tests she had taken to prove that she was capable of re-enrolling at UVA, that LeeLee was coming back, slowly, her neurons rewiring, reconnecting her parts. Gone. In my journal that night I wrote, "I, who ascribe so much meaning to objects, can't imagine losing all my stuff." Later, Laura Lee would write: "What I did have disappeared in Salt Lake in a magic act put on by a stranger from the audience of the Great Greyhound."

Things LeeLee still owned after June 15th, 2013: a fern, a tree, an elephant, an ohm, a deconstructed question mark, an abstract mountain, and a lotus. They're tattoos, forever indelibly printed on the pale skin of her body. Seven tattoos, all imagined and acquired within the span of four months, between March and July of last year. They're images that kept emerging from Laura Lee's pen after her brain remembered how to draw in March. When I first saw them in June, I could imagine my mother's disapproving glare running across LeeLee's body, wondering why any sane person would ever get a tattoo. In Elko, people get tattoos for 16th birthday presents and as graduation gifts—the only tattoo-less person Laura Lee knows in Elko is her mother. LeeLee didn't have any either until this year, until the brain injury; she says she didn't have an image that would still hold its meaning and importance 50 years from now.

The tattoos ripple across LeeLee's skin, transforming her body into an ever-shifting, living canvas. She is a patchwork of different styles and colors: a muted green tree grows over her right arm, a stark blue elephant lives on her foot, a tiny series of black concentric squares emerges from her pale wrist. (The squares, Laura Lee says, are a mountain, the steps of enlightenment in Eastern Tibetan philosophy, with the inner, smallest square as the bottom. Most people, the unenlightened, are on the bottom plane, with the Dalai Lama at the top. I can see them, Laura Lee and the Dalai Lama, looking down at us from the highest plane. *Is that where*

you are, LeeLee?) The tattoos live on parts of her body that she can see, always, and they are constant in their personal, positive meaning. "When I looked back to the past," LeeLee tells me, "I would see only negatives. Now, there are seven images that no matter what, no matter the situation, no matter the time, there are seven positive things that I can always look at." I try and imagine her successive visits at the tattoo parlor in Charlottesville: the tattoo artists' amused skepticism at this young woman who keeps coming in and asking for another tattoo, another piece of herself to keep. "Do you really want to do this?" I can hear them ask. "These don't go away, you know. You sure you're not drunk?"

When I talked to LeeLee most recently, I tried to inventory her tattoos, to take stock of her. "So there's the tree—" "—That's my soul," she interrupted. The tattoo is a tree stump seen from above, inked in green, its fallen leaves spreading across Laura Lee's upper arm. I can count the tree rings on the stump—one, two, three, four, five, six—and then a gap, a space, a nothingness. Life, interrupted. An alternative way of counting: Laura Lee, Laura Lee, Laura Lee—nothing. "Every time you count tree rings, the tree comes alive again. It has so many more lives than just the one it was given while it was growing. When you interact with anything, you're letting it live again," LeeLee says when she shows me the tattoo for the first time. (Is this what happens when I reread your letters, LeeLee? Is this why you sent out that mountain of mail?) An important feature of the tree tattoo: it is exactly the size of Laura Lee's palm. She can cover it completely so that it disappears, cradled, protected by her hand—"I'm holding onto the core of myself," she says.

A final fact about Laura Lee: she doesn't have a last name. Well, legally she does, I guess: it's Lee. Her first name is Laura, but no one calls her that except for her parents. It's always Laura Lee or LeeLee at camp and Laurz at UVA. The southern drawl of Viriginia can't

handle the “u” of Laura, so the letter disappears, gets swallowed, and in Charlottesville she becomes “Lara.” “Say it out loud—call me Laura,” LeeLee challenges me. I can’t. It’s not her—she’s Laura Lee, plain and simple. “Laura doesn’t really exist,” Laura Lee says. “She’s an enigma.” I ask her if Laurz and Laura Lee are enigmas to her, now. “They’re not enigmas. They’re still me. But not exactly. They’re just the best parts of those people.”