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Let’s Leave
Lily Soper

I don’t know where to, but
at 9:17 pm on a Wednesday night,
anywhere is better than any bar willing to take us.
We aren’t the girls holding our White Russians on the house,
spinning in our stools, laughing louder
than the jokes are funny.
We carve our initials into trees. It scares them that we
never stopped thinking and we never stopped caring.
We eat rotting fruit because
our bones haven’t been clean in years
and there’s nothing left at stake.
They will always have their White Russians amid their structural integrity,
but even if we don’t present well, we are made of matter and we are tangible.
We’ll never be beautiful, but we’ll never laugh before the punchline.
We might never be loved, but we will love, unconditionally,
the love you can only find in people who don’t know what they deserve.
We won’t go to heaven, but until
our wisps of morning fog evaporate,
we’ll twist whichever way we choose.
Predawn cold froze through the autumn leaves and pressed heavily upon the little trailer. He was awake before the sun, would be drunk by the time it rose. The preacher’s sad eyes looked at the open book without reading; his ears listened for the sound of anything coming down the long dirt road. No one had come, no one would.

“And he said to me, he said ‘Pastor, if I am bathed in His light, then why do I feel so blind?’”

The crowd murmured in a perfect chorus with the constant squeaking of their old wooden folding chairs as the soft red light of a new sunset spilled into the muggy grey haze of a hot spring day. As he spoke, the preacher strode across the cracked black paint of a small wooden stage; stopping occasionally to flip through an old leafleted bible that lay open on a lamp-lit podium. Forty or fifty people sat in crooked rows under the green and white canopy of the stained, greasy-looking tent.

“He said ‘I feel so lost in this life, I feel so helplessly lost.’ And let me remind you this was a man from this very congregation, from your own flock. Lest you think hopelessness and tests and crises of faith cannot strike so close to home because surely they can.” A microphone sat comfortably in his right hand and he gestured animatedly with his left. Dark stains had formed under his arms and steadily grew even as the evening cooled. “And I know many of you feel the same way; you feel the same as this man. You feel lost and confused and even a little scared sometimes. I myself felt the same way for much of my life.”

The old ladies in the crowd let out an audible intake of breath through the soft rustle of
their constantly beating folding fans. Many of the women wore long-sleeved floral dresses and the men wore collared shirts tucked into jeans or overalls. The preacher wore a white short-sleeved shirt with pale yellow pinstripes, a short, thick forest green tie, and a faded pair of khaki pants.

“It’s true. It’s true I assure you. I once lived in doubt. I could not see, could not comprehend in my darkness what God’s plan for me could be. I couldn’t understand it and so in my weakness and in my confusion I doubted that it was there. We have all felt this way, we have all felt, as this man said to me, ‘blind’ even though we are showered in God’s pure light from the moment we enter this world.” He paused and looked at his flock. He had short, light brown hair with side burns that came down just past the bottom of his ear lobe. The air sat heavily under the canvas and was wet enough to take a drink from. Condensation clumped his hair together in pointed bunches and glistened on his flushed cheeks. “Now, would you all like to know what I said to this man? Would you like hear what my answer was to his earnest question?”

“Yes! Yes.”

“Speak the Word, Pastor.” The answers rang out from the seats. A wolfish grin spread across his face. He waited for all the cries to die down before he continued, calmly at first.

“If you stand here,” he stood still with his feet together and pointed down at the ground, “if you stand here on Earth and stare directly into the Sun,” he pointed to the roof of the tent, “what happens? Can you see the brilliance of its light? The warmth of its heart? No you can’t. When you stare at the Sun you are blinded, you get those little colorful shadows over your eyes and you have to blink a few times before you can see clearly again.” He blinked demonstratively at the crowd, who laughed warmly. “Well let me tell you that God’s light is just like the Sun’s light. In fact, God’s light is the Son’s light. And we can never see it in its full brilliance, can we? Not in this life.”

“Mmm mmm, no we can’t.”

“Most of us see the light of God just as we see the light from the Sun. We see how it warms us and lights our way but we don’t look up to see where it comes from, and when we do it is too bright for our foolish eyes and we must look away. But just because we cannot see the fullness of the light or understand where it comes from and where it leads us, that doesn’t mean it is not there.” The worn wood of the stage creaked as the preacher darted across, speaking louder and faster and stirring his arm in a fluid triangular motion. From side to side to the sky. “But yet I understand that for many of you here today the question is still: Why? You say ‘I know that the light is there and guides me through all things but I do not understand why I still feel so blind, why I feel so helpless.’ But I shall tell you why. It is because that blindness you feel is not blindness to God’s light or blind-
ness to his plan; it is blindness to the nature of your own self. We are truly strangers to ourselves, are we not? It is said in Romans seven fifteen: ‘For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.’ How many people here today have felt those words in their lives?”

Hands rose from every seat. The preacher’s own hand reached the highest.

“Look at that, look at all those hands. I know I myself have been guilty of that exact sentiment many times. But tell me something, is this room full of evil people? Is the man to your right and the woman to your left a sinner?”

“No!”
“No!”
“No, Lord!”
“Look at me in front of you, am I a sinner in the eyes of God? Am I an evil man?”
“No!”
“No, Pastor, you are saved!”

“That’s right, because it is no sin for man to be confused, to feel that the face he sees in the mirror is the one that is most foreign to him. Because God does not ask that we understand, He does not expect that we will understand. All God asks is that we believe, that we place our trust in Him and let His light guide us wherever it must go. You may be a stranger to yourself but you are no stranger to God who has made you in His image, and if you let Him into your heart and let His light lead your life then He will lead you to paradise. As we are told in John one twelve thirteen: ‘But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.’ That is the message I came here with today.” Words charged out of his mouth like an endless train bursting from a tunnel. The preacher clung on with great shuddering breaths that overpowered the dated amplification system and rained distortion upon the unfazed pulpit. “You are all children of God, and if you feel pain, if you feel sadness, if you feel anger or spite that is all in God’s plan if you only put your faith in his hands and let him guide you along you will only end up in one place: and that is revival in the eternal paradise of Heaven. Somebody praise God!”

“Praise God!” “Praise Jesus!”
“Praise the Lord!”

“If I trust and believe in the power of my God then anything is possible! For my God is the God of miracles! People ask me ‘do you believe in the God that can heal the sick?’ and I say yes
I do! People ask me ‘do you believe in the God whose power can cast out a demon that has taken hold in someone’s mind?’ and I say yes I do, I have seen it! I have seen the God that feeds the hungry! I have seen the God that pulls the cripple out of his wheel chair and makes him walk again! I have seen the God that visits the addict and makes him put down the needle forever!” Upbeat Pentecostal hymns played on the speakers and the preacher jumped and spoke with the rhythm of the music, the giddy congregation clapped along and stomped their feet into the matted grass. “For my God, the God that I serve, is the God of miracles! He is the God to which I give everything in my life! All my joy, all my sorrow goes to God! In order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ! To Him belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever! Say Amen!”

A chaotic roar from the crowd drowned out the preacher’s screeched command and the whole tent danced and clapped in ecstasy. A tall man with a great stomach who wore a short-sleeved denim shirt tucked in to a worn and dirty pair of gray slacks leapt with unmatched fervor. He had short black hair cut in a straight line above his eyes and wore wire-framed glasses with big, thick circular lenses that made him look like a delirious bullfrog. After breaking through the compacting throng he found his way up to where the preacher was just stepping off the stage and swept him up in a passionate hug. His movement descended into the spastic when he finally let the flattened preacher from his embrace, arms and legs spasmed as he babbled away in shouted tongues. The soggy Earth stained the back of his shirt when he seized up and crashed down.

Someone had turned off the music and most of the congregation was gone. The remaining few filed out of the tent, but not before they stopped and shook hands with the preacher, thanked him, and told him what a great sermon it was. He looked each of them in the eye with a kind smile and thanked them graciously.

In a brief quiet moment he stopped a young woman carrying two wicker collection baskets filled with single bills and coins as she was making her way toward the back exit of the tent.

“Why don’t you leave those here with me MaryBeth, I’ll take care of the collections tonight.”

“Are you sure Pastor? I really don’t mind.”

“Oh yes of course, no problem. You go and relax, you’ve earned it with the great work you’re doing.”

“Well sure then, thank you very much Pastor.” She handed him the two baskets which he stacked and held in one arm.

“You’re very welcome MaryBeth, have a good night now.” He smiled warmly at the young
woman and she beamed at him as she turned away and skipped over to a group of her friends.

“That was a lovely sermon Pastor, thank you so much.” The preacher looked up from the baskets in his arms at the elderly couple who had just approached.

“Hm? Oh Rick, Betsy, you’re too kind. Thank you for coming.” He shook both of their hands. “God Bless.”

Once everyone had left for the night the preacher took the collection baskets and went out the back of the tent to the small settlement of trucks, trailers, and campers that was his revival ministry. The last blood red sliver of sun slipped behind the trees, glinting crimson off the smeared and cracked windows of the rusty encampment. A cool breeze tempered the dim light and his hair, still damp from exertion, stood on end. He walked to the far edge of the camp where his battered old tin can airstream was parked, and went in through the tattered screen door that hung ajar.

At the small table with a fake wood top pockmarked by scratches and circular water stains he stared at the two baskets in front of him filled with wrinkled dollar bills and dirty coins. For a long time he just sat and looked down. The olive green acrylic pleather seats groaned and squeaked anytime he shifted his weight. With a sudden movement he dumped both baskets out on the table and began to separate their contents. All the coins he put back in one of the baskets, but the bills he collected into twenty dollar stacks that he secured with rubber bands. When he was done he had three of them. He went into the small bedroom and came out with seven more.

A small closet held only eight hangers. Two were free, three held collared shirts, two had folded pairs of pants, and the last one held an old corduroy jacket. He put on the jacket and stuffed the stacks of bills into the inside pockets. From the top shelf of a cabinet by the sink he pulled down an old Makarov pistol which he tucked into the back of his belt and walked out of his trailer.

Outside the dozen or so workers of the ministry were gathering around a small campfire, eating sandwiches and laughing. Crickets whirred in the grass and a few lightning bugs fluttered around in the dark.

“Coming to join us Pastor?” A young man by the fire asked as he walked out of his camper.

“A little later Stephen, I’m going to go into town for a bit and get a few things from the store.”

“Would you like me to go with you?” The young woman who had held the collection baskets sprang up to ask.

“Oh no, that’s fine. Thank you MaryBeth but I’ll manage on my own. I’ll see you all shortly.” The group accepted his genial departure and bid him well. He opened the door of a battered
brown 1994 Nissan pickup and, after a few false starts, got the engine going. The headlights flicked on and he pulled off the grass onto the dirt road that ran along the western edge of the camp.

The preacher drove on the dirt road for fifteen minutes, and then on two-lane highway for twenty more before he reached town. Dirty yellow headlights illuminated the road ahead of him, but the dense foliage on either side swallowed the light like a black hole. Hemmed in by darkness, the truck could only sputter forward into the cast light. A hand painted sign proclaimed entrance to Eunice, seat of St. Landry Parish and the street opened to the uninhabited buildings and intruding weeds of the outskirts of town. Eunice was a central-Louisianan collection of single story houses with chipped paint and unkempt yards and flat, rectangular businesses with oil-stained parking lots where weeds and grass pushed through the cracks in the asphalt, and it felt like it.

Flickering orange streetlights drenched the main avenue, there was only one to each block, alternating on the right and left side of the street. He didn’t see any other cars as he passed a small white building with a smeared window front that said Johnson’s Grocery, or as he passed more small buildings with locked doors and dull grey neon signs. He took the left after a large gray building with no windows that smelled like spoiled poultry.

A few blocks away from the main avenue he pulled into the parking lot of Crawford’s Automotive Parts & Repair. Moonlight reflected from puddles nestled in the litany of potholes. The two garages were closed and dark but light came out through the blind that was covering the window to the office door. A large bearded man in a leather jacket sat in a white plastic chair with his legs outstretched and watched the preacher park and turn off his lights. He sat for a moment with his hand on the keys before taking a deep breath and stepping out, slipping the keys into his pocket as he walked toward the door.

The large man stood up in front of the door, bearing no expression as the preacher approached.

“We’re closed.” His voice was gruff and curt. “Come back tomorrow morning, garage opens up at nine.”

“No, well, um, I’m here to play.” The preacher shifted his weight uncomfortably, the man’s eyes narrowed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about man, but whatever it is you’re in the wrong place and you need to leave.” He stepped toward the preacher and grabbed his shoulder as he made to turn him around. The preacher startled out of the man’s grasp and frantically reached into the pocket of his coat.
“No no, wait! Wait! I have money! Look.” His voice was agitated and scared and his hand shook as he brandished a handful of bills. The large man looked at him suspiciously for a moment then took the money from his hand and grabbed the preacher by his tie.

“Who are you?” He asked sternly. “Why did you come here?”

“I’m, I’m a preacher,” he stammered frantically in the man’s grasp, “I run the revival ministry that’s been set up out west of highway eighty-three, we’ve been there for six weeks now. A member of my congregation told me about this place. She, she said you could buy in for two hundred, I have two hundred. I’m just, I’m just a preacher. I don’t want any trouble.” The man held him for a minute longer as he looked the preacher up and down.

“Alright, come in here. If you move at all too quickly you’ll really regret it.” The man held his grasp on the preacher as he unlocked the door, pulled it open, and dragged him in. Once there, he pushed the preacher in front of him into the room.

The inside of the building was a normal looking mechanic office, but the couches and reception desk had been pushed up against the walls and the open floor space was filled with a large poker table with seven men seated. Stale cigarette smoke settled in the air and dull yellow lamps lit the room halfheartedly from each corner. Three more large men in leather jackets sat around the wall. They all looked up as the preacher stumbled into the room but none of them spoke. A very tall man with clean-cut short gray hair and small wire framed glasses who sat at the dealer’s seat spoke first.

“What do we have here, Eric?”

“This guy came up, said he wanted to buy in. Said he was a preacher and heard about us from someone in his congregation. He’s got money.”

“A preacher?” The man stood up slowly and walked over to where the preacher trembled by the door. “Don’t hear that one every day, where do you preach at, preacher?”

“I, I run the revival ministry that’s been set up out west of highway eighty-three for a month and a half. But like I told this man here I’ve got money, I’m not-”

“You told Eric that you heard about this little game from someone in your congregation,” he didn’t seem to have listened to what the preacher had said, “who was it?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t want to tell you that Sir, I hope you can understand.” The preacher met the man’s gaze with timid assertion. There was a short pause that felt like a very long pause as the tall man looked at the preacher like he didn’t believe there was a man in front of him.

“Well alright then. You say you’ve got money, you know the buy-in is two hundred?”
“Yes, that’s what I have.”
“Is that all you have?” The preacher nodded.
“He only gave me a hundred.” Eric interjected from the doorway.
“Oh no, no I’m sorry I have the rest here.” He drew the rest of his money out of his coat and put it in the tall man’s outstretched hand, he looked up expectantly at Eric, who walked over and gave him the remainder.
“Well come on and have a seat then preacher. At least if you lose the first hand you’ll be out of here quickly. And you don’t need to call me Sir, Mr. Crawford is fine.”

The men around the table shuffled over to make room. One of them stood up and got another chair for the preacher which he sat directly to the right of Mr. Crawford. None of their distant, heavy eyes moved up from the table for more than a brief furtive glance. Most of the players wafted the smell of drink: all of them reeked of shame.

“Eric take a seat by the door and enjoy the show if you want, no one else is gonna come tonight.” Mr. Crawford said as he sat down and began shuffling the cards expertly, dealing out two cards to each player as he spoke. With his shoulders relaxed he sat straight in his chair, looming over the hunched bodies around him. Periodically, the men would produce flasks from shielded interior pockets but Mr. Crawford payed no mind to the glass of water in front of him. There were no chips on the table, each player sat behind stacks of bills with which they bet. The dealer’s was the biggest.

“So obviously you don’t have any money to bet right now preacher, and I can tell you that all these guys are gonna be pretty sour if you win the pot you didn’t put anything up for.” He dealt his final card face up, a ten of diamonds, and turned to look expectantly at the preacher.

Under the shield of his left hand, the preacher looked at his cards. Nine of hearts and the ace of diamonds. His face lost some of its anxiety.

“Why are you here preacher? What’s a man of God doing in a place like this?” His hand was clasped firmly on the deck of cards, the game would not continue until he got an answer. The preacher set his cards back down and considered his response.

“My ministry is struggling, it’s hard to establish any kind of permanence when you move around so much, but our time in St. Landry Parish has been our best. We’re almost out of our agreed tenure on our current plot and we would like to get a lease on a more permanent residence in town.”

“How much is that gonna cost you?”

“The down payment is eighteen hundred dollars.”
“Huh, you’ll need to be real lucky to get that here, why don’t you just take that out of your collections?” The preacher was getting annoyed, but answered the questions as well as he could. He had nothing to hide.

“The people who come to my ministry are mostly very poor, it would take months, maybe even years to collect that much.” Mr. Crawford seemed more amused than anything by the preacher’s responses and kept asking questions without any clear intent to continue the game. The rest of the men at the table looked at the preacher resentfully but said nothing.

“Hmmm. Does anyone else at the ministry know about your little plan here, do they know about the church you’re eyeballlin’?”

“I am sure they will be overjoyed when I tell them about it.” Mr. Crawford snorted out genuine laughter at the preacher’s answer.

“You’re a confident man preacher, that’s for sure. You must believe you’ve got God on your side.”

“Yes I do. I have full faith in God and all actions I take in His name.”

“Yes you do. Well,” he cleared his throat, “since we’re on the subject of collections, you know, every collection basket I’ve ever seen, which has been a few, they’re always filled with crumpled, ripped, dirty old dollar bills. The ones that are so fucked up you’re not sure any real store is gonna accept them so you throw them in the swear jar or in a piggy bank or something and occasionally grab a couple every few weeks or so when your wife nags you about it. And this stack here that you gave me,” he thumbed through the wad of bills, “every one of these looks like they just went through the fuckin’ dryer. Do you really think God’s gonna help a preacher who takes his collections straight to the blackjack table?” Eric and the three other men sitting around the room all laughed. The men at the table remained silent but keenly watched the exchange.

“Well,” the preacher coughed and squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, “I believe that God is aware of the purity of my intentions and supportive of the means I have to take to achieve them, even if they are…” The preacher struggled for the words.

“Not exactly the most righteous?” He nodded furtively at Mr. Crawford’s suggestion, which made him laugh again. “Well shit then, let’s find out if you’re right. Hit or stay?”

The preacher took a moment to reply, but he didn’t need to think about it. “Stay.”

“Goddam, you are a confident man, aren’t you preacher? How about the rest of you, you as confident as the holy man?”

The preacher didn’t pay attention as the rest of the players made their bets and took their
cards. He sat in his chair and watched the pot grow without daring to try and keep track of the value. He was brought out of his daze by Mr. Crawford’s voice in his ear.

“Preacher? You still with us preacher? Come on, flip ‘em.” The preacher showed his hand. “Oh holy shit, twenty! You might have God on your side after all. Anyone got something to beat that, I know I don’t.” The three men directly clockwise to the preacher folded their hands, as did the two closest to Mr. Crawford. The man in the middle of the table directly across from the dealer held on to his cards. “That everyone? No? Oh, Frank. What you got, man? Is God with you?” The man smirked and turned over an ace and a jack.

His heart dropped into his stomach with the weight of an old cannonball and splashed stomach acid through his body until every inch burned with shame. A dull high-pitched ringing filled his ears and turned the laughter he saw in his peripheral vision into muted murmurs. The ringing grew louder and louder in his ears as he stared down in shock at the pile of money in the middle of the table. It reached an ear-splitting peak as he saw the man, Frank was his name, edge out of his chair and reach for the pot.

In one frantic but surprisingly fluid motion the preacher stood up from his chair, drew the Makarov out of his belt, and whipped the side of it with desperate strength against Frank’s intruding temple. He crumpled immediately and began to bleed on the table. Everyone in the room stood up and cried out, the four men in leather all moved for weapons of their own but the preacher was quick and pointed the gun at Mr. Crawford. His hand shook violently but he was close enough it wouldn’t matter.

“Don’t move! Nobody move! I’ll shoot him, I swear to God!” Mr. Crawford looked at him calmly, even amused.

“It’s cool, it’s cool. Everyone relax, we know if he swears to God he really means it. Eric, Ryan, all of you keep your fucking guns down. But seriously, what the shit Eric? You didn’t search him?” His hands were raised but he stood right where he had risen from his chair. The preacher stepped back from the table.

“I’m sorry Mr. Crawford, I got distracted by the whole preacher thing.”

“I don’t want to hear it right now Eric!” He brought his gaze back to his target. “What now preacher? What are you gonna do now?”

“Get back against that far wall there!” He motioned with his head to the wall across from the door and brandished his weapon along the table and around the room. “Come one! All of you, let’s go!” One by one, the rest of the men in the room begrudgingly made their way over. Mr.
Crawford was the last one to move, his amused smirk still stretched across his face.

“Alright preacher, we’re going.” He stepped slowly backwards towards the wall, looking at the preacher the whole time as they all backed up against the wall. Holding his aim on Mr. Crawford he reached his free arm toward the table. His eyes flitted quickly and constantly back up to the wall as he grabbed his wadded cash from the dealer’s seat and scooped up all the blood-free money he could from around the rest of the table.

The preacher side stepped carefully over to the door and stood beside it, his small pistol still raised across the room. “What are you gonna do now preacher, there is no church, not after this. You can’t do anything with all that money. If you drop it all right now and don’t try and run we won’t have to go out to that ministry to look for you. I think anyone we might run into out there would be real thankful to you for that. Just put that gun down preacher, put it down now and this whole thing stays in this room.”

“No I, I can’t. I still, there’s still so much I have to do.” The preacher sputtered out loud as he scanned the room for a way out. With both hands occupied, he hooked his left foot around the leg of the nearest table chair and dragged it next to him.

“Come on preacher now just what the fuck are you doing here?”

The preacher bent his leg back and braced his foot against the door. He tried to force it open with a firm push but failed. The back of the room erupted in laughter. He drew his leg forward and kicked in to the center of the door as hard as he could and it burst open.

“You’re not getting out of this preacher, if you don’t want anyone else to get hurt you need to stop this right now.”

The preacher muttered inaudibly as he took a few shaky backwards steps out the door until he was clear of its radius. He hooked the chair again and drug it out with him. The room was silent for a few seconds as he stood there, pointing his gun. Mr. Crawford had lost his smirk and annoyance took over his face.

“This is your last chance you fuckass. If you run, everyone left at that ministry is going to feel how angry we are. Put that goddam gun down!”

The Makarov rattled in his violently shaking hand. “I just, I just…I can’t.” He took a deep breath and then kicked the door shut. As quickly as he could he lowered his gun and hooked the tips of his fingers around the bottom of the back of the chair, jamming it up under the doorknob in the way he had seen in films and ran towards his car, still holding the gun in his right hand. Bills flew out and fell into the parking lot behind him as he ran, but his left arm was clutched tightly
enough around the pile that he held on to most of it. He could hear multiple shoulders throwing themselves into the door as he reached his car.

As he drew level with the cab of his truck he tried to grab the keys in his pocket but his hand wouldn’t fit. He looked down and saw the gun still clutched tightly in his fingers. He tried to drop it, but he had gripped it so firmly for so long that his brain couldn’t make his muscles let it go. In desperation he slammed his hand as hard as he could onto the side of the truck bed and managed to knock the pistol out of his grip. The old weapon clattered to the ground a few feet away from him. It could have gone off when it hit the pavement, if it had been loaded.

His numb and mostly broken fingers fumbled in his pocket and clutched his keys. He wrenched open the door and climbed into the cab, letting money spill out onto his lap and down the seat as he took the wheel with his left hand and tried to jam the keys into the ignition, finally turning it just as the door burst open behind him. The truck started on the first turn and he sped over the curb and into the street as bodies poured out into the parking lot. A single gunshot cleaved open the night as the back windshield shattered behind him. Unharmed, he sped off down the road as fast as the truck would go.

He drove west on the highway for two hours in pure shock before he realized where he was or what had happened. There still had been no headlights behind him since he left the garage. His whole body started to shake and both hands were clenched around the steering wheel as hard as he had held the gun. Breathing had been heavy and labored the whole time, but he started gasping for air as his eyes filled with tears, an uncontrollable groan came out with every exhale as if the wind had been knocked out of him. He sobbed with all of his body as he took exit two seventy one north to highway fifteen.
Colossians 3:13  
“Forbearing one another, and forgiving one  
Another, if any man have a quarrel against any:  
Even as Christ forgive you, so also de ye.”

Forgiving is a power beyond  
Souls of the making of faith.  
A tribulation between forces  
Comes with some source of  
Strength with whom shall bring  
Out for our Lord to see.

Even as the almighty Father already  
Sees the strength within:  
The man that confronts his peers,  
Of tribulation,  
With that power has what our  
Lord calls reason.
A passion modifies reason as
When rain pours its wet sparkles
Into the landscape of grass to
Construct what is known as dew.

The rain will shine its beauty
To the world as a reminder of
What comes above shall not
Only help what has been burned below
But also help the growth of the inner
Source of power and reason.

With reason,
As of man with the right amount of faith,
The strength of forgiveness pours
Out as faith shines its reasoning
Behind the power of our Lord.

However with the amount of faith
That man has gained, due to
Practice and honesty,
He shall state his reason with
The selected power that
Shines within ourselves.
I heard you playing the songs
they used to sing while we watched
and I rose like the waves.
Off again, on again
between drowning and floating.
I still appreciate the rain.

You still choose to play
the sad songs of Noah
even when I am trying hard
to hold together the sand castles
in the shape of my dreams.
It’s the waiting hours that hold us up.
Then the tide comes in to take them.

Everything changes in the dark.
I want to pretend: when I close my eyes,
it almost feels like nothing’s changed at all.
It certainly feels like I’ve been here before.
You know, we’ve all been here before.
Running in circles of despondency
while you go around assuming
we’re all proud like you.

I can hear the sound of the water
washing through the past,
bringing to surface all things
I want to forget. It is a cleansing.
I have built boats with the promises
I mistook for faithfulness.
None of which have held through
this flood. This chest is heaven at its core
bursting forth from chambers of the deep.

I have held on to see the rainbow,
a banner that once spoke of your affection.
In the thunder and downpour
meant to separate the earth from sin,
you held onto the black forming the clouds.
The rain remains.

Though the floods have lessened,
they will not altogether subside.
I wait in the ocean you released in me.
Arms up, body sinking, eyes matching
the blue and green and salt
continuously rising up to meet them.

Your arms had once been my safe place
to carry me across this sea.
Forty days and forty nights.
You kept me above the water,
you saw me through the storm’s winds.

Although I have extended the branch, 
leaves of olive in this dove’s mouth, 
I never found another place to rest.
Part One: Ants

Alex sat in his office chair, staring out the window chain-smoking cigarettes. After the first two his throat and lungs felt raw, each drag worsened the feeling. But, on some level, he found comfort in the discomfort. At least he felt something, anything. None of these thoughts had reached his conscious mind though. The sight of all the little ants scurrying across the pavement hundreds of feet below held his attention. He watched as little toy cars drove by, sometimes stopping to let someone in or out. He watched as all the little people gathered on corners waiting for the lights to change and thought about how pathetic they all were, every single one of them. A horde of myopic sheep just waiting to be brought to his proverbial slaughterhouse, where, instead of taking the meat off their bones, he would take their money, their homes, anything really, as long as he could make some money off of it. *It serves them right for being too stupid to protect themselves,* he thought as a self-satisfied smile spread across his face.

He wasn’t even sure why he still came into work every day, there was nothing for him to do, he had his own little ants to do his work for him these days, which meant he could have just as easily stayed home and watched the numbers in his bank account steadily go up. But something didn’t feel right about that. He had spent years working twelve-hour days, seven days a week in this building to get to where he was, and the result was that the office felt more like a home than his house did.

He thought fleetingly about looking over the small pile of lawsuits he always seemed to have
against him, then dismissed the idea. He knew the laws, he hadn’t technically broken any of them and his team of lawyers had never failed to defend him against the army of sheep that seemed to constantly be vying for reparations from the wolf. Considering he had nothing else to do, he decided to have a cup of coffee and a bagel to wash down the seven, no eight cigarettes he had smoked in a row, a new record.

As he made his way out of his office, his secretary stopped him. He felt a pang of annoyance; _maybe it’s time to replace this one._

“Sir, your mother left a message. She wants you to call her back.”
“What? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”
“But, sir; you told me not to disturb you,” the last bit came out as a whimper. She knew not to contradict him.

Alex stared at her, _I do need a new one, this one is getting too old anyways. Maybe I’ll get a brunette next._ A minute later Alex was back in his office dialing his phone, it rang twice before she answered. “Hello,” the statement almost sounded like a question, despite himself, the sound of her voice brought a small smile to his face.

“Hello, mother”
“Ah, Alex, I was hoping you would call earlier.”
“I would have, if my secretary wasn’t completely incompetent.”
“Oh, don’t be so hard on her, I really liked her when I came to visit, what was her name again?”

“Claire, I think, I don’t know. Why does it matter? What do you need mother?”
“I just wanted to see how you’re doing, you know you never call.” _One of these calls. Great._
“I know, I’m sorry, I’m just so busy with the bank and everything.”
“Of course, but is that any excuse to not call your mother?”

Alex paused for a second, he wanted to say yes, “No, you’re right, it’s not.” _How does she do that?_

“Good, now that we’ve got that out of the way, how are you?”
“Fine, busy”

The next twenty minutes were agonizing, it _had_ been a long time since they last talked. Alex was grilled on just about every aspect of his life he could think of. Who he was seeing (no one), how his friends were (not that he had any), if he was eating right (he wasn’t), when he would visit next (expertly evaded) and if he had taken her advice and gotten a dog (he got a fish).
Finally, as the call came to an end, she slipped in an, “I love you.”
Alex blushed, “I love you too mom.”
After she had hung up Alex spent a few seconds looking at his phone, reveling in the warm feeling the sentiment gave him. Then the feeling was over, **time to get back to the real world**.

Making his way out of his office he again barked orders at his secretary, Claire? To hold his calls. This time she just nodded as he passed. The building he worked in had no executive elevator, and he worked on the top floor, so he was forced into a cramped space full of other people and had to endure a full five minutes of agonizing torture with these people. Just being around them ruined the happy mood he had been developing. He stared at a paunchy, middle-aged man wearing a shabby, light grey suit. It didn’t even look like it had been tailored right. **What type of person with any self-respect would wear that in public? And what is that smell? Honestly, do these people even bathe?** After a torturous five minutes, the elevator finally reached the ground floor and Alex rushed out of the building trying to hold his breath until he reached the door. Exiting the building he gulped in air laden with the smell of exhaust; **at least it’s better than the stink of those people.**

The walk to his favorite coffee shop was just a few blocks, the entire affair usually took about twenty minutes, but today seemed to be his lucky day. He hit all the lights at the right time and made it to the shop in only a few minutes. To top it off, there was no line. At the register he ordered the same fifteen-dollar latte he always ordered and a plain bagel with cream cheese. When they called his name, again in almost record time, Alex grabbed the bag and his cup and left the shop with a spring in his step thinking that today might actually be a good day. His happy mood lessened when the first light he came to changed just before he could reach it, he became increasingly annoyed when a pile of rags out of the corner of his eye moved.

It was a homeless person, sitting up against a building and looking even more pathetic than everyone else around them. To compound this, they actually started speaking to him.

“Spare some change, sir?” the pile of rags asked in rough, gravely tones.

Alex’s annoyance turned to anger in a flash. The audacity, this man, or woman (he hadn’t cared to look long enough to figure that out), dared ask for free money as they sat wasting their lives where everyone could see. But he checked himself, **it’s just an ant, just ignore it.**

Then the person got up and approached him, “Please sir, I don’t mean to bother you, but I’m so hungry. I haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

Alex’s patience snapped, he spun on his heel to face the person, “Then get a fucking job you worthless little shit!” he spat in the face that he soon realized belonged to a woman.
He was taken aback, he hadn’t expected the person to be so young and innocent looking. For a moment he felt a pang of guilt in his gut, then the moment passed, it’s still no excuse. Then, maybe because he desperately wanted to get away from this person, maybe because something deep inside of him actually felt bad for what he had just said, he backed into the street away from her. There was a loud blaring noise and a drawn out screech, before he could even turn to face it, something smacked into him, hard. He felt bones crunch and pain surge through every inch of his body.

Alex was thrown almost twenty feet into the intersection, he felt blood well up in his mouth and his vision blurred. The last thing that he saw was the face of the homeless woman crouching over him with tears in her eyes. For a moment he wondered if she was crying because she had just seen him hit by a car, or because of what he had said to her. He tried to say something, but all that came out was a slight gasp and a dribble of blood. He was dying. He could feel his life flowing out of him as the puddle of blood around him grew and he felt it soaking into his suit, then his vision faded to black as he lost consciousness.

Part Two: Awakening

Where am I? He couldn’t see anything, not even his own hand when he waved it in front of his face, or, at least he thought he was waving his hand, the sensation felt strange, oddly detached. It felt like he was floating in emptiness. He couldn’t remember how he had gotten here, or which way was up or down. Then, slowly, he began to feel like he was falling. With each passing second he felt like he was falling faster. He couldn’t see, but he knew he couldn’t fall forever. I’ll hit the ground soon and then this can all be over. The thought was strangely comforting to him. Just as he thought he was going to land Alex’s eyes snapped open, the world was still nothing but darkness, but the feeling of detachment had ended. He took a gasping breath as he quickly sat up and immediately smacked his head on something metal. Easing back down, he cradled his forehead for a few seconds before realizing that he still had no idea where he was. At least I’m lying on something solid now. Then he thought about the last thing that he remembered. He ran his hands over his body, everything seemed to be intact and he didn’t even feel sore. That doesn’t seem right, maybe I dreamed the crash.

Reaching out he felt the metal barrier he had smacked his head on. By feeling around as best he could he realized that he was in a metal box of some sort.

“What the fuck?” he said aloud, the words echoed strangely in the box.
There was an immediate response from outside. Someone let out a scream that hurt Alex’s ears, even through the barrier. Then he heard quick footsteps and the sound of a door being thrown open so hard it smashed against the wall beside it.

“Hello?” Alex said. There was no reply this time. Great.

Without knowing what to do next, Alex tried to feel around for a way to get out. There seemed to just be smooth metal on all sides and no latch or release to let him out. He spent several minutes trying to maneuver inside the box to check the other end, but he ended up just contorting himself into a very uncomfortable position that he couldn’t get out of. Shit. Then just as he was about to give up and try calling out for help, he heard a door opening again. This time much more slowly, almost cautiously.

“Is someone alive in there?” a gruff, anxious voice called from outside.

“What the fuck type of question is that? Of course I’m alive, let me out.”

There were a few seconds of silence, then two sets of footsteps approached. The box he was in seemed to slide directly backwards. Bright, fluorescent light stung his eyes for a few seconds before two people came into focus. One of them was a small balding man in a white coat. The other was a large, fat man, wearing a police uniform. The policeman was pointing a gun at him, both men stared dumbfounded at Alex as if they had never seen anything like him. It was about this time Alex noticed he was completely naked.

“What? You two never seen another guy’s dick before? And what the hell did you do with my clothes? And where am I?”

The men looked at one another, it was clear they were just as confused as Alex. Finally, the small man in the white coat said, “Your clothes are gone. They were ripped and soaked in blood.”

Alex paused, “So that wasn’t a dream. Why am I not at a hospital? And who the fuck are you two clowns? And would you put down the gun?” The last question was aimed at the fat policeman, who hesitated, then lowered his gun.

“I’m Dr. Feldman, this is Officer Hansen. You aren’t at a hospital because there was no point in taking you there. The paramedics declared you dead when they arrived.”

“Then someone should be fired. Do I look dead to you?

“You certainly did when you arrived. I did the examination myself. You had broken most of your ribs and most of your internal organs had ruptured.”

Several seconds of silence followed as Alex and the doctor stared at each other.

“So you’re saying I was actually dead?”
“Yes, for several hours actually, it’s past midnight.”

The three of them spent the next few seconds in complete silence as they tried to come to terms
with what had happened. Then, Officer Hansen, in a surprisingly soft tone said, “So, who wants
some coffee?” Both Alex and the doctor gaped at him.

Twenty minutes later, still swishing the cheap vending machine coffee to get the taste of
blood out, Alex was standing in front of the mirror in the morgue bathroom surveying his features.
Dried blood was still smeared across his face and torso, but underneath that he seemed perfectly
fine. In the privacy of the bathroom Alex had been able to go over himself thoroughly, he didn’t
have one scratch on him. In fact, he felt better than he had in years. After scrubbing himself as
best he could with the water from the sink he put on the clothes Officer Hansen had found for him.
None of them fit right and the denim jeans with the Grateful Dead tee shirt did not suit him at all.
I wonder where he found the clothes, he thought, then decided it was probably best he didn’t know.

When he exited the bathroom he found both Officer Hansen and Dr. Feldman waiting for
him in the hallway. “We think it might be best if this stays between us,” said Dr. Feldman.
“What about the legality of bringing me back from the dead?”
“I hadn’t filed a death certificate yet, so that’s not an issue at least. And, honestly, why would
we tell anyone? Who would believe us? I could lose my license for even suggesting something like
this.”
“So, what? I’m just supposed to go home and get on with my life?”
“Well, yeah, I guess, but you might want to go to a church or two and thank whoever gave
you a second chance. I know I’m going back after tonight.”

Alex wasn’t sure how to answer that. He was still coming to terms with the fact that he had
died. He hadn’t even given a thought to how he came back.

“Whoever it was, I doubt they were doing me any favors. I haven’t exactly been the most
generous person,” he replied after a few seconds. His own answer surprised him, he hadn’t planned
on saying the last part.

“Well, you’re right about that.” It was only the second time Officer Hansen had spoken. Again he was surprised at how soft his voice was.

It took a few seconds for what Officer Hansen had said to sink in. “You know who I am
then?”

“It’s hard not to know who you are, it was your signature on the foreclosure notice my wife
and I got three months ago.”
Part Three: Penance

The revelation that his bank had taken Officer Hansen’s home away, made his offer of a ride home a surprising one. Alex accepted the offer, but he found it difficult to look at the man. He had never really felt guilty about the things he had done before dying, in fact he often felt proud about them. There was always the sense that what he was doing was only natural. The strong overcoming the weak, wasn’t that what natural selection was all about? But this time was different. He couldn’t feel proud about stripping this man and his family of their home.

After he had told Officer Hansen his address they both sat in silence for a few minutes as they drove towards his home. Then Officer Hansen took out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

Alex hadn’t had a smoke in hours, “Can I have one of those?”

Officer Hansen gave him a sidelong look before silently passing him the pack, “Thanks.”

He lit the end and took a drag. The smoke made his lungs feel on fire and he instantly went into a coughing fit like he hadn’t had in years. When it subsided Alex stared at the cigarette he was holding. What the hell? He took a second drag, again the experience was awful.

“What the hell? He took a second drag, again the experience was awful.

“Why ask for one if you don’t smoke? Seems like a waste to me.”

“I do, well, I guess I did, this is awful,” he said as he put it out in the ash tray in the center console.

“I guess my cheap cigarettes just don’t live up to your standards then.”

“I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant. It’s just,”

“Don’t worry about it.”

What followed was several minutes of silence, finally, he couldn’t take it anymore, “I’m sorry.”

“I said don’t worry about it, it’s just a smoke.”

“Not about that.” He paused, “about your house.”

Officer Hansen didn’t answer.

The awkwardness between them felt palpable. To try and ignore it, Alex tried to think about something else. He was just beginning to reflect on what he had gone through when he got a powerful feeling of unease. He tried to put it aside, he was sure it had something to do with the horrible car ride. But the feeling became more and more present until he was shifting nervously in his seat. When they stopped at a red light, the feeling became so overwhelming that he jumped out of the car.
“What the hell are you doing?” Officer Hansen yelled through the open passenger door.

“I don’t know, I just—” he stopped. He had noticed someone on the opposite side of the intersection walking into the street. Alex could feel it, the uneasy feeling he was getting was radiating from this person. It wasn’t just that either, after noticing them it was as if they began to glow with a deep red light. The longer Alex stared at them, the more uncomfortable he became and the brighter the red light glowed. Without knowing why, Alex began to run towards them. As he neared the person, he noticed a car speeding towards them that showed no signs of slowing down. There was no hesitation, Alex suddenly knew what he was supposed to do. Breaking into an all-out sprint he closed the remaining distance between them and ran headlong into the person, picking them up along the way. His momentum carried them several feet before he lost his footing and they both hit the asphalt hard. Just as they were falling, the car sped by, blaring their horn not even slowing down.

Alex laid flat on the ground for a few seconds. What the hell did I just do? His head was throbbing from hitting the street and he felt a warm sensation spreading across his forehead, but he felt a sense of accomplishment nonetheless. Despite the pain in his head he had never felt so good.

He heard footsteps coming from behind him. “Are you insane?” It was Officer Hansen.

“Maybe, how’s the other guy?”

“I’m fine!” came a slurred voice to his side. Both Alex and the other person stood up. He stumbled a little and caught Alex’s shirt.

“Hey thanks, guy; I didn’t even see that car.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“No, I want to thank you, let me buy you a drink.”

“Seriously, don’t mention it. I’ve had a weird enough day already.”

It took several minutes to get the drunk man to leave him alone. He had to have turned down at least six offers for a drink before the man would leave. Finally, after thanking Alex for what must have been the hundredth time in just a few minutes, the man wandered off and left Alex alone with Officer Hansen.

“What the hell was that? I thought you were going crazy when you jumped out of the car. Then you just started running, I thought you were going to attack that guy.”

“I honestly couldn’t tell you. I couldn’t help myself.”

They both stood in silence for a few seconds, not sure what else to say about what had just happened. Then, as if they had agreed to it, both of them walked back to the car. Silently, Officer
Hansen opened the glove box, grabbed a few napkins and handed them to Alex.
“You got some blood on your face.”
“Thanks.” Saying the word felt strange, it had been a long time since he had used it, but using it felt nice in a strange sort of way.

Officer Hansen started driving again and then said, “You know, I’ve never seen anyone run like that before. You could be the next Usain Bolt with your speed.”
“I don’t think I’ve ever run like that before.”

They both sat silently as they neared Alex’s home, each of them pondering the meaning of the events that night. But as they pulled up his driveway, Alex felt that he couldn’t leave without saying something else.

“Officer, stop by my office when you get a chance in the next few days. It’s on the top floor of the bank. I want to talk to you about getting your house back.” Officer Hansen’s eyes lit up when he said this, but his reply was only a silent nod.

Alex got out of the car and began walking inside as Officer Hansen backed out of the driveway. Then he stopped and turned around to watch him drive away. Alex knew he had been sent back for a reason. It was time to start making up for the wrongs he had done before and he knew exactly where to start. *That girl is going to be horrified when she sees the man she watched die walking towards her.* The first *real* smile in years spread across his face. *This is going to be fun.*
Dear C,

It’s not you, it’s me.

It’s been two years too long. Don’t get me wrong, the first couple of months were great and all, but I think it’s time we part. I’ve become too reliant on you; I am afraid it’s an addiction. I know we’ve been through a lot together – two years of college, a couple of family deaths, a new job – but I think I’m ready to face those things alone.

I know what you’re going to say, and trust me, I’ve thought about the consequences. I remember when you’d leave: my world was in flux. My body stopped feeling like my body and the nights weren’t just nights: they had faces and eyes and hands that reached out from walls. I slept in the middle of the room.

I’m sure life without you will be hard at first. My hands will start to shake in crowds again because I won’t be able to grab onto you. I will have withdrawals from not waking up next to you every morning. Maybe I will have “brain shivers;” days where I will forget why I decided to do this on my own. Days where I will want to go running back into your embrace. I will fight that urge. I will be fine.
Please don’t try to find me when I leave. I can’t handle the days of suffocation anymore, even though you say they help me function. I need space. Space to re-learn how to function on my own. I need my own air to breathe, even if it’s thin at first. I want this.

No, I need this. I need to do this on my own.

I lied. It is you.
“If I would have met you instead of my wife, I would have never gotten divorced.” I continued to wash the same already clean shot glass, hoping to look busy enough to not be talked to. “She’s a real bitch, my ex-wife. Cheated on me, ya know?”

Acknowledging that my attempted suitor was seemingly unfazed by being ignored, I looked up from the sink. Big guy. Blonde ponytail. He smelled like cigarettes mixed with Crown Royal. He looked to be in his 40’s, but the smoker’s wrinkles around his mouth and sallow color to his skin proved that time and harmful habits hadn’t been kind to him. The name on the card he used to pay for his double Crown on the rocks read Paul Isman – finally, a face for the name. Everybody knew everybody in Stanford, but Paul had become somewhat of a joke after local EMTs were dispatched to his trailer. He had burned himself while drunkenly trying to make French fries.

“That sucks,” I said, trying to avoid giving him anything remotely considered encouraging. “Yeah,” he continued, “What can ya do though? I wouldn’t expect someone like you to understand, guys probably worship the ground you walk on. If they don’t, they’re stupid. I would treat you better than you thought possible.” The way his eyes lingered a little too long made me feel dirty. I looked back down into the sink, fearing he might notice the anxious look on my face.

The bar I worked at, The Waterhole, was your average small-town, country bar, or so I assumed. With the exception of work, I avoided bars like that at all costs. The patrons were nice enough unless you were a woman, non-white, or non-Christian, but this was true of Stanford in general. People were quick to judge and even quicker to spread an interesting rumor. And as the only bar in a 30-mile radius, The Waterhole’s patrons were a mishmash of locals and travelers.
My fellow bartenders were much older than me and had learned long ago that staying quiet and looking pretty was the best way to make tips. Being young and liberal, I felt I had the right to not feel threatened while trying to do my job, and in the beginning, I tried to call men out on their sexism. This mentality was scoffed at, and I was often told that it was “cute” that I was “so sassy.” I once told a man who wouldn’t stop harassing me that I’d rather choke on my spit and die than ever touch him. He responded by saying that he “liked his girls fiery.” Eventually, I gave up on my pursuit for the greater good of womankind and settled into the “pretty but quiet” routine of my coworkers. Staying quiet was a foreign concept, but the money was very reinforcing, in every sense of the word.

I already knew the story of Paul and the “cheating bitch of an ex-wife,” because she was my coworker. And even if I hadn’t worked with her, I would have still heard the story, because nothing is secret in a small town. The way Paul recounted the events surrounding the tumultuous love triangle was much different than the way I had heard it from Molly, and something about Paul’s vehement claims of adultery made me doubt he was being truthful. Prior to meeting Paul, I couldn’t believe that Molly could do anything malicious, let alone cheat on her husband; upon meeting Paul, I started to understand if maybe the idea crossed her mind. Molly was my favorite coworker. Her hair curled in neat ringlets and bounced whenever she moved. She was always excited to see you, and not the feigned “we-work-together-so-I’m-nice-to-prevent-conflict” kind of excitement either. Molly never missed a day of work and was someone who would always cover a shift if the need ever arose.

Paul prattled on about the affair, repeating that Molly was nothing “but a cheating bitch” several times. Once during the “conversation” I mentioned to Paul that I had heard the story a little differently. For the first time that night, he looked away from me and said, “Molly has always been good at convincing people that she isn’t a bitch.” After four double Crowns, hours of bashing Molly, and no other customers, Paul announced that he had other things he needed to do. “I should make this day productive,” It was already 10 p.m., “But do you like rodeos? Because the Great Falls’ rodeo is in town and one of my buddy rides. He could get you tickets if you wanted.” Excitement and something resembling lust flitted across his face. “Rodeos are cruel to the animals.” “Well if you change your mind, you can just call me. My number is seven – aren’t you gonna write this down?” “I have a good memory.” Paul’s eyebrows furrowed, but he continued to give me his number. I felt a little guilty for lying, but did he actually think that this encounter had ended in a way that would result in a date? Paul headed for the door after leaving a five-dollar tip.
and wink. The dirty feeling returned.

Paul had been my only customer for over two hours, so after he left I locked the door behind him. I began my closing-time routine. I set the stools with permanent butt prints on the bar, sprayed everything with an excessive amount of bleach, and took a shot of vodka — my shifter. While I was counting my tips — $25 for 6 hours of work — the bar phone rang. “The Waterhole, bar and restaurant, how may I help you?” I said, praying that the call wasn’t for something that would dirty my now-clean kitchen. “Hey, it’s Paul. So when do you get off shift?” I took the phone away from my ear and looked at the caller ID number. Sure enough, the number started with a seven. “Hi Paul, I’m just now closing up. Did you forget something here?” “No, I just want you to come over after you’re done. I live in the trailer park by the highway, and I live alone...without neighbors, if you know what I mean.” Once again I took the phone away from my ear to look at the number. Started with a seven, not a prank call. “I’m tired, Paul.” I hit the end button on the phone and placed it back in its cradle. I hurriedly grabbed my purse and coat, turned off the lights, and left the bar, worried that Paul would come back to make his proposition in person. As I was locking the deadbolt, I heard the bar phone ring from inside and was relieved that I didn’t work the next day.

“Molly has been here since noon, I think she’s waiting for you,” Rhonda, the morning shift bartender, said to me as I clocked in. “For me? Why would she be waiting for me?” Rhonda’s expression was serious, “Paul told everyone.” “Told everyone what?” “Told everyone about how you said you’d go out with him, but then stood him up.” The blood left my face and my stomach clenched as I avoided Rhonda’s accusing stare. “I never said that I’d go out with him. He’s old enough to be my dad.” “Oh, well that’s not what he said, and I’m pretty sure that’s why Molly is here. Like I said, she’s been drinking since noon.” Rhonda clocked out, but took a seat at the bar; she had never passed up a moment to be involved in drama. Rhonda epitomized every resident of Stanford. She had been the victim of vicious rumors, but that didn’t stop her from spreading the ones that weren’t about her. I steeled myself, and in my head, I knew exactly what I was going to say. I had to be sympathetic, yet truthful. I needed Molly to know that I never agreed to any of the claims Paul was making, that I wouldn’t do that to her. Molly was sitting at the bar, near the register. I walked over to her and noticed several shot glasses in front of her. “Listen, Molly,” I began. Molly looked up at me, and I saw something in her eyes I had never seen there before — a frenzied, drunk rage. Molly looked at me, eyes glassy with the drunk of Crown Royal, and grabbed me by the front of my dress. No one had ever put their hands on me like that before. I stared at Molly,
unsure on how to proceed, because my pre-scripted conversation didn’t go anything like this. “I’m sorry,” I ended up blurting out. Molly began sobbing, saying things like “You’re just so young,” and “Paul would never choose me over you.” She looked defeated. The pain of the divorce was evident in her eyes, although I never understood why she thought that Paul being gone was a loss. I guessed that maybe there was some truth to the cliché saying about how you can’t help whom you love. But it was also rumored that everything they owned was in Paul’s name, so Molly was left with very little after he forced her out of his trailer. I guessed that maybe that had more to do with it than love. “Molly I need you to know that whatever Paul is saying about me isn’t true. I wouldn’t do that to you.” I said. “I wanted to believe that Paul wouldn’t do that. I didn’t want to blame him,” Molly said through tears. I tried to swallow the rising lump in my throat, but I couldn’t deny the guilty feeling in the pit of stomach any longer. I had chosen to stay pretty and quiet, in the hopes of making a few more tips. I had ignored my beliefs and feelings for money, and it hadn’t hurt just me.

I never saw Paul again, except for once at the local gas station. He cornered me in the back by the bathrooms, the smell of cigarettes and Crown stronger than I remembered. I desperately wanted to get away – my eyes watered, I held my breath, I was trapped – but I stood taller and looked into Paul’s eyes. “I really want you to come over,” he slurred at me, as he reached out, trying to touch my hair. I instinctively slapped his hand away; every cell in my body shuddered at the thought of him touching me. He looked surprised but said, “That’s okay I like it rough,” and advanced toward me. In that moment I saw Paul as every guy that had ever called me their babe without knowing me; he was every guy that had stared at my ass when they thought I wasn’t looking or that had described all the things they would do to my body while I was trying to work. “Never, and I mean never, talk to me again,” I said as I pushed passed him. “Oh, another thing, leave Molly alone too.”
Hector The Turkey
Emmie Bristow

I plucked a turkey yesterday.
It was dead, of course—
frozen:
its pink, wrinkly head curled
toward its neck and clawed
foot stretched in an uncomfortable
angle. Its eyes were shut, at least,
but in a way saying,

This is going to hurt.

I named the bird Hector.
All birds are Hector.

Its feathers were coffee
brown, long, and soft
with a pattern like marbled
paper sprawled across
them. When I stretched
out the wing it crunched
with stiffness, yet the sight of fuzzy down feathers ruffled in every direction caught my breath—like a newborn’s hair after it’s been curled up all night next to your warm body.

I grabbed the first feather and pulled slowly, feeling the crack and dislocation of the white stem in its fleshy pink skin. I finally had to jerk it, ripping out the feather and sending a jolt into the bird and myself.

One feather down.

I recall learning birds were once larger and more ferocious in prehistoric days. It wasn’t until mother nature helped wipe them out for us smaller, cockier creatures that we ruled over what was left—turkeys and chickens and whatnot.

As I worked on Hector
one feather at a time,
my co-worker watched,
eyes shining. Her hands
tapped on the table,
impatience bouncing
off each fingertip
into the same wood
holding the corpse.

Pinky ring middle index thumb
Two down
Pinky ring middle index thumb
Three down
Pinky ring middle index thumb
Four down.
Pinky ring middle index thumb
Five down.
Pinky ring middle index thumb
Six down.
Pinky ring middle index thumb
Seven down.
Pinky ring middle index thumb
Eight down.
Pinky ring middle index thumb
Nine down.

Her fingers seized Hector.
His body oozed the slowly
de-thawing blood in a streak
across the table where he’d been
drug. Grasping his pink
skin, she ripped it from his body
in one violent tear, exposing
vulnerable, red insides.

I froze like the bird.
I wished I knew better,
like Hector. Wish
I’d closed my eyes
knowing

This is going to hurt.

I looked at my co-worker.
Her eyes shined at me.

Her fingers didn’t tap anymore.

If we humans are Achilles,
who will the Priam
for the birds be?
Am I Borderline?
Mike Delaney

The way days go on by reminds me of just how short the nights really are. Every second that ticks on by brings upon a new hour on the same old day. We have to wait for the day to end before we start the next with different experiences going on unless time happens to be repeating itself over and again. Sometimes we wonder if our time spent really means anything. We spend hours coddled up in waves of pseudo-happiness mixed in with astronomical advances in waves of everlasting haze. Experience never goes away along with memories filled with traumatic scenes that linger on forever.

I was snowboarding the day before Easter Sunday at Snowbowl. I was carving up tracks on my snowboard, which happens to be sort of an antique to me these days. I have been using this board since I was twelve years old. The time was around 2:00 PM when my good friend Dan who in my humble opinion is the most interesting man in Missoula and I saw my uncle Bill on top of High Park. We caught up with him to reunite when I found out my aunt was down at the bar due to her injuring her leg this year. I told my group that I was going down to keep her company.

I shred down at breakneck speed over to Upper Spartan, only to take a second thought rather than the headwall. I cruise down sunrise bowl where I arrive at the last run inn to meet up with my aunt Pam. I head in to greet her, taking off my two jackets and fleece. I almost took off my sweater when just then, I realized what occurred to me two weeks ago, Something that has been with me that I’m not proud of.

Depression tends to take a hold of someone in vastly unique ways. Everyone has their own personal way of masking chronic sadness. Being lonely is not just about being alone. It’s about
being stuck in a surrounding universe where no one cares and dares not to compensate.

I need to explain something serious going on with me. I feel that it’s necessary to explain personal issues that I face day to day, this is something that is incredibly hard and painful for me to open up about, but I’m deciding to help spread awareness about the subject matter. In my lifetime, I have had issues with self-harm. We all know that self-harm comes in ways of cutting and burning, but I find that the most overlooked aspect of self-harm is alcohol/drug abuse. I have self-medicated with various substances. In high school, I smoked cannabis to escape from my problems. When weed no longer helped I switched over to benzodiazepines until the addiction took over and I thought it was damn well time to get diagnosed with ADD so I could get Concerta to actually help me face my problems. I remember being eighteen and felt that all my problems would go away just by turning twenty one.

Talking down to myself is a problem that gets me nowhere but yet I still do it like it’s supposed to change something. Sometimes I wonder if I’m content in my personal struggles. Addicted to the drama brought upon myself. I tell myself that I’m no good and that I don’t even deserve to be living. To get the bottom of these problems I have to start at the beginning. I was born on December 20th, 1991. The cold war was coming to an end, but a new era was beginning for me. The era I know for myself is Autism.

Living on the spectrum means being aware of what’s going on in the world around me. Having Asperger’s comes with having trouble expressing my problems to other people. I have to work on my problem solving skills, without the obsession of getting my next pair of shoes. I remember in vague but precise detail of being an infant. I was being rocked away by my mother at night but was still wide awake and unable to tell my mom that I wasn’t sleeping. I remember the Barney poster in my room on those nights that I was trapped in the crib thus being stuck in my own mind. When I was three I was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

I have trouble making friends. It’s not that I don’t try, but I don’t really know how to go about making and keeping friends. I tend to spend most of my life hiding out in my apartment on Saturday’s and Sunday’s unless a concert is happening where I say to myself, “Fuck this place.” Though I enjoy solitude I feel that this is harmful to myself and others, at least that’s what my psychiatrist thinks in her own capitalistic little world. I am struck by the awful curse of chronic daydreaming. I dream of what’s wrong and how to make it better for everyone involved. I’m not that lazy I just can’t focus despite rolling on thirty six milligrams of concerta. I empathize with other’s I just don’t know how someone like me could possibly make anyone feel better, but just give me a
second to ventilate, I’m sure I can make it up to you. Day eating day I find that I have trouble taking
care of myself. There was a time when I was twenty two where I wanted to be emotionless in a sort
of Dexter type of way but now, I am full of emotions. I always feel awkward no matter what I do.
I at least try not to be afraid, which is my strong suit. I feel that I have trouble fitting in anywhere
but I try not to hide away too much. Being socially awkward isn’t about dressing a little different.
Social awkwardness is about not being comfortable in your own skin.

I am currently twenty four years old. I have been going to college since I was eighteen.
The reason it took me so long was because I wasn’t taking the traditional method of four or five
classes. I was only taking one or two each semester. After this semester, I will be a junior with the
whole university being granted access to me. There will be no more restrictions for me having to be
only allowed to take only two classes at the mountain campus while also not having to go back to
the haggard old Missoula college campus next to the fairgrounds. This feels so good for me that it
comes as a surprise that I even have the right to go to a public university. However, I keep thinking
to myself that I’m not good enough and that my being here is toxic to others surrounding me.

I try to tell myself that I have potential and have even been told by everyone around me that
the potential is obvious. I find myself stuck in a rut of being way too hard on myself to the point
that it’s getting me absolutely nowhere. I may have Asperger’s, but Asperger’s doesn’t have me. I’m
no longer afraid to open up no matter the consequences I may have to face. I accept that I may
have something else going on due to the trauma I have experienced in my life ranging anywhere
from the psychological/emotional abuse I have received throughout my years to the physical and
somewhat sexual harassment I have experienced.

I have been told by my case manager that there is no possible way for me to have a border-
line personality because he finds me so enjoyable and funny, which is a real treat for him due to the
nature of his job having to take care of people such as schizophrenics. It’s not that I want to just
label myself with something because I want drugs, (I already have concerta) I want something that
explains my behavior and why I feel that it’s high time to do something about it.

Having a Borderline personality messes with your sense of identity. My name is Michael
Delaney. I am twenty four years old and… what else is there? What is the reason for my need to be.
No, I don’t want to commit suicide but what happened? How did I get here? What went wrong?
Life happened. Life is what happens to everybody. They make plans when they are ten, think ev-
erything is figured out at fifteen when slowly but surely, they find themselves bordering on a quarter
of century of life with people wondering if you are worth anything at all.
I find it hard to believe that I’m a male. I have always felt more feminine than masculine and wish that I were born a female. I decided that I should come out of the closet and admit that I’m bi-sexual. I am no longer running away from these feelings of attractions that I have towards other men. I don’t see anything wrong with having a little gender dysphoria and I hope to see that one day men and women are treated as equal human beings.

I feel that in the end, you die in your own arms. Every three months I see my psychiatrist to renew my concerta due to being a controlled substance with a high potential for abuse. She asks if I’m making friends. I lie and say yes but she responds, “Who are they, and what do you do with them?” First off, it’s none of her business who I consort with, and second give me a break. I feel that I have been left to die from everyone in my life. I have been pushed, used, manipulated, and seen as an autistic joke. My family may still love me but they share my last name, they are stuck with me. I feel that I need to buy as much items at possible to be happy. I think I need more shoes even though I have more than enough to compensate. My underwear collection is literally overflowing. My belts resemble a snake pit sitting on the seat of a vacant computer chair for I was tired of stepping over them. My wardrobe is nearly full, but I want more. I go from happy to sad in just a flip of a switch. No one can do anything for me but me. What’s the point? The scars remind me of the damage left behind. This doesn’t make me a psycho it’s just what I felt I wanted to do. Looking in the mirror come on, I know I’m not that ugly, but I’m not worthwhile. How about I say I’m the best looking man in Missoula, ha, yeah right.

I have always had depression, anxiety, anger, substance abuse, and rage. This has been a common affliction for me. I feel as if I’m constantly being told that I suck and that everybody is not comfortable with me being around. I feel that everyone I’m with has to treat me a certain way otherwise I feel very unwanted. My emotions tend to be up and down while going round as the second of time ticks and tocks spiraling out of control. I am constantly on edge wondering who I am and what I truly value. When I’m stressed which is an everyday cycle, I get paranoia running rampant with insane delusions and even have had dissociations (minor out of body experiences).

The night of Saturday March 12, 2016 was a night I wish I could forget, but I will always keep the night in the depths of my mind. This was a point of my life where I felt that I had to always be in contact with someone. This is at least what my psychiatrist wants me to do even though in reality, she doesn’t care. I look back at the night and admit that I completely dissociated due to my intense emotions and feelings of perceived abandonment. I was feeling very lonely and isolated. I couldn’t stand being stuck in my apartment on a Saturday night alone in my misery. I wanted to
hang out with at least one person in my contacts list or at least have someone to talk to. I called everyone from my contacts list but nobody answered. Not one number I dialed called me back. I wish that I had better sense during that turbulent time to say to myself, “Don’t worry, you’re not a loser, nobody finds you difficult to be around.” Instead I had this delusion that nobody was answering because they must hate me. After I had a couple of drinks at the double tree I called many people who didn’t answer. I felt extremely upset. I went home in a blind rage to my lonely apartment where I proceeded to let it all fall on out.

As soon as I walked through the front door and locked it, I was repeatedly pelting my face with my fists until I felt like I needed a much bigger rush. I grabbed a belt out of my collection where I proceeded to whip myself across the back giving me the familiar feeling of getting my ass pelt by the freaks I hung out with freshman year back in my high school days. I was getting a massive rush of the old sensation that I crave due to my masochistic tendencies. Crying and laughing, I realized that I needed something stronger, something that I needed to do to give me that old awful high.

The knife and the lighter reign superior to any shitty little crack I can give across my stupid ugly face. I took the knife out of my kitchen drawer where I proceeded to slash myself across my forearms and legs while also heating the knife up to give me the feeling I so desired. Most people think of cutting as a sensual, slow, dramatic experience but with me it happened to be extremely fast and horrifically ugly. I was burning my skin with the fire from the lighter which caused my apartment to stink of burned hair while also pushing the metal against my neck waving supreme the rush of calmness and stimulation I needed for I was in a really vulnerable place at the time. It was like a mix of clonazepam and concerta. I took to my g-mail account to find that my cousin Matthew sent me some pictures of his daughter. I was so happy that he contacted me that I rebooted my facebook to add him on. He accepted and I’m glad that he’s there for me. All in all family will always be there for you. Maybe I’m wrong with other people but with me they are the ones I can rely on.

The massive wave of emotions I was feeling that night happens to be very traumatizing for me to this day. I hate the fact that I have resorted to this and it breaks my heart that I’m not the only one suffering from these issues. I won’t lie. Self-harm did feel very good due to the intense rush that it brings.

9:00 P.M. I can’t take it anymore. I want to shop. I head down to the department store to use my charge card not caring how much debt I may get myself into. There was no one at the
Jewelry counter at the time and I was just staring at the watches with no one there to help me out. I thought I could just ask someone to help me, but I don’t want to have to call someone over, I want them to come over out of the fairness of their hearts to ask me “Can I help you pick something out?” I walked out of the store feeling empty. I was talking to myself while walking back to the car. I was speaking in weird cult like style language. Just pure gibberish was flowing out between my teeth when I realize that it’s 9:30. At 10:00 a funk band by the name of Your Mamma’s Big Fat Booty Band is going to play at The Top Hat where I am recognized as the regular loner.

I drive down to buy a ticket. I bring myself to the bar for an eight dollar glass of red wine. I could’ve had the five dollar glass but I wanted the most expensive taste that there was. I tell the bartender to close out my card after I asked for the wine. When I gave him my card, He forgets to close it out. There must have been a case of miscommunication being that it was a reasonably busy night and from all the experiences he’s had with me, he probably just assumed I would want at least one more drink. I felt very angry at myself but was also pissed at the bartender for not closing out my card like I asked. I kept waiting for him to close out the card and didn’t just ask him to close it out. I sip the wine waiting for 10:00 to bring on show time. When the time comes around I did something pretty mean that I regret, but at the same time, I consider myself not caring anymore since I was just seeing red cut into the black and white noir world that I find myself in. I couldn’t take anyone else’s feelings into perspective because all I was feeling was pure rage. Not knowing I was being an asshole, I snap my fingers to get his attention. (I must have just been excited for the show starting.) “No snapping.” “Don’t snap at me, I’m not a dog man.” “What do you want?” I respond, “Could you please close out my card?” He gives me the check and I sign. I felt alive. I was walking up to the stage happy as a clam feeling like I had power to unimaginable proportions sipping my wine and enjoying the funk. After I finish my wine I go out back for a smoke when suddenly, in the tick of a second, I felt absolutely terrible. I wasn’t upset that I got mad at the bartender, I was upset because there was no true reason for me to be around. I didn’t want to be there anymore. I sit on one of the balcony areas of the top hat feeling like Tony Montana in the scene after the incident he has with finding his sister with some guy at the Babylon Club. The music from that scene of the film played in my head covering over the positive sound of the funk going on around me. That song played over and over as I held back the tears feeling all alone in my misery wishing the concert would come to an end. An hour into the show, the group members announced a break. Thank god I finally have an excuse to leave. It’s late and I’m miserable. I just want to get a pint of cheap vodka, go home, and completely self-destruct into oblivion.
As I’m walking out I stop to stare at the bartender making drinks for a lot of people. I’m thinking to myself, “I’m going to make you a rich motherfucker.” “Next time you see my face, remember, this town is mine.” I walk to the door where the staff security girl Heidi was working the front door taking tickets and checking ID’s. She recognizes me so much that she doesn’t even bother to card me and will go out of her way to make sure that nobody else cards me. I tell her to have a good night. She replies, “You too buddy thanks for coming out.” She patted me on the back bringing me the respect I felt that I deserved.

Outside of the Top Hat, the city was a cruel monster. There was a drunken asshole in an argument with a girl. He was telling her that this is his town, he was born and raised here, and that she wasn’t worth shit here. She replies with a fuck you and that’s when I went all out yelling. I yell out “Fucking piece of Shit!” among many other words I can’t really remember. I wish he would’ve gotten pissed off and tried to fight me but he didn’t. I would’ve loved for that man to split my head open on the pavement where the paramedics would have to keep me from bleeding out all the way to the hospital. Unfortunately, that didn’t happen.

Back at home I was drinking and hurting myself even more. I called many people who didn’t answer. At some point I even called the top hat to leave a message that I owed a bartender there money. I looked at my bank account to see that I was all out of money. I knew I was running low, but couldn’t control my spending. I called my mother. I told her that I won’t make it home for supper before ranting out of control about weird, threatening, abusive, and paranoid delusional words that she happens to be used to dealing with me on occasions. I told her that I was out of money and that I owed someone who works at the top-hat. She was very calm, patient, and most likely operating on an ambien (She probably needed another one after chatting with me.) I walked to the store to get cigs. I bought the pack with my dad’s credit card for I was completely out of money. When I was walking back and smoking, I started stumbling back. My behavior that night was completely disgusting. I called my brother but he had no way of helping me. I was telling him how I used dad’s card for smokes and he told me that he deserves to be stolen from for being such a bad father. After explaining to me how I was going about everything all wrong he told me to toughen up and go to bed. I wonder what toughen up means. I called someone who I had to look up in my missed calls from December. Sorry to get off the story at hand but this is important. Last semester, I was taking intro to poetry workshop. This particular kid transferred in on the third day of class. I didn’t start hanging around him until a week or two after classes began. He was perfect. He was the only one that was in my age range with me being 23 and him being 22. He was mentally unstable,
an alcoholic, and an all-out interesting guy. The biggest reason we connected was that the poetry teacher gave us both a hard time, at least that’s how we felt. One time I was hanging out with him after fall semester came to an end on Friday December 18th 2015. I just finished snowboarding for the first time that year and I called him to check-up on him. He was drunk at flippers where I was spending time with him when his friend came in all anxious about having to help him out. Little did I know that thing he needed that person to do was to score cocaine. He had me drive to a drug deal without telling me about it until I drove them all the way to the north side of town. I was told to end contact with him from my case manager and a girl who was also in my poetry class. This kid doesn’t answer but I left him a message explaining that I really liked spending time with him and that he’s a good person. My final call that night was to the girl. I remember earlier that week I called Gill after speaking with Max. I called her to talk and she asked if I wanted to come over. I drive over to tell her about the kid where she explained to me why I should stay away from him. After our chat she gave me a hug and told me to come back any time or to call her whenever. The next day I saw the kid outside the Lommasson center where I catch up with him. He told me that he failed the poetry class because he didn’t do his final eight page paper. I was so happy that karma came around that all my dislike towards him went away. I called Gill to tell her that I had some good news and wanted to share with her in person. She told me that she was too busy but would like to hear it another time. I eventually got together to talk to her one last time, but her interest in being my friend seemed to be away somehow at least that’s how I felt. That night of March 12th I called her despite telling myself to leave her alone and left a message sounding very troubled and told her voicemail that I want to continue to be the kid’s friend. I text her in words saying I love the kid and I want to marry him. (I have to admit I’m sort of attracted to him.) I knew that Gill was too busy dealing with her own shit to be my friend and offer me advice. She also has been diagnosed with Asperger’s. After that, I turn my phone off, set it on the carpet, and smashed it with my foot. All of a sudden it hits me. Holy shit it’s late, and I might have made a neighbor scared. I got to get the fuck out of here before the cops come and haul my ass in gestapo style. I was shirtless so I throw on my leather jacket and run out of the apartment. While walking I realized that I have nowhere else to go. I take out the cellphone I just smashed, but it won’t turn on. It came to me that I have to find a phone, but I’m drunk as a skunk. Who in their right mind is going to want to be around me? So I decided to turn around, face the music, and walk back to the apartment. No one did anything because I wasn’t loud enough. It was so late that they were all probably just sleeping. I remember feeling so sick that night I had a black garbage bag next to me while I was vomiting up all my shame
and guilt. Eventually, I took an ambien and drifted off to sleep. When I woke up the next morning, I realized it wasn’t a dream. The scars covering me were a reminder that the past was real. My heart felt torn open and I was even more alone than I ever had been in my entire life.

I went to see my mother and I was still very upset over last night. I showed her my scars and it upset her deeply. She told me before giving me one hundred dollars to put into my bank account that when I hurt myself I’m also hurting her. I feel very bad that I have this sort of behavior and I wish that I could get rid of it, but I have trouble finding out how to. It’s unfair that my mom has to go through so much abuse such as but not limited to being married to a functional alcoholic, taking care of her two screwed up sons, and dealing with her schizoaffective sister. How can I be so cruel to her when half the reason I do so well in school is because she helped me out so much? I go to the bad-lander around 5:30 for the second wind reading. I was feeling so terrible that all I ordered was a ginger beer. Though I was tempted to leave early so I could lie alone in my misery, I stay for the whole reading. When I get home I lie in the bed with the pain from my scars and the tears on my pillow. The classic song Sea of Love by Phil Phillips plays in my head while I say to myself, “There you go, you can now be officially labeled as a borderline, happy?”

I am told that I’m being taken advantage of by other people. I know that they try to take advantage of me but they can’t get away with that anymore. Close friends have tended to do that to me. I wish I could reverse time so I could change the past. The past lingers around and won’t ever go away.

Back in 2010, I had a friend sleeping at my parent’s house. This person was my only contact I had to give me a social life. I had a long history with this guy and he introduced me to some interesting people in my life. I felt that I needed him to get my name out there even though I found him to be totally disgusting. I was drinking a lot with him and remember the fateful night in May, 2010. That was the first time I died. I thought everything was going to be picture perfect. I was graduating from high school with a diploma that I obtained from Big Sky High School through the Missoula County Public Schools online system. (After junior year I decided that I wanted to get my education through alternative means so my parents hooked me up with an online program so I could get an actual diploma.) After a house party, I was driving some of our friends up to their house on the south hills. My friend was in the passenger’s seat drunker than a box of rocks. I was also drunk to some degree. I can never forgive myself for what I have done. We were rolling down the hill, I was changing a cd when suddenly in a blink of a second, I crash into two parked cars. From what I can say, my experience was very intense. The smell of the airbag deployed, the sounds
of the alarms going off, while the dogs were barking away. My drunk friend was wondering what the fuck just happened. I knew I was going to jail but I was so shell-shocked that I chose to run away from that situation. I call my parents to tell them what happened in a mad panic. They try to pick me up, but the cops have already found me walking. The first patrol car goes up to the scene of the crime. The second car sees me, does a u turn, and creeps up behind me most likely thinking, “Maybe this little fucking shit’s going to run, increases our revenue.” I take off through the residences. I was hopping over fences, scratching myself all over from trees and calling my parents once more before finally being surrounded. The officers had their guns drawn while their voices were distant and muted. I got on the ground face down like they told me. I was still talking on the phone as I got on the ground until they told me to drop the cellphone. I dropped it while it was still on the line. The officer slowly walks over, gun drawn, and kick’s my cell phone away before handcuffing me. Only the car accident was traumatizing. I absolutely loved being arrested for a very strange bizarre reason.

On route to the jail, a song comes on the cop’s radio, a song reminiscent to the scratches all over my skin that night. Papa roaches Scars. In jail I had the sobriety test done and pass every test with flying colors only to refuse the breathalyzer because I wanted to avoid a DUI. Instead of being charged with DUI, I am charged with refusal of breath check among various other crimes and I lose my license for six months which is what I deserved. The only problem I had with jail was that it was very isolating. No clock, nobody in my cell, nothing. I wish I could’ve at least got my ass beat down, or maybe even raped. I wish that I were able to be shanked in the cafeteria as well as in the showers. That never happened. My father bailed me out before I was even changed out into the county orange.

I got a lawyer and was admitted into a mental health/treatment court a couple years after the incident. I will never forgive myself for crashing my car because I could have killed someone. Everyone still thinks this is hilarious, especially that friend who to be honest never had my back. One time at a party up miller creek, I was being threatened by someone and Jon did nothing. Jon is the type of person who will always be there to video tape you getting your ass kicked. The problem with him is that he’s a coward. My father never much cared what happened to my opinion he wasn’t there to tell me that I was being used.

Okay, let’s get back to my self-diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder. I feel that I relate with many of the symptoms of having it. This is not something that will just go away. I have to come up with ways to manage these symptoms that I have. Borderline is the most stigmatized
mental health problem of all time. No one will ever diagnose me because everyone fears it. So, my option is to diagnose myself and to use therapeutic measures of treating myself without the use of drugs.

No, I will never forgive myself for the actions that I have done in the past. I believe someone out there wants me to be taken out of existence but come on this is all part of my paranoid delusional thinking. Letting it all fall out is the best way to express yourself. I have been living on my own for the most part since June, 2015. If I were to say everything is fine, that would be too narrow for me. I will admit that I couldn’t stand being trapped in a dysfunctional household with my father the functioning businessman while my mom was there having the life sucked out of her by being married to him and yet so dependent on his financial gains.

I ask myself, “Am I Borderline?” I respond to myself, “No one can possibly say yes or no. All that I can tell myself is that it’s good that I recognized the symptoms of this personality trait that I believe that I possess in one way or another and try to come up with ways to cope with these feelings.”

There is no way of telling myself that I once had borderline but now I’m cured. That is not how mental illness works. I want to go into how I once had no idea with what these problems could be and now that I understand what borderline is rather than the stigmatized way my case manager explains it to me, I can go about using techniques to try to overcome these problems that I have to face.

I explain to myself that it’s okay that college is going to take a lot of time for me. No one is going to completely abandon me. I will always still have the support of my family and I will do everything possible to make friends and meet new people. Making friends is the hardest thing for me to do. Not only am I troubled by my isolation both physically and mentally, I feel stigmatized for being alone most of the time.

I wish that I could be all that I can be, but what is exactly being all that I can be. Why am I not myself? What do I have to do to make Mike Delaney the best that Mike can be? How much weight do I have to take before I can be able to throw it far up towards the moon? The anxiety rushes me as the existential existence filled with everlasting pain continues to grow as I feel suffering all around.

As day swallows night I wonder why I keep struggling to keep my life in check. I wonder if everything that happens is a total mistake and the future is wrecked. If I were to do everything again I can say that not much would change, I would just be more prepared. The sun goes down
practicing bravado while the cool spring night shimmies air still to my delight. There’s still plenty of time to make the life I’m given the most that it can be. Maybe my brother had it right, all I have to do is toughen up, but what exactly does that mean? I guess that it could mean that I shouldn’t let things get to me so easily.
When all is said and done,
I want to meet you here;
where the smoke of last winter’s fires
curl like histories into the atmosphere.
Where the horizon stands waiting
to meet the dawn, as if caressing
the body of these mountains
before beginning her day.

We’ve exhausted all horoscope bed tales.
The ones that say things like:
“you will find love this year”
or “people will like you better
if you’re willing to learn from them.”
Perhaps “You’ve misread the stars again.”
We’ve spent countless raising suns in Venus
waiting for them to tell us that we’re all alright.

I used to lay awake with your breathing
seeping through dreams like déjà vu.
The charts never foretold this affair
in the dark with your soul. I could never
tell if I was reliving your presence.
How many times have we walked this galaxy,
before the stars grew weary of footfall
and shook themselves
into dust at our doorsteps?
We stomped on the sidewalk. Our flip-flops slopped through the rainwater like slow, fat paddles. A yellow umbrella reached back to cover my head and I crowded under it. I turned my face up to meet the amused eyes of someone who I was desperate to discern. His full eyebrows arched over closed lids as he bent to kiss me. Around us were other trotting couples frantic to escape as their dresses and moods were beginning to ruin. Thanksgiving dinner had been dampened, the buffet line unprotected and unnoticed by the forces of nature. Our moods however were unwavering, because the thing is—it doesn’t matter what the hell the weather is like when you’re on an adventure. The mountains only look more marvelous when they are suffocating in storm clouds. The palm trees more erratic, temperamental even, while they blow spasmodically overhead. A Caribbean spell fell over the island and I felt lucky to be enchanted. How did I get here?

My sisters would be in California with their father, maybe contemplating roller-skating on the beach, or perhaps they’d be in the midst of watching mid-day mass on the television with a grandmother who I do not claim. I imagine them sitting around a lightly worn wooden table with four matching wood chairs, rain streaking their window. They might tell her stories, and the eighty-year-old may come to know my brother and me through those stories, or maybe they don’t and maybe she doesn’t. Some strange characters she could believe we were, the invisible others. I wonder if they say the grace our mom taught us or if there is some secret prayer they subscribe to when they are with that other family. I wonder what they remembered to be thankful for.

The Ritz Carlton resort we were at named their suites after flowers, as we raced up the hill we passed a blooming garden of buildings. They were beautiful, each with a balcony and a view
of the cerulean ocean. Somewhere around Dahlia, I kicked a green iguana the size of a pencil; it flew down the concrete path near a swamp. I imagine that the manufactured swamp’s purpose was to catch the rainwater in an attempt to control flash floods. A smell was being dragged out of that swamp by the storm, the kind of smell that makes you imagine things unseen. I looked at the cesspool and pictured all of the four foot long iguanas who disappeared with the rain, escaped into it, and gathered around their massive leader. They were feeding on tourist trash and plotting. Before I could become too aware of the effect our tourism might be having on the land, the thought disappeared as an umbrella was thrust into my hands, apparently a frog needed to be caught. The sound of sloshing and croaking vibrated in the air and sounded more joyful than any rain I could remember. A surge of warmth shot through my chest and I felt how I use to when my mother would gather us all in her bed to listen to the rain hit our old tin roof. Back then, I never would’ve thought that when we all grew up we would elect to spend the holidays away from each other. I felt guilty being there without them, experiencing the luxury and relaxation that had never been available to us, it didn’t seem fair. Thinking about opportunity, I decided to not question this one too much, and joined Wolfgang in his effort to capture one of the hundred burping frogs that surrounded us.

My mother and brother would be driving away from our tiny home town to find something to do, most likely they would settle on going somewhere with a movie theater, talking about how much they wished we were with them. Every year she’s abandoned so her daughters can be thankful for some other family and every year her first born son is there to keep her company. They may have finished up at Jaker’s Steakhouse and her fourth critical martini would leave my brother to drive her through whatever small storm would await them in the dreary canyon. Wiper blades would drag across a wet window shield as the two sang along to The Avett Brothers, at least that’s what I picture, and I’m struck by how much I wish I was there. She’d ask him to drive her down a certain road past an unfamiliar house and he’ll not know what I know, that you need to look for the red car. She’d look herself and when it isn’t there she’d tell him to turn around, in front of the house, and take her home. Fat raindrops will fall from the gutter as they walk upstairs. Having been left alone all day, Kasey the cattle dog will be waiting to celebrate what’s left of the holiday with them, I’m sure he’s thankful for their company.

Wolfgang and I made it to the Begonia complex and before unlocking our room said “Hello” to the three housekeepers that took cover underneath an archway. Their dark skin wasn’t glinting with the thick inescapable sweat that laid on their foreheads like dew, the moisture wasn’t
isolated anymore to just underneath their arms and their upper lips. Tonight, they were soaked straight through, the rain might as well have bathed us all together, like when all of my siblings use to be able to fit in the tub at the same time. They didn’t shake with shivers but with laughter as they watched the two of us crash into our room to take cover. The air conditioner, left on high at all times, assaulted us. I stripped off the previously dry dress I had selected for our Thanksgiving feast and tugged on a pair of dry coral underwear. I grabbed my pack of Parliament Lights and slinked out onto the covered balcony and into the warm mist.

I had flown from Montana to Miami and from Miami to St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. St. Thomas in the middle of an ocean so big it could swallow a continent in a gulp. An ocean who’s size could only be matched by the Sky which seemed, tonight, to contain just as much water. A sky which it seemed we lived inside the belly of instead of under as if it had already swallowed us in a gulp, someday long ago. I could’ve been washed out, thousands of miles away from the Rocky Mountains, without the world ever noticing. I wasn’t though; I was welcomed instead, not only by the strange island but also by the strangers who had so generously brought me there. What could I have done to deserve this?

Once when I was very young we took a trip to Calgary, Canada, it was one of the few vacations my single mother would take us on. She was so fraught with anxiety that she forgot quickly that it was a vacation at all. The four days we spent there were filled with budgeting and planning and constant head counts. Us kids ignored her fear of heights and forced her to ride a gondola over the town with us. A few cities over and a couple stories above everyone, she was able to take a breath and experience something other than the life that was forced upon her, I saw a flash of that adventurous spirit that we had done such an effective job of killing in her.

I dropped the ass end of my cigarette into a Coke can the way I’d watched my mother do in her twenties. When she was my age she had just given birth to the first of four children that would be born in the next three years of her young life. I think if she had never had us that some handsome man might have taken her here, all expenses paid. If she had been free, where would she have flown? Maybe she’ll fly one day, with the help of her oldest daughter and a Xanax, maybe we’ll fly right back to this storm. Maybe then, standing in the middle of the ocean, on an island and with its people who could reject us but don’t, I’ll be able to give her a sliver of the life she gave me.
Somehow We’re Still Doing This

Lily Soper

Being with you is a little like a heroin overdose and a little like breaking out in hives.
Or maybe it’s like social media.
Or like dying rich next to fat grandchildren and still feeling empty.
Or I maybe just love to hurt myself.
Perhaps my mother was right when she said the bad boys could smell that.
I can’t tell her stories about you anymore. I can’t tell anyone. My cards are close to my chest.
When I let you think I’m winning, it’s a bluff.
There are 14,000 students here and
I should go out and meet them. My mother told me
to find a nice boy at the library.
I should attend scholarly lectures like an intellectual.
But that would take dedication, and probably intellect, and well,
I lost those both with you last summer. I still suspect you took them
the night we were blindfolded up at our spot in Blue Cloud. When I could smell the fire, and feel its sting, but you insisted that it wasn’t burning me.
I think I’m scared of blonde girls because of you.
I’m scared I shouldn’t make myself forget when you told me you weren’t unhappy but “it wasn’t what you had in mind.”
I might be too scared to love you up close again.
My mother says that “Fear is your body’s way of saving your life,”
but I haven’t been answering her calls lately.
In about five minutes he’s going to throw up. The dark vinyl cafe blinds barely cut the morning sun that only illuminates the swirling dust in the foreground of his vision. This swimming sensation in his inner ear, and sweat running along his back is the start to a familiar, grim countdown. Errol Acker still figures he’s done everything right when all he had to do was keep driving. Even after he had stopped wanting to, while his Los Angeles loft called to him after two hours northward, then eight, then twelve, promising the unconditional forgiveness that only DVD royalties could buy. You can come back and it won’t hurt, it said. LA keeps twenty six year old has-beens safe.

His eyes stay closed as he fails to remember the magic ratio of inhales, exhales and holds that stop the saliva from pooling in the back of his jaw. Back in Southern California the people he knew might get work on a touring play, or take a night class. Former child star Errol Acker has inexplicably started stress vomiting. He momentarily opens his eyes to the long dining room of the cafe, then down at the half finished plate of huckleberry pancakes. Maybe he’s been drinking too much coffee. The name of the restaurant escapes him, he’s learned that these places quickly become interchangeable with the dusty Northwest Americana along the walls, daily specials, empty bar seating. The plastic booth creaks as he rests his forehead against the crook of his arm.

“Pay at the counter when you’re ready, kiddo.” A woman in an apron tenderly sets the ticket to his left. Does she call everyone that? She can’t be more than 40. “Hey, wait. Let me get a closer look at you,” she says and her turquoise earrings click together when she leans forward. Her perfume smells like burnt sugar and settles in the back of his throat.
His heart clenches at this type of encounter. Errol still has the trademark Sycamore clan rusty hair, the only one who had come by it naturally. Still, it’s been ten years since the show ended its eight year run. Outside of LA he had hoped people weren’t looking for B list celebrities with the same preyseeking eyes. Still, he turns to her with a weak veneer smile just as his cell phone starts to ring.

“It is you! Goodness, I probably wouldn’t have recognized you... otherwise,” she says while running a hand along her cheek to mimic the slash across his face, hissing through her teeth in sympathy.

All he can do is nod in response as he laments the damage to his eyes from the midmorning sun, now in vain. This spot in the diner was strategic, so his right side was facing away. The sweat on his neck pools in his collarbones. There isn’t much time left for him to politely excuse himself.

“Sure a saving grace how they didn’t have high definition back then. I’d probably just die if I saw it on my boyfriend’s fifty-five inch with how many times TMZ played it. What brings you so far North?”

“I’m seeing my sister; it’s my first time back in the country in five years.” He says, as his phone rings again. Errol imagines the process of wordlessly taking the phone out of his pocket and hitting the screen with a salt shaker in one hand, pepper in the other and seeing which shatters first.

“Oh, your type has so much drama. My gay cousin lives over East and it’s always something with him, you know?” she says, laughing and rolling her eyes. “I hope you don’t mind if I ask for a picture, my kids used to watch your show.”

Errol wants to react, perform the kind of humiliating verbal takedown that would get airtime on those hidden camera shows, but it only amounts to diluted lavender vomit spurting onto the table.

His agent had asked him about a “comeback,” once he was back in the states. It seemed only natural. Errol had said that he didn’t want to be in the public eye, he didn’t care what they thought of him anymore. They said nothing for three full heartbeats with only the sound of his agent slurping from a bowl of soup, then he said how people don’t exile themselves for five years unless they’re trying to, excuse the phrasing, save face.

“Oh my god, fuck. Sorry. I just you know what? Fuck off? Fuck this.” He stutters out to the waitress and stands up out of the booth, dizzy, only thinking about how he’s going to have to pay the meal from his emergency cash. He throws a fifty on the table narrowly missing the pool of sick and stumbles out into the mild, cloudy parking lot.
He hits the ignition button on his keyring and his car hums to life. The heel of his shoe crunches into a broken bottle on the asphalt that’s the same color green as the glass that Alex had cut him with, of course it is. He almost vomits again, swearing he can smell champagne. He shuts the driver door and sinks low in his seat. This car has been his lone companion for the last seventy-two hours, it’s only a temporary respite but he takes what he can. With short gasps of breath, he looks at the permanent fixture of black trees along the horizon, the greasy yellow of the cafe’s outdoor trim, and then makes eye contact with himself in the rearview mirror. It’s the same meandering, salmon pink line that runs past his crooked nose and ends just barely underneath his right ear. He had gotten so used to it in Lisbon, now it’s as though it radiates a heat and light of its own. The cruelest thought he can imagine is that at least he ended up better than the other guy.

What would Alex have looked like now? He asks himself again. LA hadn’t changed after five years, he thinks, so Alex wouldn’t have seen the point in changing either. Maybe that in itself would have killed him anyway. He’s been trying to avoid tangents about people being doomed, somehow, but it creeps in slowly like a mold. Errol knows he’s allowed even delayed feelings of contempt, regret, anger, whatever comes after someone tears apart the remnants of your career with a complimentary bottle of champagne, and then outs you to the public for good measure. Still, he can’t single out one emotion to unpack. His stomach feels locked in the swirling start of a sawmill fire, between the microscopic second of dust ignition before the room is consumed entirely. He adjusts the mirror with a trembling hand, and backs out of the parking lot to continue north.

He reminds himself that his career was long dead before the scar, before he started throwing up on tables. What’s there to get from a comeback anyway? Errol imagines two magazine covers. The first one is tabloid standard: a waist up shot with him in a nicely fitted robin egg blue shirt, his head tipped slightly to the right and his eyes crinkle in a smile that says “Don’t worry, don’t worry, I made it in spite of myself.” He would be framed by weight loss success stories and divorces and his hair is perfect. In the soft lighting his shoulders would be slightly tipped forward in a surrender, a public question for mercy. The caption would say something about forgiveness, love and inner strength. He imagines skipping over it in the dentists office. The second option is a tight close up of harsh shadows, straight on, eyes forward, unflinching. A way that no one has ever seen him before that promises nothing. His scar would be almost like a tear in the glossy cover, in black and white with every detail honed to a knife edge against a gray background. This headline would have to be an exclusive tell-all, claiming to have the truth in all of the pockmarks and stark realism. It would ask the world to forget who he used to be and buy this version. Surrounding him would be
stuffy culture pieces about the state of the world and offering authority in tone, but fulfilling only what the last cover can: entertainment, something to chew on. Both seem so hollow. Both tell the world that he’s brave, he’s so brave but only in the right ways, the ways he can’t keep for himself.

Errol gets his sister’s voicemail and tells her he’s two hours away, and no, won’t be wanting anything to eat. When he got her first call, Errol was a halfdead type of jet lagged in LAX. He’d done his best to cut off all family in the wake of the scandal, if they hadn’t done it first, so he wasn’t surprised by her urgency. Her sincerity made his chest tighten minutely, how she’s getting married soon, she needed to talk to him in person, she had an extra room. As he stood at the terminal the smell of rainy Los Angeles gave him a sinking feeling he was sure he’d grown out of. He had always hated palm trees, was his immediate realization. With each step it seemed that all roadways and gravel paths and nightclub doorways would lead to the same raw, hazy nightmare five years ago. The nights he spent in clinics, the times he tried to be the one to apologize to Alex because it was the only thing that made sense, despite knowing who had held the bottle. He couldn’t stay. Instead of taking another plane, he made the romantic decision to go on a road trip. Renee couldn’t stifle her laugh when he said that it was “America’s strongest source of catharsis,” and that only made it impossible for him to admit defeat. His apartment in the hills stayed locked as he had transferred his suitcase directly from the taxi to his own car in the driveway.

Now, twelve hundred miles later, Errol hasn’t been this exhausted since he went sober. He wants to maintain that this was a good idea to anyone he can, that the saying about the inherent worth of journeys versus destinations turned out to be true. The trees continue to race by as a light rain dusts the windshield. True green foliage nearly spills out onto the road from the soft, rolling northern hills blanketed by grass. He looks out onto the ocean and tries not to feel sick of it, trying to imagine the beauty instead of nausea. It’d be better to get lost here, he thinks, than the desert. He wonders how many thought games he can play until he forgets what the taxi driver had said to him: “If it’s any consolation, and it’s none of my business, I don’t think you killed that uh, friend of yours. I read that you didn’t even know he had died until you got locked up.”

He pulls over at the sign entering Raymond, Washington. The door swings open, he kneels onto the ground and puts his head between his knees. His therapist had told him that this coping skill was a sign of regression, and she was right. During the first couple seasons of Sycamore, Errol would hide exactly like this on set. His TV parents would scream at the director, threaten to quit, then scream at him for just being a child.

He doesn’t remember doing the same thing that night in the club while he was trying to
hold his face together. But he saw himself in the grainy resolution, hunched over, rocking back and forth as torrents of blood dripped through his hands and onto the floor. Alex only had two days left to his life as camera turned to him, while he thrashed against security, screaming but not loud enough to be heard over the music. His black hair covered his eyes, spindly fingers clutching broken glass. Errol could only make out the word “coward” in the one time he watched it on television, transfixed by both ghosts in an audience of strangers. What came before likely didn’t matter, it was too late to take it back. Did he kill Alex? Errol tells himself “no” out loud. An overdose in some apartment is just another weekend on the outskirts of the LA area. He says it again. There was nothing he could have given Alex that he hadn’t already taken for himself twice over. Errol rests the back of his head against the bumper of the car, sitting crosslegged and repeating the taxi driver’s words like a hymn.

He briefly rests his eyes before getting back into his car, checking the address that Renee had sent him. He’s both grateful and guilty that she doesn’t expect him to remember where she lives in such a small town. The singlelevel blue house sits on a small plot of grass facing the bay. He parks and exhales a shaky breath, and before he feels the urge to sprint away into the ocean, the screen door opens. Renee wears a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and a screen print of a local baseball team, slim shoulders pale from the Pacific overcast. They share a stark resemblance even as the years have gone by, gently angled chins and dark eyebrows that frame sleepy grey eyes. At just two years younger she could have gone into acting herself, but Errol suspects that she understood something about their shared dispositions a little better. Instead she took up web development and stayed in the Northwest, became a homeowner, got engaged to a carpenter. She’s the only person that he doesn’t have a hint of patented jealousy for, only a sense of comfort in her success. He recognizes worry in her eyes as she gets closer to him.

“It’s not as bad as you described it.” she says with deliberate calmness and trying to maintain the lightness in her eyes. Errol stands around three inches taller, and leans against the car as to not loom over her.

“Is it as bad as everyone else described it?” he whispers back, fearfully. Of course she hasn’t seen his face yet, not in person.

“Nope. I’m just glad you still have your eye,” she says and her eyebrows wrinkle, reaching out a hand to his face. He flinches, and Renee lets out a wounded cringe as she recedes. “They never released the name of the guy that did it. You never told me either.”

“It’s not important. But, maybe I could have gotten a good bit part on Law & Order if I
had lost the eye,” he says through a gentle grin. It’s a lame way to deflect, and it’s an old joke, but one he doesn’t get to tell very often since it’s in poor taste. Errol shuts the car door behind him and crosses his arms against the wind. “Everyone’s always looking for a convincing one eyed villain, right?”

“Fuck off,” she says and laughs more than he expected her to. “You up for a walk? I want you to finally meet Cecil, he’s working on something nearby for the wedding before the rain gets here.”

“I need to stretch out my legs anyway.” he says, “What is it he’s building?”

Errol would always ask about her life first in the few phone conversations they had. Cecil Mizutani had worked at the development firm with Renee when they had first met. It was a matter of months before they had moved in together, when Cecil suddenly told her that the “abstractness” of coding was driving him insane. He wanted a trade that was more tangible, he would say, something he could see down the road and know that it would stick around. He took what he learned as a hobbyist and soon got into contracting. Renee once told Errol that Cecil could probably build anything. He spoke with Cecil on the phone once, and he made Errol promise that no matter where he lived next, he would accept a full dining room set from him even if he could afford something better, so he’d have something from the family. The kindness frightened him more than he could say at the time.

“It’s a stage, actually, for the ceremony. The idea of a wedding with a stage is...not what I pictured for myself. There’s something nice about it though. Knowing what it means to him.”

The wind starts to pick up again. Errol tries again to imagine building something with his hands, and fails. If he squints towards the meadow on the edge of town, he can just barely see a partial platform nestled within the grass.

“When’s the wedding?” Errol asks. He could barely keep up with Renee’s athletic pace as they walked along the lush shoulder of the road.

“In about three months,” She says, and stops a few steps ahead of him. “And I want you to live here until then, with us. I know it’s forward, ad I’m not going to plot or scheme to get you to stay, Errol. But I don’t think it’s good in LA.”

“I shouldn’t even go to the wedding, really. It would stop being your thing pretty quickly if I showed up. It’d turn into a soap opera with the family.”

“Just think on it for a couple days, okay?” Renee says, having turned away from him. “I care about you enough not to want you living alone for awhile. I was scared for you in Lisbon.”
Errol realizes, all at once, that he might lose consciousness soon. His gaze fixates on the stage’s skeleton but Cecil is nowhere to be seen. They cross a dirt path to the tall grasses and his breath flutters slightly. The closest thing he had to a meal in the last day is the failed breakfast at that cafe, and he’s strained from lack of sleep. He doesn’t want her to know that he drove in this condition so he only thinks about the things he could say to Renee if he stayed. A lot of misguided things, half truths, but maybe something real would surface. Was it better than being alone with that risk?

The clearing opens up as they follow tire tracks to the looming structure. Renee says something about how she wants to paint it green after the wedding and keep it up for the school to host plays on. Maybe you could help them, she says, and he can barely keep his eyes open. Her voice seems to echo. Errol searches himself for understanding, looking at this half finished monument as they draw closer.

He remembers the blue bathtub and the yellow sink in Lisbon, the destination he’d boarded to straight out of rehab. There he stayed at an apartment on narrow streets that curled into each other like an octopus with no one he knew and no one that recognized him. The caulking in the bathroom had separated from the wall and the wood underneath had begun to rot, the steam releasing an earthy, wet smell. Errol would sit for hours with only his eyes above the water and survey the flowered tile, the peach colored walls, orange street lights filtered through the lace curtain. The best that he could ask for was that this room was never real to him, making it easy to return to.

Something with a laugh track would play from the television he’d left on in the living room. Then music, then an engine turning, ghostly movements that kept the walls of the bathroom from sealing shut and trapping him inside with the shivering pipes. On certain nights it felt alright to cycle through the people that could be waiting in the adjacent room. The would-be ghostwriter or family members looking to see the old city, close cast members from later acting ventures, all at the last age he remembered them. He would cautiously bring up the short list of ex-lovers with their names redacted and imagine which figures he’d let through the door. All of them would say to him how cold the water was.

Only fingertips would graze the surface in quiet waves, with some sitting on the edge of the bathtub while others knelt to his left, always to his left on the crooked teeth tile floor and how the lace shadow would cast across their faces. He would catalogue where he thought their eyes would settle. The tenderness of who he wouldn’t correct when he was told he could get sick from the chill.

The grass is wet when it finally tips towards him, and cushions his fall better than he could
have asked for. He wonders, in the back of his mind, when he got so nuanced at being able to rate the experiences of his body breaking down. A flash of red hair wades over his vision and Renee seems to calls to who he can only guess is Cecil. In the peripherals of his vision he sees a figure jump from the edge of the high stage, and he can almost hear the sound of his running footsteps.

Renee sits above Errol, speaking softly, pressing a hand against his forehead, and there’s something he wants to understand from it. Errol closes his eyes against her cool palm, and can match his breathing with the ocean.
MISSED CONNECTION: AN OPEN LETTER TO THOMAS SAYERS ELLIS

Dear Thomas Sayers Ellis — :

You don’t know me, nor do I know you, but I’ve read your poetry, and I’ve been inadvertently following you around Missoula, Montana.

Tonight, at the Good Food Store, five minutes before close, I was standing at the register next to yours, wondering if there is ever a good time to interrupt someone’s everyday to tell them you love their work. Before an answer could come to me, however, a woman in a spaghetti-strap tank and in pants of an indeterminate color (probably purchased at a fair trade shop with bumper stickers lining its walls) sidled up behind you with a box of tea in her hand, placed it on the conveyor belt. The tea collided with the last of your groceries and you made a comment I couldn’t (over) hear. The woman, though, said something like, “I wanted to buy chocolate,” and now I think she was buying some sort of strange chocolate tea.

You bought her that strange chocolate tea, Thomas Sayers Ellis, and she told you that she would pay your good deed forward. You misunderstood and told her not to worry about it, as though you believed that this strange white woman would have the wherewithal to track you down, shove $4 in your hand for her inevitable disappointment: not having real chocolate.
**B-List**

Wrote a piece about Anne Carson called, “What I Talk About When I Talk About Anne Carson, Hypothetically,” ‘cause it was for a class in college, and I didn’t want my poetry professor to know that I’d actually (and not hypothetically) had an affair with an older man—a man he had taught four years prior. Didn’t want my professor to know I was writing “What I Talk About…” with a broken heart and stumbling fingers.

Prefaced the essay with four quotes unrelated. Got a B.

**Whatever-It-Is**

I’m reading Sarah Vap, standing in the open doorway of my kitchen—an act likely to exacerbate this whatever-it-is-I-have, but I’m feeling a bit too bored of the warmth of my house and the comfort of my bed.

**Quick ’N’ Easy Thai Peanut Noodles**

Ingredients:
- Any type of pasta on-hand;
- an unmeasured amount of soy sauce, Sriracha, and peanut butter;
- sesame seeds, if available.

Directions:
- Cook pasta, drain. Throw in other ingredients. Stir. Enjoy.

Two days ago: my roommate says, “Peanut noodles are a sign of hard times at our house.”
2+ YEARS

Look longingly at this room in this house at 921 Stephens Ave. (Missoula, Montana) while “She Used To Be My Girl,” by the O’Jays, runs through your head, and think of the really bizarre and lovely 2+ years you’ve spent here: sea foam green and cum on grey flannel sheets.

IN DEEP

We were trudging around the summit of Lolo Peak on my birthday. The snow was thick and high—powdery—and the sun was at our sides all day.

My friend and I were talking intermittently, focused more on whether or not this trek through unexplored terrain would lead us to the mountain bottom, or whether we were wise in deciding to bring our headlamps in case we ended up shoeing in darkness, lost on Lolo Peak. In each silence between observations said aloud, my thoughts revolved around the man I was currently sleeping with. He was due back in Missoula later the next week, and after a none-so-subtle hint that he’d need a ride from the train station in Whitefish, I had offered to pick him up and bring him back to Missoula.

“Want to hear a secret?” I asked my friend, whose legs were deep in powdery snow.

COMMUNITY CHEST

My sister and her husband gave me a greeting card for my birthday. Inside, from a now-incomplete Monopoly game, a GET OUT OF JAIL, FREE card: their promise to pay a triple-digit, five-year-old municipal court fee—a fine that held my name hostage on an online “Arrest Warrant List” in Helena, Montana. Happy Birthday to me.
They Had Mountain Ranges Behind Them
Michelle Nemetchek

Crispy salads and thin pizza atop our table,
I sat across a sweet-faced girl and her boyfriend.
I talked to him about gardening. PEAS farm,
cold weather that spring. How the frost
kept the shovels from piercing the ground,
even in March. One of his pant legs
was eaten from bike gears and dirt.

When we walked, the three of us, he would run
ahead, jumping off ledges of buildings or climbing bridges
to a better view of the city. He was a photographer.
She was a better one.

She sat next to him, long hair,
simple string bracelets, watching him talk
with lasting infatuation. I ate a slice
of apple off my salad.
“How long have you been together?”

“A year, maybe?”
Her arms and cheeks were freckled from the sun.
“He’s the only person I can travel
with that doesn’t infuriate me.”
We laughed, but what a feat.
Traveling tears families apart at Disneyland--
pushes friends to fight after long road trips.
Something about a sense of place
changes a person.

Later, they got a dog,
the trademark of a solid relationship.
An Australian Cattle with piercing blue eyes,
they take him hiking out in Arizona—
hot red sand, cooling at night,
making campfires with the old wood.
The best part is the simplicity, the way they move around each other, two people on the same page of the same book. The progression is terrifyingly natural. They were classmates first, sitting a table away from one another in a room without heating, then casual acquaintances chatting before and after class, then friends keeping in touch across vacations and schedules. Then they were partners. It all happened within a few months. When she is alone in her room late at night, she tries to remember the defining moments of each phase of the process, but the lines are so blurred that she starts to wonder if they haven’t been dating the whole time.

She marvels at the way their conversations run the course of a river. Sometimes their words splash along the surface. At other times, they sink right to the bottom and dredge up their darkest and most well guarded secrets. She has never been one for sharing, yet finds herself answering every question with an openness that scares her. She has lied about everything from her age to her religion, is a liar by nature. He brings out the truth in her, at least at first.

If things are ever awkward it is only in public, and usually her fault. He starts conversations with strangers, people he just met, people she knows. She is torn between the woman she is to the world, and the woman she is with him, and the two have trouble coexisting. Often the result of their conflict is a stilted conversation with one of the hundreds of people he seems to know, people from work, class, professors and deans, people from Freshman year he hasn’t seen in months, board members, volunteers, people he used to know or has never met but knows about. They intimidate her with their vastness. Small groups are more her style. She can talk to anyone from across a pool table, a game board. Public is just too public for her.
Behind closed doors things are different. The easiest woman for her to be is herself, and she revels in it because he revels in it. He is the best audience she’s ever had, responding to her every thought, every whim, every facial expression as though it’s the secret to unlocking the universe. He never pretends that he can read her mind, but he always knows when something’s on it. He calls her out if he doubts her honesty. Sometimes it’s justified. She loves the way the world falls away, the way time plays them for fools. She can never be sorry because she wouldn’t trade any of those moments. Their value is in their irreplaceability. She replays them whenever they are apart. He is her greatest distraction even when he isn’t there, and she whittles away hours lost in thoughts of him. She doesn’t know how it can be any other way when he responds so vibrantly to her.

She is infinitely satisfied with the way her name sounds in the back of his throat as she covers his neck with open-mouthed kisses. He tells her that he doesn’t like people touching him, that she is his exception. And she can hear it in that voice, feel it under her lips as the cords of his neck jump under his skin. Like he is losing his sanity one hickey at a time. Like she is powerful enough to destroy him, to own him. She takes being his exception very seriously, wants him to feel it all, wants him to crave her touch more than he needs to reject someone else’s. She wants to make him burn for it, needs to know that she can.

Between kisses they talk about rules. Midnight on weeknights and no blowjobs. She gets to pay for herself more often then he gets to pay for her. Not this weekend. Not with the lights on. She doesn’t get to help with the dishes when they’re at his place, even if she makes half the mess. Always say Goodnight, human. No sex. Yet. She comes first to him because he needs her to. Homework comes first to her because it has to. They lay out all their lines, draw their boundaries in the sand, some together, some separate. The rules are undermined by the understanding that some of them will be blown away in days, that some of them are really just suggestions. She hasn’t gone to bed before midnight in months, but she needs the structure, even if it’s fake. Maybe he knows that.

He whispers soft words in Spanish, words she used to understand. She thinks he is telling her things he doesn’t want her to know but can’t keep to himself. Beautiful things. Terrible things. Things like I need you, and Don’t leave me, but she imagines it all. There’s no way of knowing without asking, and she isn’t sure she’s ready to know just yet because it means they are on the same page. And it keeps her up at night as he drifts to sleep beside her. She hides behind her foreign tongue as much as he does. She traces words into his skin with the pads of her fingers – Táim ag titim in grá leat – over and over until he might learn the pattern, learn the words and discover her secret. I’m falling in love with you.
She kicks him out of her apartment, otherwise he won’t leave. He begs five more minutes that turn into twenty, thirty, an hour, and still it’s not enough for either of them. Her roommates call it the honeymoon stage, but she worries that it’s more than that, worries that they really just need each other that much, but the idea of needing him scorches her pride. The idea of cutting him off burns her even more. Leaving him is impossible but she does it. They stand by the front door for ten minutes repeating goodbye. Every kiss is the last until the one right after it.

She tells him he can make the next move. The soft touch on her back is a tease she’s been waiting for him to fulfill all night. He says he isn’t sure he can do it to himself, take off the ribbons without unwrapping the gift. But he does. Maybe just the bow. She hopes to never forget the look on his face when her plain cotton tee slips off. And she is amazed that her usual self-consciousness stays dormant, that her arms don’t cover her stomach. It’s hard to feel ugly or unworthy when he can’t take his eyes off her.

Their apartments overlook a private park. They jump the fence and wander in the dark for hours at a time. She took him there the first time they negotiated the rules of their relationship. He suggested it the second. Now it’s where they go when they can’t stay inside. He isn’t himself. She asks questions that don’t sound right, don’t mean what she wants them to, don’t reach across the distance that’s grown between them. He calls her a question dodger. He’s right, but she argues, she still doesn’t have the right words or the right heart. She can’t figure him out, can’t read him. She is not herself because he is a stranger again. They are out of sync, keep running into each other. She knows she isn’t all he cracks her up to be, but she’ll never get tired of hearing him compliment her. Tonight she isn’t hearing anything. She wants to be what he wants and what he needs. She wants to be what he deserves. Their hands tighten like lug nuts so rigid they might crack from the strain.

Intimately they move forward. A brush of fingers along the hem of a shirt. A palm on a hip, a back. Ticklish at first, playful. A hand in the back pocket of a pair of jeans, two hands holding tight and pulling tighter. He asks if it’s okay, waits for permission, won’t go forward without it. She likes that. She lets him be in charge of the pace because she’s worried they’ll go too fast if she takes over. He wants to wait and she’s glad. She doesn’t need to rush. He is softly methodic, agonizingly subtle. Even if he’s been there before he never assumes he’s allowed to go there again. Always he waits, for permission, for affirmation, for something, and sometimes she isn’t sure what. But she’s glad about that too, glad that he’ll never take without asking. It makes the giving easier, knowing that she can always say no.

She loses track of how many times they ask what the other is thinking. The question never
gets old. But she can’t do it all, not at first. She cringes inside the first few times he tries to kiss with his tongue. The criticism from the last guy floats through her head, hard to ignore, harder to forget. But she humors him because he wants it. The practice helps. She grows confident, if only with him. The way he looks at her is compliment enough. She drives him to distraction. He can’t stop touching her, kissing her. His desire is her greatest turn-on. When his hands are on her she can forget the last time until she can’t anymore, and she’ll never forget the way he stops everything and hugs her tight to him as she explains why he can’t go down on her. And she’s as weak as she was when it happened, unable to push him away, unable to claim the space as hers and force him out of it. He kisses her forehead, rubs her back until the shaking stops. Offers to get her shirt. Offers to leave if she needs it. Offers to be her pillow. She lets him stay. They grow quiet. The clock reads 5:30. She doesn’t sleep.

He enjoys having her on top. He tells her he doesn’t mind being owned. He tells her she’s amazing at all things erotic, jokes that it’s all the romance she reads. She doesn’t believe him, especially not at first. Her entire life has been an exercise in self-doubt. He isn’t the first person to believe in her, to have faith in her abilities, and she wants to trust him with everything she has but fears it won’t be enough. So she tries to make it all about him. It’s the easy thing to do, natural for her. The power is thrilling. She can drive him crazy with her hips, make him weak without taking off a single layer. He calls it torture. She knows he loves it.

They grow comfortable in each others’ spaces. She knows where he keeps his journals, what he has on his desk, his bookshelf, which cupboards belong to him. He knows where her dishes go, where she keeps her knives. They become friendly with one another’s roommates over games of pool and movie marathons. As a group they have conversations about politics, pranks, the past, the future. They talk about movies, shows, music, school, old friends, family, whatever comes up, wherever the conversation goes. Alone they struggle to find things to sustain them, words to keep them going. She wonders if it’s because they would rather be kissing, but she’s afraid they might be running out of things to say, so they talk less, turn to food. They make dinners and breakfasts. He wants to spoil her by refusing to let her help, but she insists. They delegate. He is in charge of bacon because she cooks it wrong but she makes the eggs. They do steak in a frying pan because neither of them has a grill. She makes pasta. They stand side-by-side, back-to-front, hands around waists, on shoulders, down arms. Kiss on the cheek, the back of the neck, the forehead, the lips.

She is self-conscious when they aren’t alone, when anyone could walk in, walk by, and see them. When their roommates are in bed, when the drapes are shut and the lights are dim, that’s
when she comes alive. She kisses with abandon, sits on the kitchen counter and pulls him into her. He likes it when she wraps her legs around him. She likes the lights off. She can’t see him without her contacts, but she can blame the dark if the lights are off, if the only illumination is the muted streetlights, the breaking daylight filtered through drapes. She knows he hates it.

He wants to see her, all of her, good and bad, but she’s glad he can’t in the dark because that’s when they tell each other secrets. She’s afraid of him and he’s afraid of being alone. They are both afraid to die. He never tells her that he needs her but she knows that, in a way, he does. And she wants to be anything he needs, doesn’t mind being the light in his dark some days because he’ll do the same for her without question. No request is too big for him, the sky is her limit. The sky and a little extra time. He makes his own requests too but never pushes, never asks why if she says no. She likes that she doesn’t always have to explain herself, that he’s willing to trust her judgment, willing to wait, willing to ask permission every day if that’s what it takes to make her happy.

And it’s worth all that waiting when she opens up to him in a new way, when she strips off her panties and tells him with confidence exactly where she wants him. His expression is every holiday across the world as he kisses his way down to her. She knows how much it means to him because he can barely string two words together. He’s wanted this for ages and she’s finally ready for it, can finally want it from him. And it’s better than anything she imagined, better than she deserves, and she’s so surprised that she pushes him away before she’s really ready to. She could grow addicted to a feeling like that, like her body is winding itself up, stretching and compressing, like she can’t control herself anymore. And she’s still possessed when she pushes him off, pulls him up, kisses him. She has to know what he’s tasting. Has to know if it’s worth it.

Most of the power is in her hands, and it starts to go to her head. Uncertainties bred from a lifetime of mediocrity melt into the molten gold of purest confidence. She hardly recognizes herself in the mirror after four hours in bed with him. He tells her that he wishes she could see what he sees, and she can in the bathroom at four-thirty in the morning when they struggle to keep their laughter down. He shows off his battle wounds in the mirror above the sink and her smile is satisfied, a little evil. And even though they’re supposed to be sleeping, all she can think about is giving his back another set of scratches.

She knows she can ask for anything. He doesn’t like his stubble, but she can talk him into leaving it for a few days because he knows she likes it. And he must like it a little because he smiles every time she runs her hands along his jaw, but he’ll only keep it for a few days at a time. He warns her when he’s about to shave it too, and she’s sure that it’s only so he can laugh at the way she
moans and groans, protests as if he’s stealing something from her. It makes it that much worse the one night he shaves without warning because she’s used to being in the loop now. And it shouldn’t matter because it’s a days worth of facial hair, but as their eyes meet in the bathroom mirror she knows that it’s a test and she’s just failed.

When they’re apart she feels the claustrophobia. He needs her more than she needs him and it shows. He demands more and more time together, time she can’t afford to give him, but she does. Her work builds up on her desk, starts to swallow her under the weight. She knows she’ll have to cut him off eventually, have to push him back, establish lines of concrete instead of rules written in sand. Midnight on weekdays only works if one of them enforces it, and that falls on her. Leaving her is the only request that she can count on him to never obey the first time. But it’s hard to be upset about that when they’re together. She pulls him down for one more kiss as often as he stays for one more minute. He’ll consume her if she isn’t careful, if she isn’t the responsible one. She doesn’t feel smothered until he’s gone, until the house lights come on and illuminate all the work she hasn’t done yet, until she realizes that she’s grown dependent on him. Every day is just moving from one room to another while she waits to see him again. She wants to be disgusted, feel pathetic for wasting all her time and thoughts on him, except it never feels like a waste.

She won’t stay over on weeknights, not at first. Even as she’s insisting she doesn’t understand what’s holding her back. Maybe fear of how fast it all happens, how small of a step it is from sleeping together to sleeping together. It should be silly. Most couples their age sleep together first and worry about catching a few z’s later, but they aren’t most couples. She feels like a hypocrite for asking him to stay a few nights later. Maybe she needed time to get used to the idea. He leaves, comes back with a cheeky smile and shows off his retainers. You said we were just going to sleep. They do. It’s the first time they’ve ever gone to bed before midnight and they joke that it’s the secret to staying over on weeknights. He doesn’t make fun of her lisp. She doesn’t make fun of his pink retainers. He ditches his sweatpants. They wake up around six the next morning and get caught up in the sheets. His hand under her shirt, his lips on her skin, it’s the only persuasion she needs. He brings her to orgasm three times before she has to get up and go to class. He still tastes like her when she sees him four hours later. Her and the mint of toothpaste.

He says that the best way to keep her interested is to keep things from her until later. But she can’t always remember the things he does, she forgets parts of past conversations, forgets the context of a comment, forgets to commit every second of their time together to permanent memory. It’s her greatest flaw and it hurts him. She knows it, even though he never says. What he does say
is that he wants to learn to love it all, the good and the bad. He points at her heart and tells her he wants to know her. And she worries because he isn’t returning the favor. She feels like he’s keeping part of himself separate and distant, and just because she is allowed to ask doesn’t mean she always can, doesn’t mean she always wants to. Some days she’d rather he say what’s on his mind without prodding from her.

He leaves in the morning while she is in the shower. The lights are off, the bed still unmade, everything exactly where she left it except for him and the piece of paper in the middle of the bed.
Eraser lips like to smile
pink and firm and remain
closed like curtains…

Eraser lips like to be bitten
when alone and allowed
to drain rust blood
onto stained white teeth…

Eraser lips like to brush
against skin, feel muscles
relax, taste salty sweat
and cool the trembles
from family, work, and liquor…

Eraser lips like to kiss
owies from falling?
tripping? being thrown?
down the stairs onto
cement basement floors
which mop up easily…

Eraser lips like to open
their curtain sometimes—
feel screams vibrate
when no one’s home
and let the dry air chap
and tear at their soft
eraser exterior…
Water hit the bottom of the empty bin, echoing off the hardwood floors in the house they shared. Anna was sitting on white tile in the bathroom with her arms draped over the side of the tub, head resting on the edge. The water rose and reached her fingertips. She turned it off. On every side of her - boxes. All shapes, sizes. Some opened, spilling white powder – blue specks scattered across the tile, gathered in heaps. Spray bottles, various sorts and strengths lay half used. Most broken – thrown.

Anna began to lift the heap of fabric from the washing basin. She held it gently, squeezing and rotating. With her eyes closed it sounded like rain. But again, when she opened them, the water was still tainted red.

Without looking, she reached behind her. Using a damp hand Anna grabbed a pile of powder. It leaked through her fingers as she shook the white and blue specs over the sheet. She pushed hard into the water and turned and turned and turned the fabric over until foam bled out and the tide she created settled.

She drained the water.

Anna ran new frigid water into the bin while the lifeless pile remained - seeping. She pushed the mound beneath the stream. It was a rhythmic motion – the rinsing. Water ran continuously as she lifted a piece of the cloth, and came down hard, pushing all the soap that was left out. Then turn. Again, lifting the heavy cloth. Pushing the suds out. Turn. Lift. Push. A sigh escaped from her mouth and before it could sound accomplished, she clogged the drain and let the cold water run into the basin. It filled and suspended the fabric. She grabbed and squeezed.
Again – the water was tainted red.
She drained the water.
“Annaaaaaa!” Her husband yelled from down the hall. “Get ready. We need to be going soon.”
She turned the water on hot this time and steam filled the room. Anna spread the fabric out across the glass surface. James opened the bathroom door.
“I don’t want to go James. Can’t we go another time?”
“Why don’t you want to go now?”
“I’m tired. It’s been a long day.” She turned the water off.
“It’s only noon.”
She began to lift and twirl the fabric. Thick droplets fell into the tub.
“I have so many things to do today.”
“...and you’re always tired.” More tenderly he added, “Darling, leave this alone. Get up. Have a shower. We need to leave at half past”. Anna reached behind her grabbing a bottle this time. She drizzled blue over the fabric.
“We can go next week, can’t we?
“Anna.” James crouched down, close to the edge of the tub. “It’s stained.” He placed his hand on her shoulder. “We can just buy a new one.”
She dug into the ball of wet fabric and, again, began rotating it rhythmically. Push, lift, turn. “I could make us some lunch…” Push, lift, turn… “We could stay in and watch a film.” Push, lift, turn. “That would be better for us…”Push, lift, turn. “Wouldn’t it?” Push. As she thrusted down foam seeped. She turned the water on and let it run cold.
He turned it off.
“Anna, we’re going. It’s paid for.”
“You can drag me by the heels then.”
“Now, what’s this about? You’re anxious about what they’ll say, aren’t you?”
“No.”
“Do you hate the facility?”
“No.”
“They only want to help, dear.”
She reached for the water faucet. He grabbed her hand.
“After I’m finished with the washing,” She said quietly and pulled her hand away from him.
“Then we can go.”
“The washing never ends.”
“You try then.” She held the heavy drenched fabric out.
“I don’t want to try. Damnit, Anna! I want to go to this appointment. I want to buy a new sheet.”
“What if I don’t want to see what’s wrong?”
“Why wouldn’t you?”
“And I don’t want to buy a new sheet.”
“Well we certainly can’t use this one.”
“We’ve tried and tried and tired…” Anna calmly turned the water on and began rinsing again.
“And they can fix it,” James cut her off.
“I’m afraid it isn’t so simple.” She began to push and turn the fabric faster under the rushing water.
“Of course they can. They’ll just take a look -”
“What if there is no problem,” Anna said, pausing. The suds dissipated. She turned the water off and let the pile sit. She looked at him.
“Of course there’s a problem. Don’t kid yourself, Anna.”
“There doesn’t have to be. Nothing’s worked. And now, I figure if it’s supposed to happen...”
“So that’s it then?” James rose to his feet. “After all this, you’re leaving it up to chance?”
“Not up to chance darling, up to fate.” She clogged the drain turned the water on again, filling the tub.
“You’re just going to give this all up?”
“James, I can’t give up something we never had.” She turned the faucet off and clutched the sheet. Dangling it above the basin, she squeezed and closed her eyes. With the sound of rain, red spread like dye.
Spilling Light
Megan Jessop

When you arrived, it was barely morning,
the earth releasing darkness
as if she herself were a writer;
allowing a bloodletting of ink.
Your solemn face told me all that I needed.

How your demons settled.
How they were somehow
quiet in this black isolation I had just disturbed
with laughter and starlight.

I wanted you to see the magic this world held
inside her pen. Writing a new beginning
as light crept in along mountains,
rivers, roads and front lawns of our college town.
You seemed to be transformed into a mountain yourself.
Built altogether of strength
and dirt and rock and a stubborn will
to not be moved.
Beneath the surface, a magma—
glowing and searing, as if consuming your true self.
The sun is a fire blazing at a distance.
You kept it there, suspended,
separate by this mountain so that her light
could not break through the darkness your body held,
for fear of her becoming one with the river of flame.
The river you held within yourself.
Making love with what is at your core,
releasing passion to color this earth of gold
like the morning we now drink.
I watched slim fingers slip a thin paper into a cigarette roller. It was made of plastic, blue and yellow – I remember this distinctly, as well as the smell of tobacco added pinch by pinch. She used a thick blue card to pack the loose tobacco, she twisted a dial on the side, slid the top of the roller to pop out the finished cigarette, and then started all over again. I watched her fingers move and the cigarettes piled up. They had no filters, and she sealed each paper with her tongue. I can’t quite remember her name, but it may have been Margaret.

My mom sat one chair over and followed suit with a cigarette roller of her own. Her hair was fine and dirty blonde, cut haphazardly with kitchen scissors. Her nails grew long naturally but were stained yellow and unpolished. The two women created piles of cigarettes in silence, and I listened to the methodical sounds of paper slipping, plastic clipping, and the tapping of the finished cigarette against the table wood. I was eleven but had already been taught cigarettes were a lot cheaper when you rolled them yourself. They had no filters so you had to be careful not to burn down to your fingertips. If you were poor you finished your cigarette and then unrolled the butt to add the partially scorched tobacco back into another little bag for later use. The scent of tobacco at the table was familiar and held a notion of comfort.

I sat in a too-big chair and drew a deciduous tree that had lost all of its leaves. The trick to drawing good-looking trees is to accommodate the branches, the forking of boughs, the splitting of twigs, into smaller and smaller segments. The longer you sit and add branches, the better the tree will look in the end. I drew a hole in the trunk where an owl lived, and winding roots weaving in and out of the soil. I made a path just to the right of the tree that started wide and narrowed as it
moved diagonal across the paper. In my mind I recited the lines of “The Road not Taken,” recently memorized for 5th grade English. Margaret looked over and said, “What an artist,” in a tired voice. I’m sure my mom spoke then, but I can’t imagine what she might have said.

When the women were finished rolling cigarettes we moved outside. I stood against the building’s wall and stared at a grey plastic arm for crushing cans that was mounted to the outside of the building. Beneath the arm were two large garbage cans, lined with thick black plastic, and filled with flattened pop cans. The people in this house drank a lot of soda and smoked a lot of cigarettes. They saved all the aluminum cans and cashed them in for money at the recycling plant. I counted the flattened cans resting on the surface of the pile and tried to mathematically work out how many total cans the bins could hold, but I couldn’t remember the formula for volume. It felt like I was trying to guess the correct number of jellybeans in a glass jar at a carnival. I looked out at my mom and Margaret smoking on one of two picnic tables in the yard. Above their head was some type of birch tree; the leafless November limbs resembled my drawing from inside. Every spring the tree comes back to life and thousands of little ladybugs blanket its surface, presumably to reproduce with each other all over the leaves.

Living in the house were two orange cats with extra toes on their feet. They often hid in the juniper bushes just beyond the front porch. I knelt down and glanced into the bushes, searching for the cats, but I didn’t find them there. They were probably inside, hiding beneath one of the residents’ beds. On a sunnier day not long before I used my first digital camera to take a photo of a cat sitting in dappled sunlight. Their eyes glowed yellow in the shadows, and I loved them.

On visiting days my mom would smoke at the picnic tables while my brother and I played outside. One day it rained for a few hours, and dozens of tiny snails crept out onto the sidewalks. I collected a few snails in an empty fruit snack packet and brought them inside. My mom helped me line Tupperware with damp paper towels. We punched holes in the lid, I placed the snails inside and we fed them carrots until their droppings turned orange.

In the evenings residents of the house took turns preparing dinner. There was a large white marker board with names of people and tasks delineated: grocery shoppers, dinner cook, dish washer. There was a common room TV and a smaller one in the women’s lounge. There was probably another in the men’s area but I was never allowed up the stairs. Two payphones in the dining area rang frequently. Occasionally someone was waiting nearby to receive a call but not always. A staff member usually sat at a cluttered desk looking over one of the two long dining room tables.

This is where my mom lived once, in a house with strangers and schedules and visiting
hours. I came for visits every week, and once every other weekend. Ten years ago I was a kid with a kid brother and a sick mom who was getting better every day. I built memories here, and then I slowly lost them over the years. I forgot about the typewriter on the dresser in the women’s lounge. I had never used a typewriter before but my mom could teach me because she had used one just like it in college. I once typed a journal entry about my kissing gourami named Valentine. I wrote a love letter to my mom, and she bought me a machine to make my own stickers.

There was a morning when my dad took me to Perkins for breakfast because I was sick with the flu. I couldn’t go to school so he drove me to the house where my mom was, and I threw up bacon in the parking lot. That day my mom and I sat and watched the movie Titanic until I fell asleep. Then she smoked on the loveseat outside and I laid my head in her lap. I cannot accurately describe to you the beauty of this moment – it has never once left me. The sun warmed my skin and the weather worn fabric of the small couch. The light illuminated my closed eyelids until they fluoresced hot orange, and my mom ran gentle fingers through my hair for what felt like blissful eternity. Her cigarette smoke smelled deep and pleasing on this day. We were silent but a breeze drifted through the leaves of the ladybug birch tree, and birds called in the distance.

I still don’t know exactly how long my mom lived in this place. I never kept track, and I could probably look back and calculate an approximate timeline but I wont. She was gone from my life for so long and then suddenly she was there in this house, and I was there with her if only for a few hours each week. When I was a kid my mom lived in a group home for the mentally ill, the recovering addicts, the homeless. In this home we were together, and we were happy, and we were safe.

At the tail end of her stay she met a man and fell in love and I cried because she could not be his when before she was only mine. She left the house and the man came along. A month or two later I found his deodorant in my mom’s bedroom and this filled me with rage. I knocked it behind the dresser so he wouldn’t be able to find it again. My mom lived in the basement of a friend’s house that wasn’t big enough for more than one person. Still, over time the man came over more and more often. Soon they moved out together and found an apartment of their own. The man’s prolonged presence resulted in my increased tolerant of his existence. Eventually he grew to love us all and I think I might have loved him once.

Everything shattered a few years ago. The man ultimately disappeared. I poured cups of mixed alcohol down the drain. I silently replaced birthday money taken from my brother’s elementary school backpack. I woke up in the night unable to find my mom anywhere in the house. Then,
a few months ago, I nearly lost my mom completely. I walked down snowy streets in fear that I would hear her name call out to me from the dark blankets and cardboard scraps on the sidewalk surface. I called her and a slurring man I didn’t know answered the phone in North Dakota. She was lost for six months.

I found my mom in the halfway house from 10 years ago. I brought her flowers, pink azaleas in a pot, the day before Valentines Day. We sat together at the table where, years ago, I watched her roll hundreds of cigarettes. And I listened to her talk about what was the same and what had changed. She laughed wildly in a way that was new and unsettling to watch. She rocked towards me and reeled back slightly, grinning and holding my hand in hers. I brought her expensive chocolates and she ate them at the table, passing me bits to share. I listened to stories about weeks she spent on the streets, about her broken ankle and the surgery. How she met a new man – he had cancer. It was terminal.

I sat at the table and felt stunned. I looked at the bowl on the floor that held water for the old orange cat. His name is Hobbes, I couldn’t find him that day, but I think he may have been hiding in the juniper bushes. My mom smoked at the picnic tables outside. Her teeth looked different. I glanced at the birch tree – no ladybugs quite yet. We hugged. My mom cried, but for some reason I couldn’t.
I walked out of the cabin at first light. The air was cold, smoke coughed from the chimney. To the west, the Sawtooth Mountains were purple and blue, like cold steel. I saddled Ned, tied on my bags, scabbard my rifle. He’s a full seventeen hands tall and only kicked me once, when I gelled him. I mounted up and followed the buckboard tracks back to the pasture and forest beyond to look for my daughter’s body.

Pa gave me a Colt revolver when I was ten years old.
“You take care of this, and it’ll take care of you, Finley,”
He was third generation Smith to ranch this ground on the high plateau of Western Idaho. Later, I paid cash for a big bore hunting rifle. Hard-earned money from selling steers. I practiced shooting every chance I got. I got real good. Pa was proud of me.
After I got my guns, Ma gave me a Bible. A big one with gold edges; real fancy.
“Use this,” she said, “when those guns won’t fix your problems.”
“I will, Ma,” I promised. I put that Bible under my bed and took it out only twice since then; once to Pa’s funeral; the other to Ma’s. I didn’t take it to the third.

When Pa died, I took over the ranch. Run fifty head of mixed breed cows and put up hay twice a year. I built a cabin on the home place from trees I felled and skinned. Made a fireplace from flat rocks hauled from Sawtooth Creek running nearby. Cemented them together with mortar bought from the General Store down in Stanley. I don’t like town much; stayed away from it most of the time.
After I built the cabin, I married Irem. She was an Indian. When Jeb McMaster got tired of her, he burned her face, and other parts I can’t talk about, and kicked her out into the street. Nobody wanted her. I took her in. I ignored the scars. She had hair like black silk, passionate eyes, mixed with a faraway sadness. I loved the way she smelled when we worked side-by-side; strong, womanly.

Irem was good for me. She gave me a daughter, Emily, born with golden ringlets that turned dark as she grew up. She was beautiful. She looked like her mother without the scars. When Emily was four, I hitched Ned to the buckboard and took my family to town. Stanley had one street, lined with clapboard buildings; a bank, the General Store, Dr. Pfister’s place where he worked on people and animals. There was a saloon next to the store and a church at the end of the street. It was raining, the day as grey as two week old stew meat. Mud in the streets.

“Irem, stay here with Emily. I’m going to the store for supplies.”

Irem held the horse as I walked past the saloon towards the store. The smell of day old beer and cigarettes came out of the doors. Never drank in that place with whores and rummy cowboys. I drank my liquor alone.

Behind me, the doors opened and Jeb McMaster stepped out. His spurs jingled a tune known only to rich men.

“Hey Smith!” he bellered at me. “Don’t see you in town much. You afraid to show off that pretty wife of yours? Well, at least she used to be pretty.” His face was flushed with booze.

Jeb McMaster had broad shoulders, a big face. He owned the largest ranch in the county, running a thousand head of cows. He hired Mexicans and Indians to work for him; paid dirt-poor wages. He abused his help, especially the women. He took a hot branding iron to Irem when she was younger.

“McMaster, I got nothing to say to you. You’re drunk. Go back inside. You don’t want to start no fight with me.” I turned back towards the store.

“Whoa!” he hollered. “Heard you got a new baby girl. Maybe I’ll go fix her up a little, like I did her momma.”

McMaster struck a match, lit a cigar and blew on it, ember red.

“Stop,” I said, word hissed like venom.

“Stop?” he said, sullen now. “You going to stop me, Smith?”

A double-barreled Derringer was tucked in his waist band. His hand moved toward the grip. Before he got his gun out, I drew my Colt and leveled a slug right between his eyes and out
the back of his head. He fell, blood and brains mixed with the mud.

The Sheriff said it was self-defense. Told me to get back home. I went to the store, got my supplies and turned Ned out of town. Irem stayed close to me the whole way. Emily stayed close, too.

I heard it took four men to hoist McMaster’s body up top his horse. One man led him home, tongue hanging purple. When they dumped him on the ground, heard Mexicans and Indians spat on him.

Ma was still alive when I shot McMaster.

“Gracious Finley,” she said, “I never seen a man who loved so fiercely. Man or beast is just stupid to mess with your family.”

She died shortly after that. I took that Bible to her funeral; haven’t looked at it since. I think she was glad to be dead. She missed Pa. Now, she could join him, either up or down as God saw fit.

Four years later a disease laid hold of Irem and wouldn’t let go. Made her sickly for weeks, then put her in bed. She gurgled when she breathed; coughed day and night and turned white as yesterday’s ashes. Her lungs filled with water; she was drowning from the inside. I put my mouth over her nose and tried to suck the water out, but did no good. Doc Pfister came out and gave her morphine for the pain.

“What can I do?” I said.

“Dig her a hole,” was his only answer.

She died the next day. No more coughing, no more fever; her scarred face peaceful in the dullness of death. Emily and I buried her under a pine tree. I put up a wooden marker and Emily laid wildflowers on top. I didn’t bring my Bible to Irem’s funeral. Didn’t need to. She was Indian and had spirits of her own.

Emily grew up fast after that. She went to school and learned to read and write. She was a good rider. We worked cattle together.

“Daddy,” she spoke timid to me one evening, “Momma told me you killed a man once.”

“I did,” I said, “but took no joy in doing it.”

“Was he trying to hurt you or Momma?”

“No child. He was looking to hurt you.”

“Oh,” said my daughter, sad-like and thinking.

She walked away, then turned back towards me.

“Thank you, Daddy,” was what she said.
Spring came late to the Sawtooth plateau this year. She-bitch winter kept the ground frozen, covered with ice and snow with no grass for the cows. They were calving and needed food. Emily was twelve. Twice a day we loaded hay and Ned pulled us out to feed. Bears from the high country came low looking for food. We saw lots of sign near the cows, foraging on afterbirth, but not taking down any live animals.

Emily sat on the buckboard holding reins on the horse. I was pitching out hay when Ned stopped short, stomped his feet, nostrils flared.

“Whoa there Ned. What’s wrong with you? Careful, Emily. He’s smelling something.”

I dropped the fork and reached for my rifle. From behind a clump of grass, a big she-bear came right at us, with two cubs close behind. I fired a quick shot. The slug missed her but hit one cub that dropped dead on the spot.

Ned screamed. Emily held tight.

The grizzly hit the side of the buckboard, knocked the rifle out of my hands and sent me into the hay. She landed a paw on Emily’s shoulder and hoisted her up like a stick figure. I smelled bear stink; rotten, fermented. Before I got back on my feet, that sow shoved Emily into her jowls, dropped to the ground and lumbered into the pines and darkness, the other cub following behind. Emily never screamed, never cried out, never said nothing. She was surely dead.

I walked the pasture and scrub forest for hours, called for Emily but got no response. Didn’t find her body, either. In pitch dark I went back to the cabin. I didn’t sleep that night. Spent it getting ready for the morning. I sharpened my big knife with bear oil mixed with spit. Cleaned my pistol and rifle and put pemmican, stale crackers, and coffee in my saddle bag. Sat by a low fire, smoking and waiting for dawn to bust. That she-bear took my daughter. Grabbed her right off the buckboard, jaws flapping and a blizzard of snot flying.

At first light, I saddled Ned and tied down my gear. Kicked him hard as I set out to find Emily’s body and kill the bear that took her. Rode past the cows and picked up the bear’s trail, leading towards the mountains. Cows stood around, dumb-faced and chewing their cuds. One old mamma was bawling, moving frantically, looking for her lost calf.

I followed the tracks west; big bear in front, cub behind. Drops of blood were on the snow. Ned stepped lightly with bear stink still in the air. I rode across the plains and foothills and into the mountains. Tracks and blood went in a straight line; she-bear knew where she was going. Didn’t see any other sign of Emily. There weren’t any drag marks either. That bear kept her lifted up above the frozen ground as they moved west.
I followed those tracks all day. Stopped once to chew pemmican and gave Ned a couple of sugar cubes. He nuzzled me for more, but I had none left. The country was harsh with big pines and boulder outcroppings. The tracks led to the base of the Sawtooths. Trees swayed in a strong wind; weather was changing. The air was cold.

I pulled my horse up, stood off him and tied him short to a pine tree. Night was coming faster than I wanted, but it wasn’t up to me to tell the night when to come. I built a fire and made coffee with melted snow. It was bitter. I had no appetite. Gave Ned stale crackers for his feed.

The storm screamed down the East slope of the mountains like a banshee witch coming out of Hell. A spring storm that kills men and horses. No chance for me to keep a fire going, so I hunkered down on the leeward side of a boulder. Ned switched around so his butt faced into the wind and sleet. It was going to be a long night. Not sure if we’d be alive by morning.

Then that old sow grizzly appeared, lumbering towards us in the fading light, apparitional. Probably smelled my earlier fire. Didn’t have a cub beside her and no Emily in her mouth. Same ugly bear, though. She rose up on hind legs, stood twice as high as me, and bellered. Ned panicked, pulled back, but the rope held. I grabbed my rifle. Levered a round into the chamber.

The bear walked towards me. The wind howled through the trees, sleet pelted down, the bear’s face contorted and angry with jaws snapping and spit spewing out of her mouth. Touched off my first round and hit her squarely in the shoulder, spun her backward. She turned back around and moved towards me, one arm slumped down, busted and useless. My second shot hit her between the eyes and knocked her onto her back with four paws reaching up to the dark sky. I moved beside her and shot her twice in the heart.

Ned whinnied and peed himself, and then settled down. I moved away from the bear and wretched on the ground. My hands were shaking, but not from the cold.

I did what I had to do. I needed to know. I slit her open from neck to arse and pounded the knife through the rib bones with a flat rock. I cut her throat tube loose and pulled everything out. The innards, stretched on the ground, were pale yellow and covered with slime. Her stomach lay there, big and swollen from the things she’d eaten. I stripped away the greasy tripe. My hands smelled like fat. Her guts continued to move, still trying to digest something. I sliced open her stomach and gagged at the smell when I reached in. Chunks of something slipped through my fingers and then I felt a skull, crushed and broken. I closed my eyes and brought that skull out; lifted it up to my face. I opened my eyes.

A calf’s head, wet and mangled, looked back at me. Maybe it’d been still born or maybe
she took it alive. I threw the skull back on the gut pile and fell to my knees. Stayed that way until
the cold forced me to move and think about surviving the night.

I wrapped my oil slicker tight around me and crawled next to the bear’s body. Smelled me-
tallic, like something from a blacksmith’s shop. Her insides were still warm. I huddled next to that
dead body all night. At first light, I stood up stiff and cold, blood and slime on my slicker and hat.
The storm had passed.

Ned was alive, too. Still tied up, head hanging low.

Up slope and to my left, a bear cub whined. Took my rifle and walked towards the sound.
On the other side of a thicket, two boulders butted together with an opening at their base. A sec-
ond, pitiful whine came from this cave. I got down on all fours and crawled into the opening, rifle
out front.

Dim morning light filtered into the cave. The cub was there, sitting on its haunches, rub-
bbing its eyes with both paws. I raised my rifle, placed my sights on its head. I cocked the hammer,
but before I shot, I saw Emily’s body stretched out on the other side of the cave. Blood stained her
shoulder and hip. Hair matted down across her face. In that dim light, she had no color; some-
body’s child yesterday.

I turned back to the cub, held steady and tightened down on the trigger.
Then Emily moved. I lowered my rifle and went to her. She moaned.

I extracted her from that cave and brought her into the light of a new dawn. Like Jesus
coming from the tomb. The bear had bit her on both shoulders and laid open some skin on her
hip. She was semi-conscious, delirious. I took off my slicker, wrapped her up and carried her to the
horse.

“Let’s take her home Ned.”

I turned him east, rode out of the mountains and towards the ranch. Cradled Emily in my
arms. Looking back, I saw the cub come out of the den, lick his dead momma’s face, and then went
to following us, she-bear’s blood now mucoid on the slicker covering Emily.

We got back to the cabin at dusk. Emily didn’t wake up, but I felt her breathing. The air was
warmer, the first hint of spring. That damn cub followed us the whole way.

I stepped off Ned and laid Emily in her bed. She had good color; her eyes fluttered open
once in a while. I’d get Doc to come by to clean and bandage her wounds. Like her momma, she’d
have scars.

As Emily slept, I went outside, unsaddled Ned and brushed him down. He drank a lot. I
gave him extra hay and two sugar cubes from the pantry. Threw a loop around the little bear and tied him tight to the corral. I pulled my rifle from the scabbard, walked over to the critter, and nearly blew its head off with one shot. While it was still twitching, I gutted the animal and hung its innards over the fence.

In the morning, I fried onions, potatoes, and eggs. The cabin smelled good. The pan hissed and popped when I threw in some fresh bear’s liver. Food to make my Emily strong again.
You are told two things when you live among the tall grass in the summer—treat every snake as if it were venomous and only wear tall, leather boots in the field. Most people would call a rattlesnake poisonous, but us kids know better. Poison is the little pellets you sprinkle into prairie dog holes that litter the fields and pastures, inevitably poised to break a young horse’s leg. Venom is the slow drip that seeps from the fangs of a snakebite and killed a young boy next to the Big Dry last summer. It was the two small holes above his ankle slightly raised from the rest of skin that told his parents he wouldn’t wake up when they found him sleeping on the bank of the crick.

We call my grandpa “Snakehips”. Underneath his blue jeans, he wears heavy cotton long johns, held up by a thick, leather belt even in the dead of summer. I inherited his cool skin and the struggle our blood has to keep us warm without the sun. Like reptiles, my family laughs. Compared to the round, swaying hips of the women in my family, his slender build is easily lost. More than once, we’ve turned around only to find he has slipped away, between bookshelves, out to the corrals, to the next room.

There is evidence that prairie rattlers’ venom is becoming neurotoxic. The venom of the rattler has been hemotoxic, meaning it attacks the red blood cells, preventing the blood from moving through the victim’s veins at a pace necessary to sustain life. If it becomes neurotoxic, it will attack the nervous system. It will stop the neurotransmitters from finding their synapse, from being able to fire across the void, much the same way dementia dismantles a brain. Worse than snakebite, I
worry my grandpa will ask me where my brother is when we’re out in the fields, and I’ll have to watch him experience the death of his first grandson all over again. That’s why we wear our boots, my grandpa and me.

My favorite thing to eat with my grandpa are oranges peeled and arranged on a plate in half moons, powdered sugar sprinkled across the tops, red raspberry syrup drizzled slow and easy. He braided a halter for my first horse out of a piece of dead rope lying in the grass that I didn’t approach because I wasn’t sure if I heard a rattle or just the summer cicadas.

During the winter months, snakes gather in underground dens. Come springtime, the men head out into the coulees with shovels, looking for those snake pits, hoping to find rattlers sleepy in their dens so the sharp edge of the shovel can separate the heads from their bodies before the warmth of the summer sun entices them to lay out in the field. They’ll cut the rattle from the corpse and shake it the whole way home before offering it to the kids to play with.

The year is 1941 and my grandpa is six years old. The drought in Montana hasn’t heard the rumor of rain in the Dust Bowl yet, so the sun continues to bleach and blister the countryside. A snakeskin, shed from a rattler, hides among the tall grass. His father picks it up, rubs brittle scales between fingers. Stay close, Charles, his father says, shovel slung over his shoulder. But as he turns around to catch his son’s eye, he sees only horizon. He runs over to the bank of the crick, calling for his son. My grandpa crouches near the ground, his blue jeans the only thing distinguishing him from the countryside, his white crop of hair blending in with the dried stalks of wheat. As his father walks closer to him, he notices Charles shoving his pockets full of squirming things from a hole in the ground. The father calls out to him. Charles turns, baby rattlesnakes falling from his hips.
The trouble with conviction is that no matter what you believe, you are always at least semi-wrong.
Loyalty with leave you with enemies you didn’t make.
I read this article scientifically proving that dogs can be diagnosed with the same mental illnesses as their owners and I thought to myself, “Who has been psychoanalyzing dogs?”

The trouble with martyrdom is that you die in the end.
There are no peas in the freezer. There’s some in the fridge, but they are still in their pods and I hate the strings that get in between my teeth. I know you told me that the peas need them to hold the pod together but they make my gums bleed. You knew I was coming this weekend.
Whatever. It’s fine.

The trouble with virtue is that it is probably fucking someone over somewhere.
When I was in the fourth grade, I wondered, why don’t we just take all the meanest people and put them in the same place? My mom called it fascism, but my Dad called it Wall Street. And who would be our politicians or CEO’s?
I don’t think I’ve ever tried my hardest at anything. Maybe I just don’t want to admit that I’ve hit my best.
And every time I cut my hair I hate it.
And in the sixth grade, wanted to be a dog. I crawled around in
footie pajamas on the weekends. I asked my mom if I still wanted it
when I was eighteen if she’d pay for the plastic surgery to make it real
and she said yes.
My best friend thinks I’m still vegan.
Verisimilitude means less and less every time you say it.
Three mental institutions later, my Dad still says you can fake happiness.
Books with brown pages like moon
dust sleep on the shelves. Hundreds,
thousands, millions resting with spines
straight as a pianist’s,

but a silent pianist’s, whose fingers
press empty keys.

The silence swallows even the whispers
down the isle—swallows them up
like a black hole, leaving only silence.

Only the light has the right to make a buzz.

There’s something about that old book smell.
There’s something about wanting to hear
voices like a schizophrenic—hear the background
of a Gatsby party or an Alice tea party
echoing between the cracks of books
filling the still, suffocating air with crazy laughter.
Haha! listen to the way these books creak when slid from the shelf!
Look at their dark letters burned into the pages, kept pressure-shut between two covers!

Listen to that music! Look at that beauty, lost in this void!
This void filled with nocturnal eyes, wide with empty feelings while staring at laptop screens!

I hope to never be a librarian-astronaut stuck in this black hole.
“I can’t believe Santa is having us do this,” Imp said. “Helping humans? Where’s the fun in that? They won’t even know it was us! Humans are meant for entertainment, not charity cases.” He glared at a worn man chop down a tree. A series of loud hacks preceded the tree groaning and falling over. Imp’s nose twitched at the invading scent of pitch. His glare darkened as the man wiped his brow.

“You make it sound like we’re doing something bad,” Fairy said. Imp’s glare moved to Fairy. She rolled her eyes and continued, a light smirk on her face. “Santa visits that poor, tiny house yearly and for the past three Christmases there’s been no tree. Even as much as you enjoy playing tricks on humans, you have to admit it’s heartbreaking.”

“Yes. Heartbreaking,” Imp said, not trying to sound sincere. “Why is the tree so important?” He stopped, holding his hands out as wood chips flew from the woodsman’s axe.

“Oh come on,” Fairy said. “The tree is meant to invite Santa to deliver the gifts in a place where they’ll be easy to find. Plus, they look so nice, dressed up!” Imp huffed, watching the man continue to chop down another tree.

“I’m not convinced.” He looked at Fairy with pleading eyes. “Are you sure we have to do this?”

Fairy nodded. “We’ve watched him for days now. If you were him, could you find the time and energy to get a Christmas tree for your own family? He’s out here from dawn to dusk and they won’t even let him keep one.” Imp looked away, arms crossed. His lips fidgeted before he sighed.

“Fine. I wouldn’t either, but it’s not like I’d need a tree for such a trivial matter.” Imp ig-
nored Fairy’s chiding sigh. “Why can’t one of his sons get it?”

“He has no sons.”

Imp looked over a shoulder at Fairy. “So you’re telling me he has nobody who can go and get a tree? This might just turn out good for me. I’ll just prepare some classic tricks…”

Fairy coughed. “You can go back to your tricks when we’re done. All he has is a five year old daughter.”

Imp bounded away, pausing after a second with a sagging sigh. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Fairy laughed. “Let’s go find a tree. Santa’s stop on Christmas Eve is never predictable.”

Imp opened his mouth to protest, but closed it.

‘Let’s go find a tree? Ha. I’ll be the one finding the tree.

“Where’s the tree?” Fairy asked Imp. The sky was a hazy gold to the west and Imp had given up on flying an hour ago. His sullen gaze looked up.

“Uh…I think we’re close,” Imp said, hoping to fool Fairy. She glowed.

“I hope you, I mean we, find a gorgeous tree that’s nice and symmetrical, and…” Imp rolled his eyes, tossed a snowball, and floated off. He was sure the tree she wanted didn’t exist; tree sellers would’ve gotten to them weeks ago.

That’s too tall. That one is too wide. That’s too bushy and that one doesn’t have enough branches. That one’s perfect and that one is lopsided. Imp stopped, his eyes narrow, and looked at the tree he had called perfect. As he stared at the tree, his shoulders relaxed and his eyes widened. Smirking, he snapped his fingers and waited for Fairy to appear.

“It’s perfect!” she said, surprising him. “You knew this tree was here, didn’t you? That’s why I had to wait so long to see it. You’re playing another one of your games.”

“I just found it,” Imp said, rolling his eyes. “You know nothing about my games.”

With a swish of a finger and a little fairy magic, the tree came down. She caught the top, lowering it slow enough for Imp to grab the other end without it hitting the ground. Snow and ice shrunk as steam was released.

More fairy magic.

It was dark when they reached the house. The tiny home’s fireplace was unlit, making their job easier. Imp released his end, letting Fairy lean the treetop against the small house as he considered ways to get the tree inside. It was unremarkable, looking like every little cabin he had ever
seen. They hoped they still had a few hours before Santa would arrive.

Imp didn’t know how long had passed when Fairy shouted at him. “You have an idea yet?”

Imp was about to yell back when he snapped his fingers and smiled. “We go through the
chimney, just like Santa.”

“What if the tree gets messy? We won’t have time to clean and dress it up,” Fairy said,
looking at the tree. “The tree will be all black and disgusting. And black! I was going to make it all
colorful.” Imp wanted to laugh at her pouting.

“How colorful?”

“Don’t worry about it, you silly imp.” Fairy buzzed in circles, scratching her head. “I think
I could actually do something with the soot that’ll get on the tree. I could harden it into silver strips.
That would look really nice with my design.” Imp nodded, lifting the tree. He set the tip at the
chimney’s crown. Tilting the tree, he lowered it in.

“I don’t know if this was the best idea,” Fairy called up from the hearth, her voice echoing
a little. “I don’t think the tree with make it through, unless you want to break it.”

“Don’t worry! I have it under control,” Imp said. He tapped the trunk twice and the tree
became fluid. He curved it through the flue and into the room, tapping it twice once more. Fairy
then put it in a corner close to the fireplace.

“Thanks for the help,” Fairy said. “I’ll finish up here.” Imp nodded, and started out the
near window when an idea came to mind. With a snap of his fingers, the tree appeared to die and
he rushed off, leaving behind a fuming Fairy. He was exhausted and needed a long winter’s nap.

Imp woke Christmas morning with a knot in his stomach. He didn’t know why it was there,
but he had a bad feeling about it. As he prepared materials for a new prank, he thought about
the small hut that he had helped Fairy deliver a tree too. Imp had wanted to pull something while
there, but for some reason hadn’t even thought up a single thing. Looking towards the hut, he
sighed. Against his better judgment, he headed towards it.

Arriving after dawn, Imp hoped the humans weren’t awake. Watching through the window
he had used to leave the night before, a little girl walked into the room, her eyes following a spin-
ning assortment of colorful lights. She looked up and saw the tree, her mouth opening as she took
a step towards it. Imp smiled a little at the delight on her face.

“Daddy!” she squealed, turning around. “Daddy! Daddy! There’s a tree! We have a tree!
Daddy!” Imp started to smile, but suppressed it. The best he could do was a proud smirk.
“Tree? What are you talking about darli…” her father said, looking at the tree. Imp finally looked at the tree and saw that it was beautiful. There were a thousand tiny lights spinning around it, changing color. The bits of silver Fairy had talked about now looked like fresh snow, reflecting the light across the tiny living room.

Maybe Fairy was right about a couple things.

“It was magic, wasn’t it daddy,” the girl said.

The father smiled, picking her up. “Yes it was,” he said. He ignored her glance at the window.

Imp marched away, giving into the grin.
Phil had always been adverse to helping out around the house, but the memories from last fall changed his tune: juicy fresh tomatoes, pesto made from home grown basil and garlic, cute little onions that were sweet enough to eat raw. Most of all, the little strawberries barely the size of his thumbnail and red as theater curtains. Phil liked to chop them up, dump them into a glass of chocolate milk, and devour it all like a starving puppy.

He stomped his feet as he walked into the front yard and towards a fenced in garden. Phil’s dad promised a freshly baked pie would be out of the oven by the time he had tilled the soil.

Phil didn’t do much hard work at all really, but his imagination kept him moving. The loose soil, which held the corpses of last year’s plants, was easy to dig up even with a dull shovel. Phil was a twelve-year-old bushwhacker; a real adventurer, but the kind that doesn’t take it seriously. He inspected interesting new plants, watched clouds, and took breaks under big shady trees when it was too hot.

He loaded up a wheelbarrow with sun tanned roots that looked like spaghetti and dried stalks from last year’s tomatoes. A few hours past and Phil’s shovel hit hard ground beneath the loose soil. With unnecessary determination he dug deeper, excited for the fall taste of new tomatoes. He wanted their roots to soak up as much water as they could. He was happy to dig out the clay and rocks if it meant happier plants.

Tông! The shovel’s blade struck something and its handle sprung out of Phil’s grip. Whatever he hit, it wasn’t dirt. Phil had found something. Confusion turned to intrigue as Phil started digging with his hands.
Dirt, dirt and more dirt. A pebble here and there, but no boulder or anything. No, he didn’t just strike a boulder. That sound the shovel made echoed so full and loud it had to be hollow. Phil’s finger scraped against it. He brushed more dirt out of the way revealing a metal plate. He knocked on it and heard an echo. It had to be a container of some kind, like a bunker. Maybe it was for food? Or a place to hide during a tornado. But then why was it out in the garden instead of under the house.

Looking a little closer Phil saw a scratched on symbol. It looked like a mandala or a pagan circle or something. Phil didn’t know much about symbols like this. He stood up, sweat dripping off his face, burning from the sunlight and looked through the large sliding patio doors of the dining room. Of course no one was in there. He turned and peaked towards the large living room window. A large fern had been placed in front of the window and he could barely see his dad reading quietly in his armchair.

With a smile, Phil began throwing dirt on top of the bunker. Once he was done he walked inside. He had flipped the dirt more or less. Down the garden plot, over near where they had put the garlic last year, he hadn’t flipped anything. But that didn’t matter, Phil had something important on his plate.

In the mudroom Phil brushed dirt off his trousers.

“Do that out front Phillip,” his dad said from the armchair in front of the TV.

“Sorry Dad,” Phil walked briskly into the living room, having already cleaned himself off.

Phil tried to ask a casual question, but his voice came out like a squeaking bike break. “Is the pie done?”

Phil’s dad looked at him questioningly, his son had never hidden anything from him before. There was a moment of silence as they looked quizzically into each other’s eyes. Phil’s dad turned a page of his noir mystery novel titled ‘The Shut in Chemist: A Modern Sorcerer.’ “I can’t put the pie in till the oven reaches temp,” he said. “You finish?” he turned his focus back to the book.

“Ya, except for the garlic plot.”

Phil’s face was tense and red from working outside. Working hard always appeased Phil’s father. Phil remembered him saying once: ‘you can’t worry after a hard day’s work.’

“That’s fine,” he said squinting at something in his novel, “We planted garlic in the fall, just leave the plot be and they’ll sprout in a couple days.” Phil nodded, grabbed a glass of lemonade and went upstairs to his room. He had a thinking couch in his room. Last fall one of Phil’s friends visited from the west coast, a skater kid named Ty. He had stood on Phil’s carpet one day and turned in circles.
“You need something,” he had said, “like a desk, or a TV. No wait, a couch, you need a couch.”

Phil had been skeptical at first, but eventually Ty talked him into it. They found it downstairs. Phil’s mom told him it was the only thing in the house when they moved in, besides the fridge and the oven. It was awesome. Phil actually found he could read easier for school laying down on it. He tried to keep his steps light as he approached the couch. Lying down, he closed his eyes and heard his dad yell from downstairs. That armchair was right beneath the couch and his dad practically lived on it. Phil sighed, got up and started dragging the couch across the carpet.

As the couch legs ruffled up the carpet Phil began to realize how much he liked his privacy. Even now, trying to avoid interaction with anyone downstairs, he was proud of his first lie. Well, it wasn’t really a lie, but it was something to worry about. A secret, a nagging demon loose inside the once prim comfort of his conscience. Somehow it made him feel cooler.

If he dug up that bunker by himself without anyone seeing he could have whatever was inside it and not have to share. He giggled, so sure of his decision. He was going to sneak out there at night and dig up the bunker, that’s probably what his parents would do.

Then Phil heard his dad calling from downstairs, “Phillip, Craighton’s here.” Craighton was one of Phil’s most invasive friends. Everyone called him Cron for short. Most people liked him because he was usually in a good mood, but he was starting to get on Phil’s nerves.

Phil had just found a place for the couch at the end of his bed. He sighed and finished his lemonade because he knew Cron would ask for some, “Alright, send him up.”


Cron walked in smiling and excited about something. “Hey dude, where’s your mom at?” Cron had a crush on Phil’s mom. It was one of the things that annoyed Phil about him.

“She’s gone on another vacation, something to do with dolphins.” Phil didn’t even know where she was this time, but she wouldn’t be back for months.

“That sucks man,” Cron was still smiling. He came over and sat a little too close to Phil on the couch.

“What?!” Phil held up his arms to push Cron away, but Cron pulled something colorful out of his pocket. He held it up with shining eyes and an expectant look. It was a glass pipe, for pot.

“Really?” Phil said with a sarcastic look.

“I bought it from the neighbors, you know the ones in that trailer?”

“Why are you talking to them?”
Cron ignored him and pointed the mouthpiece of the pipe at Phil’s face.
“I’m good,” Phil said, holding up his hands like Cron was a cop accusing him of stealing. Cron waved it at him again, “Come on man, this is the first time I’ve tried it.”
“Well I don’t want to.” Phil said, scooting away from him.
“Alright,” Cron said. He lifted the pipe up to his mouth. He looked spiteful and annoyed, like a grade schooler about to throw a tantrum. He was smoking it. Cron was actually smoking it. Cron held in some smoke, looked right at Phil and puffed his cheeks out dramatically.
Phil shoved him. “Go blow it out the window you idiot.” The sounds of chirping birds were coming out the open window reminded him summer was coming. Cron’s face turned red as he stood up and put the pipe down on the couch. He stumbled towards the window and started coughing. He stopped and held his chest. Some drool came out of his mouth and fell on the carpet. Phil stood up and the pipe rolled over spilling ash all over the upholstery. Phil felt his muscles tense as he walked swiftly across the room, “God damn it Cron.” He shoved Cron to the ground. “Get out man, I don’t want to get in trouble with you smoking in my house.”
“You’re dad’s chill. It’s fine Phil, really. It’s just weed.” Cron started pushing himself up as Phil trudged over to the couch.
“Well I don’t care, I don’t want to start smoking.” Phil grabbed the pipe and held it out to Cron.
“What’s going on up there?” The sound of his dad’s voice was coming up from the kitchen, right at the base of the stairs.
“Nothing dad, Cron’s just grabbing his stuff.”
Cron scrunched up his brow and put the pipe in his pocket. “I was just trying to share with you dude, I thought you would like some.”
“Go home Cron.” Cron walked out instantly, without a word. Phil could hear him stomping all the way out the door.
Phil started waving his arms trying to move the smoke out towards the window. The strange new smell upset him. He didn’t know what to think of Cron being a druggy kid. It was like he hadn’t even listened in class. Phil found it hard to ignore the faceless old academic narrators screaming at them about how drugs get everyone arrested and ruin lives. Cron didn’t skip those days in class. Did he?
The sound of steps echoed in the hall. Phil’s dad was coming up to check on him. Phil quickly ran over to the door and locked it. The handle wiggled. “What’s going on Phil? Cron just
stormed out. Did you guys get in a fight?”

“I don’t know dad, I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Phil’s dad didn’t skip a beat. “What’s wrong? You’ve never not talked to me before.”

Phil could feel a sharp pain in his chest. His vision blurred a little bit and he felt uneasy. He didn’t answer his dad as he started brushing the ash off his couch onto his hand.

“Come downstairs in a bit Phillip, the pie should be done in less than an hour.”

Phil could hear his dad’s steps as he walked down to the kitchen. He was crouched on his carpet and picking up ash from in front of the couch. Then he noticed a little etched symbol on the wooden frame of the couch. It was faint, like someone had sanded it and put wood finish over it.

“Oh my God,” Phil said aloud, it was the same symbol he had seen on the bunker. Phil dropped the ash back on the carpet and ran to the window. He looked over at the garden. The old tenant must have etched the symbol on the couch and the bunker. Phil breathed in deeply, the crisp dusk air invigorated him. He looked around the neighborhood and saw Cron’s bedroom light on. His neighbor’s house across the street was dark. It was a big white house with a short, white picket fence. Behind it Phil saw a woman smoking cigarettes in front of a trailer.

It was the only trailer in the neighborhood, tucked into the center of the block. Those must have been the people that sold Cron the pipe and the pot. For a moment Phil forgot about the bunker and the old tenant. He left his room and went down the stairs. He wanted to talk to the people in the trailer. As he tried to walk through the kitchen his dad stopped him.

“Phillip, Phillip wait, where are you going?”

“I’m going over to Cron’s to talk to him.” Phil walked towards the front door. His dad just stood there watching him. The door handle was cool and the outside air was warm. Phil could feel himself strut from the aftermath of the lie. He lied without even thinking. A newfound sense of power was walking out the door with him.

Once he crossed the street Phil could see the trailer behind his neighbor’s house. He walked along the edge of the picket fence and kept an eye on the trailer. The woman was petting a dog tied up to an old rotted wooden pole.

As he rounded the corner of the fence Phil’s empowerment dwindled. What if these people forced him to take drugs, what if they tried to convince Phil to steal his mother’s jewelry or rob his house? He would just have to be careful about what he told them.

The trailer was missing siding panels and had cracked windows. Dirty curtains ruffled out a bedroom window, a broken grill leaned against a dog house. Phil spotted a tapestry in another
bedroom window. It had a big peace sign and swirling Rastafari colors. Just as he expected. Phil was about to meet some degenerate, lazy, drug addicts, the same kind of people he had been warned about his whole life. The woman patted the dog, an energetic pit bull. It was lifting its front paws in the air, trying to greet Phil.

“Hi,” the woman said cheerfully, “I’m Paula. Aren’t you Tom’s boy?” She had finished her cigarette and just seemed to be enjoying the sunset.

Phil nodded and shook her hand. Phil couldn’t quite find words to say. He had wanted to yell at whoever had sold his friend drugs. He wanted to hit them and scream at them for ruining Cron’s life, but this woman seemed so sweet. She reminded him of his grandmother. Her face had a good amount of wrinkles, but she didn’t look old old, just weathered somehow.

“You’re out a little late aren’t you?” she asked.

This couldn’t be the right woman, she was way too sweet to smoke pot. Blushing, Phil started to consider how he could run back home without making a scene. Then a guy, not quite twenty-one, came running out the front door, tripped over the steps and ran up to Paula.

His hand touched on Paula’s shoulder. “Hey mom, what do you put in the mac and cheese sauce again?”

“Plain yogurt,” she answered.

Paula’s son had a shadowy beard and lanky arms that flapped around like they didn’t belong to him. His shirt was ratty and tie-dyed, with a skull on the chest part. It was surrounded by dancing colored bears and burns that looked like they came from a campfire.

“Alright,” he made a move to go back inside, but stopped when he saw Phil. His face lit up in surprise and excitement, “Hey, you live across the street over there don’t you?” He gestured towards Phil’s house with his thumb.

Phil couldn’t look at him.

“Leave the boy alone Joseph, we were talking.”

“Sorry mom.” Joseph ran back inside and Paula turned her attention to Phil.

“Sit down,” she said. Phil sat next to her, his empowered feeling had gone away. The pit bull barked and Paula pat her hand against his back soothingly.

“What’s your name?” She asked.

“Phil, I just wanted to talk to someone about my friend,” Paula nodded. “Ya, he came over today with a pipe and a bunch of pot, he said something about getting it here and I…”

“What!” Paula took her hand off the dogs back and looked at Phil seriously. “Your friend
said he bought grass from someone here?”
Phil nodded. “Ya.”
Paula stood up and started walking towards the front door of the trailer. “Wait a moment,” she said. Once the door shut Phil followed Paula, unsure of what was happening. He was surprised to find a rug draped over the steps of the door. It was soaked with rain water. The trailer was one big room made up of a kitchen and a living room. A small hallway opposite the kitchen probably led to a bedroom and a bathroom. There was a door on the kitchen wall that must have led to the bedroom with the Rastafarian tapestry, probably Josephs.

Joseph was standing at the stove stirring something in a big pot with a wooden spoon. “Would you like some mac and cheese?” he asked Paula as she walked in, “I put ground beef and chili powder in it.”
Paula stood an inch from Joseph and crossed her arms. “Joseph, did you sell a pipe and some weed to a boy in the neighborhood?”
Joseph turned white and brought his face up to meet his mothers. “Uhhh, I did, but not that one” he swung the wooden spoon at the front door and looked at Phil. His face turned white like Phil was going to hurt him, “Oh.”
Paula turned around. “Phil go back outside.”
Phil couldn’t hold back his anger. He had his attention set on Joseph. “What is wrong with you,” he yelled stepping forward. He shoved Joseph.
Paula held Phil back. “Phil, sit down, this is no way to act in someone else’s home.”
Phil walked over to an armchair and sat down, he kept his eyes on Joseph’s stupid hippie shirt.
Paula stepped between the armchair and Joseph. “Joe, Apologize to this young man.”
Joseph looked back and forth between Paula and Phil. “Ok, sorry dude.”
“Some people don’t like drugs in their house,” Paula said, “You shouldn’t be selling to kids.”
“Alright.”
“Go to your room or something.”
Joseph walked into the room that had the tapestry on the window and shut the door. Phil was looking around the living room. How did Cron even meet these people? What were they doing selling drugs in the first place? While Paula sat down on a couch on the other side of the living room Phil’s eyes wandered towards the coffee table. It was a messy table covered in beer cans and carvings. There was even a few video game controllers.
In the middle of the table a large symbol was carved into the wood. It was the same symbol Phil had found on the bunker and on his couch.

Paula breathed a sigh and leaned forward like she was about to say something, but Phil pointed to the symbol and asked, “who carved that in the table?”

Paula seemed taken aback. “Joseph, he draws it all the time.”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know.”

Without thinking Phil walked over to Joseph’s room and barged in.

Joseph jumped in surprise, “sorry, really dude, I’m sorry. I won’t sell to Cron anymore.”

“Good, you shouldn’t be selling to anyone, but I actually have something I want to talk to you about.”

“Ya, what is…?” Joseph looked up towards his bedroom door. Phil followed his line of sight. Paula was standing in the doorway looking a little confused.

Before she could say anything Phil grabbed the door. “I gotta talk to Joseph alone for a moment,” he said. Then he slammed the door in her face before she could say anything.

“Weird little guy,” Phil heard her whisper. Phil knew she was too sweet face to face. She yelled at the door. “Don’t you dare sell him anything Joe, or I’m gonna kick you out.”

“Don’t worry mom, I learned my lesson.”

“Like hell,” she said, walking away from the door.

Phil turned his attention to Joseph and sat down in the middle of the room. “Joseph,” he said seriously, “did you know the person who lived in my house before me?” Joseph’s eyes lit up. He sat down on the floor next to his bed and looked at Phil like he was the most interesting thing on the planet.

“When I was a kid I totally stalked the guy that used to live there. I didn’t see him for a long time. I just heard loud cracks and high pitched whistles, like someone was lighting fireworks. The blinds were always down and curiosity got the better of me. One night I snuck through the patio door and found that symbol painted on the living room floor. It covered nearly the whole floor. Bookshelves covered all the walls. They were packed with faded tattered books and he had a wooden stand filled with long walking sticks covered in decorations like paint, feathers, gems, and bones. A large hairy man was placing little trinkets in a spiral pattern on top of the symbol. He noticed me instantly and got ahold of me pretty quick. Carrying me by my collar he threw me out of the house. I never saw him again and he moved later that week, but when I was in there I saw a huge
metal dome in the corner. I never knew where he went or what he was doing, but I’ve been trying
to figure it out for years.”

Looking at Paula Phil assumed she didn’t believed him. This was an old story he probably
told too much, but Phil knew part of it must be true. That old man had to have been the one who
buried the bunker and etched the symbol on the couch.

“How big was that dome?”

Joseph looked skeptically at Phil, “ahhh, I don’t know, maybe the size of a king bed. And it
had a cylindrical hatch looking thing attached to it, like a mini skylight or something.”

Phil stood up and pondered all this new information. It was a solitary man who was hiding
strange decorative walking sticks and painting big symbols on the floor. Why would he be going
through what Phil assumed was some kind of pagan ritual? Was he crazy, or involved in some kind
of cult? And if he was, why would he need a bunker? Did it have sacrifices in it, or is he in there
hiding away from society?

“What’s so special about the dome?” Joseph asked, squinting his eyes.

“I guess it just seemed out of place.” Phil knew he wasn’t as convincing. Joseph stood up,
his skeptical look intensified. Why was it harder to lie to this stranger? Something about lying to
Joseph felt wrong. But why should it? He was a junky who sold drugs to Cron and didn’t even seem
that sorry about it. “I think I’m going to go.”

“Tell me if you see anything out of the ordinary at your house. I really want to know what
that guy was doing there.”

“Ya sure, I gotta go home, my dad’s probably worried.” Phil walked out and said good
night to Paula before she could offer any mac and cheese. While walking home he knew Joseph
was watching him. His dad was back in his armchair rubbing his pie-filled stomach. Phil grabbed
a piece of pie and went up to his room. If he waited then he could dig up the bunker around one
in the morning. He was too anxious to wait any longer than that.

First, Phil stared at the carving on the couch. He spent more than an hour digging through
the internet trying to find anything that resembled it. He assumed it was some kind of old alchemy
symbol or something since Joseph had said the old tenant painted it on the floor. But nothing really
cought his eye. Cron kept calling and texting him, trying to talk to Phil about their fight. Phil had
lost interest in him. He really wasn’t that cool of a friend anyway and if he started getting addicted
to drugs then Phil didn’t want anything to do with him.
Eventually, he got too antsy looking at all the symbols. He heard his dad’s bedroom door shut and ended up laying down on his couch and staring at the ceiling repressing the desire to dig up the bunker right away. If his dad saw him digging up the garden in the dead of night he would have to tell him and Phil didn’t want anyone to know about it. Since their fence was so low to the ground eight different houses had a clear view of his front yard, but he knew that if he didn’t go now then he would never have another chance.

If Phil didn’t dig tonight there was no way he would have another chance till the end of the summer. His neighborhood was right by a park and in the summer friends came over every day. The neighborhood was effectively a city plaza in the summer.

He couldn’t take waiting any longer. Slipping out of bed in his socks, Phil shuffled over to the door. Nothing, his dad must have been reading. Phil waited to hear a single sound. A few times he heard the squeak of his dad’s desk chair.

Phil looked out his bedroom window. He could see the trailer. No one was outside and the lights were off. Actually, no one was awake anywhere in the neighborhood, except one place. In his garden someone was digging and throwing the dirt in a pile far onto the garlic side. Phil raced downstairs as quietly as he could and went out to the garden with his dad’s shovel. When he approached the garden he whispered at the digger. “Hey.”

Joseph turned around stunned. He started stammering and backed out of the hole. “What are you doing Joseph?” Phil asked as he walked over and stood on the rim of the hole.

“I don’t know, I was just,”

“You were trespassing and invading our garden. Why are you digging up our garden?”

“I just thought maybe there was something left behind from, you know the old tenant and,”

“What would make you think that?”

Joseph hopped excitedly and pointed to a metal pole next to him. It was a metal detector. “It doesn’t matter, I was right.”

Phil stared wide-eyed at it. “Get out of here Joseph, my dad will get mad.”

“But I found something, maybe it’s the dome that guy made?”

“That isn’t your business, just go home and smoke your weed or whatever you do.”

Joseph looked offended. “I’m sorry I trespassed man, but you don’t have to be so aggressive. Just chill dude.”

“Go home, don’t talk to me like I’m your buddy OK.” Phil didn’t know what had come over him, it was like this secret had done work on his personality. He was a different person than he
was before he started lying. Joseph started walking away.

Phil ran after him and caught him just after he went through the fence gate. “Joseph, wait, I’m sorry.”

Joseph turned around, his brow scrunched up with confusion and frustration. “I get it, alright, I’ll leave you alone.”

“No, that’s not it, I’m just, I’ve been a jerk today really.” Phil meant it, he was starting to feel sick lying and treating people badly, especially Joseph. Even if he was a drug addict, it didn’t mean he deserved to be yelled at or pushed.

“It’s OK man, I understand. I can be rude sometimes. I should have asked you if I could search your yard. I just got excited talking about that strange guy today, no one has ever listened to me about him you know, and I well, I found something!” He hopped again and gripped his metal detector and shovel tighter. He looked at Phil expectantly like he was asking for permission to keep digging.

Phil felt a massive weight press on his conscience. He didn’t like lying and keeping secrets. It had gotten him grounded, and made him loose respect for himself. “I found it too. This morning, when I was flipping the soil.” Phil opened up the fence gate.

He looked up at Joseph whose face was bright like he was looking at a television screen. Phil felt better already and let himself grin. “Want to help me dig it up.” He held up his shovel.

They dug with gusto and purpose. Within two minutes they had reached the top of the bunker. The metal plate started curving downwards as they dug, it was definitely the dome from the old tenant’s house. It was round and about as big as an oven. They tried to keep their shovels quiet as they dug around the edges, but about a foot down the edge of the bunker Joseph hit some kind of protrusion. The bunker was perfectly round and strangely smooth, except for this thing.

Phil and Joseph dug vigorously with their hands until they uncovered the whole thing. It was a hollow cylinder, with a glass covering, welded to the shell of the bunker. Joseph pulled a flashlight out of his pocket and shone it towards the glass. Phil laid down on the dirt and peaked in. “It’s empty,” he said.

“What, like completely empty?”

“Ya, move the light around.” The beam from the flashlight jerked around the inside of the bunker. It was perfectly round, probably as big as a car, but empty. All Phil could see was the rounded walls on the inside of the bunker. “I don’t see anything. Maybe we could break the glass on this thing and I could fit my head in.
Joseph stepped up on top of the bunker and leaned on his shovel. He was staring at Phil. “Do the honors,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Phil asked him. Joseph made a swinging motion with his shovel and pointed at the glass covering on top of the cylinder. Phil lit up and flipped his shovel around. He held the pole, beneath the blade, and pointed the end of the handle at the glass. With a downward motion he smashed the wooden pole into the glass. It shattered. Both of them flinched and looked around. It had been pretty loud, but no one seemed to be up.

It broke right through only breaking part of the glass. As soon as it shattered a loud deep humming made them both jump. The bunker was shaking and a flash of light came out of the hole in the class. A glowing orb flew out into the night air, it looked like a mini sun, or an energy ball like a sorcerer would cast in a fantasy. Joseph and Phil watched in disbelief. It spun around for a minute and shrank quickly until it was the size of a marble. Then it stopped moving and hovered for a moment, more than twenty feet above their heads.

Then it burst and glowing billows of smoke spiraled down on top of them.

“What Phillip?!” Phil and Joseph turned towards Phil’s house. Phil’s dad was leaning out his son’s bedroom window looking at them. “Are you alright Phillip?” He disappeared probably to come down and find out who Joseph was and what the light was. Phil was speechless and his mind was blank from surprise. Joseph dropped his metal detector and fell to his stomach. He was looking through the hole Phil had made with the shovel.

The flashlight was shining in. “There’s nothing in there.”

“What just happened?” Phil asked no one. Phil’s dad found came running over, his eyes went from scared to angry as he looked from Phil to Joseph. He sent Phil upstairs and Phil heard him ask Joseph what he was doing in their garden.

Once upstairs Phil watched the two of them. Joseph got yelled at and walked out the front gate. Then he walked back to the trailer in a bit of a sunken mood. He took a look back at Phil’s house before going inside.

Phil watched his dad bend down himself and look inside the bunker, then knock on the top of it. He scratched his head and Phil walked over to his couch. He was stunned and even more intrigued about the bunker now. All he could think about was the old hairy man that lived in his house before him. He thought about what he may have been doing and why. He wondered what he may have kept in Phil’s room and it made Phil’s skin crawl.

He must have kept a lot of secrets.
“It Takes Two Baby”:
What Ras Baraka and Lauryn Hill Teach Us about Writing and American Intimacy through
“Hot Beverage in Winter”

“It’s a full moon, we in the bedroom, thoughts consumed
By the passion, slow jam tunes and body action…”
- Method Man, “Sweet Love”

“The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing”
-Ta-Nehisi Coates

America is a country built on Protestantism and the belief that we sit one step below the
Angels. In order for America to succeed as a self-governing nation, the country had to adopt set
morals, morals that were based in the church and governed by hard work. History shapes America
into a country of equality and democracy, but two hundred and fifty years of slavery, one hundred
and fifty years where women could not vote and the creation of the reservation says otherwise.
Along with the American basis of democratic equality, piety and hard work is engrained in our
country’s foundation as well. Benjamin Franklin’s idea of the virtuous life is the best example to
look to. His famous quote “early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise”,
serves as the cornerstone of American capitalism and reinforces the attitude that with enough hard
work anyone can become rich. While everyone agrees that a good night sleep is sometimes the only thing we want in the world, this quote denies a wonderful quality about humans—our imperfection. When the founding fathers sat around a handmade table from a tree that Franklin chopped down the day before, they looked to eliminate what makes us human and strive for an impossible perfection.

Denying bad and embracing good is not unique to America. It is a natural human tendency to uphold the good while ignoring the bad and nationally speaking, every country has done it. When creating the foundations of a society, you dream of Utopia even if you know it is unachievable. You don’t have to go back to Franklin or American religious thought to show that America tried to place itself above the rest (including its own black citizens) by denying natural human flaws, a state of mind that began to form American intimacy, an intimacy that combines elite Protestant thought with hard capitalistic work ethic and uses the black body as a model of impurity to uphold its standards to. As America progressed and tried to find its place among the Angles, the nation began to repress human’s natural intimate nature, which bleed into mainstream expression.

Walt Whitman, America’s poet whom we love to glorify, wrote exhilarating poetry. The first time I read “Song of Myself”, I was forced to read it out loud. Lines such as “My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil” or “I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised/ and naked,/ I am mad for it to be in contact with me” praise the body and glorify the relationship between humans and nature; however beautiful (and real) these lines are, they move away from any genuine intimacy the moment it is touched. In section three Whitman writes,

“Urge and urge and urge.../always/ substance and increase, always sex.../As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side/ through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day/ with stealthy tread.”

Whitman acknowledges our sexual desire, yet moves away quickly, allowing the woman, as well as the intimacy to withdraw “with stealthy tread”. Ras Baraka and Lauryn Hill’s “Cold Beverage in Winter” continues Whitman’s, “love thyself attitude”, yet “unfearfully” (stronger word) acknowledges genuine human intimacy. Whitman writes, “Clear and sweet is my soul”, Baraka reads “seeing our souls caress, dancing and dancing and dancing, trying to turn total chaos into complete thought.” Whitman embraces the orderly and the power of collective individuality, while Baraka and Hill embrace a dark chaos that America sought to reject. Audre Lorde writes “[t]he white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us-the-poet-whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free.” “Cold Beverage” frees the listener from rational thought and
invites us to embrace the chaotic made beautiful through the intimate.

The song begins with Hill singing, repeatedly “You are the sun after the rain. You are the comfort after the pain. I want to be with you.” A slow, melodic guitar riff comes in, one that actively falls from the ears, rather than sits to be heard. Baraka reads “in the core of my heart the fire of the sun beams, burning billions of degrees of compassion for the world in steady rhythms…beating and beating and beating I want to get in you—deep, deep, real, real, deep and watch you from your own eyes.” He depicts their love, his “teeth pressed against [her] collarbone, nibbling down, hot breath on [his] spine, finger prints on [his] chest.” The movement of the him/her creates a respected shared intimacy between two individuals. Often in song or poem, the speaker (when it is a man) focuses primarily on the women, neglecting his active participation and a true intimate connection is lost. Hills reminds us, “it takes to baby to make it alright.” It is through this unfiltered connective love that Baraka realizes he is in love with her, with her “soft pretty eyes [and] the way [her] hair touches [his] lips,” (note the her & his) which leads to the connection of these two individuals through which they both reach their “true greatness.” If Whitman sings praise to the individual and makes us a complicated being, Baraka and Hill praise the accomplishment of the embrace between two individuals. Baraka praises “your music, my poetry” through which we get “our voice”, our wholeness. This wholeness is what Baraka craves and what America has abandoned.

“Cold Beverage in Winter” falls into a unique category of art through the combination of song and speech, giving the listener a full experience by engaging multiple senses. That is why Whitman’s words were so powerful, they demanded to read out loud; however, as American poetry progressed, it lost its musicality and focused strictly on form and school of thought. The “isms” were made and the complete poet was lost. Thomas Sayers Ellis explains this through his metaphor of the door, the nuts and bolts of the door are the “craft” and the swing of the door is “the nuance, the poetry” and when both the craft and the swing are accomplished, the poem then has flow can touch on a much more visceral level. When talking about what poetry is, there are as many answers as there are poets and the joy of reading poetry comes from the wide range of written thought that the genre enables. Zachary Schomburg writes beautiful surreal vignettes, taking you to Sea of Japan or to the edge of a cliff where man and women sit, kissing in an avocado and cake costume, respectively. Schomburg’s work is grounded on the page and does not work linguistically the way Ellis argues poetry should; yet, it still works nonetheless. Read the masculine prose of Jim Harrison and allow Eavan Boland to teach you the struggle she faced as a woman growing up in Ireland wanting to become a poet. Through the combination of the vast collection of spoken and written
word we can begin to understand the range of human emotion and come to a true wholeness of ourselves. In our society we want to form paradise and in our writing we want beauty and command; however, when you place such an emphasis on the end product, you often lose the element you try so hard to create. Instead of expecting perfection in our lives and work, we should follow Baraka and Hill’s advice and seek out the intimate in the hopes of finding our greatness.

We all want to write with beauty and command, yet when you place such emphasis on the words and rather than their meaning, you lose to very beauty you are trying to create. When you try and avoid a cliché, you are trying to say something new and in a new way, but it is very easy to move away from any meaning at all and instead you end up sounding sterile. In Hot Beverage in Winter, Baraka writes “Feeling every single emotion all at once. Remembering midnight since of soiled sheets that drive me into wild frenzies. Teeth pressed against your collarbone…” I argue that this is better poetry than anything you could find in Blake or anything other romantic poet because it is grounded in simple sensuality and its words translate in relatable feeling. Isn’t that why we ultimately try and do when we write? We try and take a thought or action and put it into motion on the page or through our voice. Poetry created a self-inflicting wound that can never heal from and I hope that it never will. By trying to encompass human emotion, other ways we of course going to spring up.

Poetry tries to take on life and act in a way that is above literature. Unlike fiction and non-fiction, forms that ground themselves much more in a literary sense (ie the question is never “what is fiction?”) poetry, tired to become greater than a literary medium, one that attempts to translate life into thought. Whether critics or the writers created this notion is beside the point. Poetry stretches (if not further) back to Sappho (who actually sang her poetry rather than read) in Araric Greece, yet we still cannot come up with a consistent definition of poetry. Audre Lorde believes “poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so that it can be thought” This ambiguity of what poetry is stretched the genre and ultimately gave credibility to rap and r&b to be considered poetry. In “Brooklyn”, Mos Def writes “Yo sometimes I sit back, reflect on the place that I live at/ Unlike any place I ever been at/ The home of big gats, deep dish hammer rim caps…Blue collars metro carding it/ Thugs mobbing it, form partnership / Increase armament, street pharmacist.” Eavan Boland writes in her poem “Falling Asleep to the Sound of Rain”, “I love small towns—they seemed to come from/ a kinder time: shop blinds lowered on weekdays/ afternoons, peaceful
evenings with beds turned down” (57 Domestic Violence). Here are two writers, one describing Brooklyn, the other writing about unnamed Irish town, yet the latter is regarded as poetry. That one is printed on a page and words are read rather than heard. If poetry wants to keep it stance as “something greater than the page” than it must be able to exist off the page.

The song, the poem, the words are ridiculously sexy. These thoughts can stand in a song, yet in a poem that might seem overly crude or dramatic, but they are so good. With Lauryn Hill’s voice accompany him throughout “you are the sun after the rain. You are the comfort after the pain” and a guitar repeating the smoothest rhythm while a piano tip toes. To me that is poetry. At times he is so deep inside that he can see the world from her eyes. You feel like you can only listen to it in headphones, like his words are something hide, yet at times they are all that we want. The only “page poet” I have come across who writes like that is Kim Addonizio. In her work she does not move away from the dirty thoughts, because for her, for us, it all we think about it sometimes. And like Baraka, her poems are not perfect, but they don’t try to and for that reason they are so much better. In “What Do Women Want?” she writes, “I want a red dress./ I want it flimsy and cheap,/ I want it too tight, I want to wear it/ until someone tears it off me.” (Tell Me 74). Very simple words, but they address a very real feeling. Her word are honest are confront a human desire that a lot of romantic love poetry moved away from or discussed in a strange mx love and religion. Louie CK made a joke that sex is the number one thing that we want all the time so he finds it strange that his audience is just fucking throughout his entire performance.

Wordsworth is beautiful, but it is a beauty that I cannot relate. Like America he tries to transcend human flaws and create a sterile beauty, while beauty lies in our mistakes. “The ode to duty”