

Spring 2016

Remains of a Fellow Adventurer

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Recommended Citation

Albamonte, Gene (2016) "Remains of a Fellow Adventurer," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 84 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss84/4>

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REMAINS OF A FELLOW ADVENTURER

William, who has been dead and buried for seven months now, calls me on my phone. I'm always grateful for this, every time. I'm happy I can still speak to him, despite the fact that it's not really him, but only his voice, that deep red-blooded timbre, a little gravelly, like stones tumbling down an escarpment.

On the phone, he talks about the neighbor's mailbox we had stolen when we were kids, how we lifted it straight out of the ground in the middle of the night and carried it to the small copse of woods near our subdivision.

"You remember?" he says. "How we snuck out that night?"

"Like it was yesterday," I say. We had been giggling idiots that night, drunk on the absurdity of our prank. Our father brought it up during Sunday dinner the next day—it was the talk of our little cul-de-sac, although nobody, including our father, had any idea we committed the prank—while William and I stared down at the little moons of ravioli covered in red sauce before us. We bit our tongue; nothing would make us confess to our crime.

My dead brother and I talk for a few more minutes and then he hangs up, and all I can do is wait for him to call again. I can't call William. That's not how The Line works. As of now, the technology behind The Line only allows the computer-generated voice of the deceased to call you. Although they keep promising a patch: a 2.0 that will change everything.

Every time a call ends a memory rushes forward and this one—summoned by our mailbox conversation—is from when William and I were kids: William hovering over my shoulder, listening to me mumble the words written on the screen of my Commodore 64: "You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a mailbox here." And then me typing *open mailbox* and my brother saying, "Let's go," the maps to Zork spread out across his lap. "To the back of the house!" And so I typed our way to the back of the house because that's what my brother told me to do and he was a genius. Even back then, at an age when siblings should be rivaling, I stood by his side, listened to him, watched his

eyes widen and light up when he spoke. I could feel his energy pulling at my own skin with its intense static.

The drive to my parents' house is typically short, but today there is traffic. There's been an accident up ahead; two police cars are off to the shoulder, lights flashing. I call my parents, let them know I'm going to be late for that most holiest of days for Italians: Sunday dinner. Even now, at forty-two, I think of my mother and father as food deities, concocting flavors handed down to them from their own divine ancestors. William relished his last Sunday meal with my parents before moving to California for his new job at The Line. After dinner, William and I went out for drinks at a neighborhood joint called the Red Lantern, home to a jukebox full of bands like New Order and Sonic Youth and Psychedelic Furs. He explained The Line to Yo La Tengo's "Cherry Chapstick," their indigo sound layered thick and dark, filling up the place in a dusky swirl:

*Wondering what it would be like if I could be that smooth
I could think about all that I missed out
It's hard to do*

I lower the volume on my radio now and sing along, listen to my voice give shape to the lyrics. The traffic rolls forward a little. I stop singing and hear William's voice in my head:

"The company records your voice when you make calls," William had told me that night, his face half lit by the lights of the bar. He was scruffy: he hadn't shaved in a couple days. He continued: "The computer stores your words, letter-sounds, vocal nuances—"

"Vocal nuances?" I said.

He shrugged, gave a what're-you-going-to-do smirk. "Lingo." Then he finished his beer, and we soaked in the nebulous mash of Tengo's rampant guitar, the quick swells of feedback. It was one of William's "desert island bands," and he asked to be buried with his old Painful tape, which I made

sure happened when the time came.

“There’s these things called Programmed Conversations,” he said. ProCos. A storage of topics and talking points. “Kind of like that.” He pointed to the Red Lantern’s jukebox. “The topics are in there, ready to be played, thousands of them. And when you die, family and friends randomly receive calls from you. The ones you selected back when you were breathing.”

“And if I try to steer the computer off course?” I asked. “Change topics?”

But he didn’t answer. He was lost in the moment, in the frothy music, in the things-to-come at his dream job.

The scent of Sunday gravy—tomatoes, hot and sweet pork, garlic. A mound of fresh cavatelli on the wooden cutting board, tiny curls of pasta waiting to be submerged in bubbling, salted water. My father pulls meatballs out of the oven, and my sister Nancy gently drops them into the sauce. Before William moved to California, the meatballs were his job. It was William who made my father switch from frying to baking them.

“We talked about meatballs for fifteen minutes the other day,” my father tells me as he gently places them into the gravy. “I told him I wished he was here to make them, and you know what your brother said? He said, ‘Pops, you always were better at making the meatballs.’” My father smiles, but there’s hurt there, at the corners, and he shakes his head. “Jesus Christ Almighty.”

It’s hard for my parents. They’ve canceled The Line three times already, but always call back hours later, to re-enroll. They know how The Line works, but there’s still a sense of confusion that rises from that part of the brain that deals with logic. He’s dead, but here’s his voice.

Now the stereo plays Sinatra’s “Three Coins In The Fountain” and my mother has to leave the room. Last month, on The Line, the late William said to her, “I hear Frank and I think of you, Ma. Every time.” This house is painted thick, coat after coat, with memories of music: Claudio

Villa, Matteo Salvatore, Dean Martin. Louis Prima singing, *Oh Marie, in your arms I'm longing to be*, which was extra special because my mother's name is Marie, and so William, when he was alive, would take my mother's hand and spin her around: *Tell me you love me! Tell me you love me! Kiss me once while the stars shine above me!* Sunday dinners: an eddy of scent and chatter and melodies and sweeping movement. And always, for me, a sense of nostalgia, even while it's happening, a conscious understanding that the moment will be revealed in later that night and perhaps even in the distant future.

I go into the den and sit next to my ma on the couch, photos of her three kids on each end table, the sconce that's been on the wall since I was a child. I put my arm around her, look over to the olive-green reading chair in the corner.

"Remember I used to read over there," I say.

"You used to read behind the chair, hidden," she says.

"I liked my privacy," I tell her. I pull her close to me and we sit like that for some time. Then she's better, and we make our way back to the dining room.

At the table, we sit in our usual chairs: me next to my sister Nancy, my mother on the other side, followed by my father. William's seat remains empty, and sometimes I catch someone glancing toward the cavity at our table. I do it as well, even now, seven months after he was plucked from the mouth of this world. The feeling is cousin to the desire to look at the awkward or deformed, a force that cranes the neck, pulls the eyes toward curiosities. And so we scoop macaroni onto our plates, grate Reggiano over it all, sometimes add ricotta, converse with those who are still living, and feel the void right beside us.

My genius brother, at twelve years old, took apart an old Commodore 64 computer and put it back together again in minutes. He created a working alarm clock with Legos. My mother joked that when he was born he came out of her holding a working robot. She told us that joke when he was eight

and, when he turned nine, he gave my mother a present: a working robot he constructed with an erector set and an assortment of electronics.

These are my thoughts when I pass the Red Lantern on my way home.

“Are you going to record your voice?” I asked him that night of Yo La Tengo. He shrugged and left it at that. The next day, he moved to California. I drove him to the airport, watched his plane peel off the ground. Nancy was with me.

I said, “I can’t believe he doesn’t live here anymore.”

“He’s lucky,” she said,

“Why don’t you move if you want to leave?”

She snorted and walked away. Nancy and I are in a place between disliking and accepting each other. I dislike her boyfriend, Rick, whom I feel mistreats her. He talks down to her and she takes it, and there are occasions when I hear her crying on the phone while talking to a friend. One Sunday, I let Rick know I didn’t like him and he stormed out, and my sister never really forgave me. We have a love through genetics—a gentle sea-swell that carries us along, but never actually breaks into anything tangible like a hug or a goodbye kiss. I thought that William’s death could force the wave to finally breach, but it only stirred up a short-lived, foamy crest that eventually faded back into the glassy heap of water.

William died three years after moving to the West Coast. A few weeks later I got a phone call from him. I felt as if someone had ambushed me from out of a dark corner. I could feel my heart trying to break its way out of my body. I hardly remember what we talked about that day. Something about the Yankees, how Dad used to take us to the stadium as kids. And then we hung up and I had this weird rush to the head, as if someone had rung a giant church bell in my skull and I was feeling reverberations, the droning shiver of its alloy shell. When things calmed down, I felt a swarming happiness, the kind I used to get when I smoked weed and the good stuff would finally step through the front door. I still get happy pins and needles when William calls. The joy lasts a couple hours before I start

coming down again, but it's a soft landing. Unnerving, but still: soft. He'll call again; I just have to wait.

There is a way I can receive a call without waiting, and that's by visiting his grave, which I do every Monday on the drive home from work. At the cemetery now, stone-grey nimbus clouds gather above me, their bellies full of water. The geo-locator embedded in my brother's headstone detects my phone, so William calls me as I sit on the cool grass, a breeze passing over. He tells me he's thinking about getting a dog, a golden retriever.

"You always did like the idea of having an animal," I say. In the distance, I hear a couple children laughing, the sound of running, the swish and crackle of fallen leaves.

"Particularly goldens," my brother says. And then I hear something through the phone: a blurt of static, raw and metallic, and a far-away word that sounds something like 'rye'; a short, garbled mess that's there and then gone.

"Do you remember playing Civilization?" William says, referencing an old computer game we used to play, where each player starts out as a lone settler and eventually builds an entire empire. "I'm playing now. I'm the Germans under Bismarck. The best. Expansive and industrious."

And then I say, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to call bullshit on you, William. The Persians kick the Germans' ass any day. Expansive and creative. They build, sure, but they also spread culture."

"Culture," he says, "Oh, Mikey. A military win is the only surefire win."

We talk Civilization for an hour before we hang up. It's the best post-death conversation I've ever had with my brother. He calls me a couple more times later in the week, and I try to bring up Civilization but it never really sticks. He'll say something about it, then quickly switch the conversation back to what he had originally brought up when he called, and I always think about that burst of static. The strange sound that resembled the word 'rye.' Every call, I wait for it. I've associated it with our Civilization conver-

sation. I've become obsessed with the static. Please, I think while talking to him. Please come.

The following Sunday, it's baked ziti. Layers of ricotta and mozzarella and red sauce. Dotted between the tiers are marble-sized meatballs. As it bakes, the rooms fill with its scent. I leave the house for a couple minutes and then come back in, just so I can smell the scent anew.

Sitting in the chair I used to hide behind as a child, Matteo Salvatore's "Mo Ve'la Bella Mia da la Muntagna" plays on the CD player, with Salvatore pining, *Mo ve'la mia dalla muntana*. Now comes my belle from the mountain.

Salvatore's voice and the lullaby-strums of guitar carry on, when a video message from The Line appears on my phone. I hit play and the video opens with an aerial view of water gently cascading down a waterfall, splinters of the rushing meltwater winking in the sunlight. It cross-dissolves: a forest of trees, where a covey of birds bursts out of a copse as if suddenly inspired to discover new frontiers. The shadows of those same birds flicker across the wide expanse of a grassy clearing, past a meandering brooklet.

The Line is calling, the text on the screen informs me. Answer.

The camera glides over green knolls, a sweeping steppe, a pasture with a house. I hover across an Amish town, into a bustling city with fists of grey and white buildings.

Even when you're not there, you'll always be there.

And then it holds on a mid-sized brick building on a city's fringe, and the way the camera is keeping steady is enough for you to guess that this is The Line's headquarters. A slow dissolve takes us inside the building, into an office where a middle-aged man with a tamed poof of brown, curly hair sits behind a desk. He's dressed casually, in a denim button-down shirt with the first two buttons left open as if to say, "It's all good, I'm just like you." The man talks about how the mind holds the song that is our life and the voice is the instrument that makes that song come alive, etcetera, etcetera. In essence, The Line is trying to convince me to record my voice with

them while I'm still alive.

Salvatore sings, *Fa subbeto bella mia allu merchete*, as the camera returns to landscapes: rolling hills, the blue sky streaked with glades of sunlight, the copper-colored rooftops of a European city, spires of old churches spiking upward. "When we pass on, our bodies might disappear," says the man's voice as we fly over a lemon grove, a pasture of ambling sheep, a tree-lined lagoon, an English garden. "But our voices can live forever. Let us grace our loved ones with our voices after we've moved on. Let our spirit carry forward through connected speech so that we may help our loved ones live easier." And now just a blank, white screen and a soft instrumental with, if you listen closely, ambient noise: drops, like rainwater falling from trees and gently landing in a still pond; birdsong; something that sounds like the beginning churn of a sprinkler on a muggy summer morning, distantly chugging away in, say, the suburban yard of your childhood home, Mom and Dad in the kitchen looking out the window leading to the backyard, where you and your brother devise an obstacle course for your little sister that involves the swing set, a sprinkler, sporting equipment dug out of the old shed, back when everything was going to be okay, everything was going to be fine.

Lu bene mio 'mpazzi me fà.

One Christmas, when I was in my mid-20's, William gave me a present that would end up being my all-time favorite. We opened gifts at our mother's house that year and, when I unwrapped mine, I sat there stunned.

"I used a real C64 motherboard, Mikey," William said. "Hacked off some inputs and keys, rewired and assembled a keyboard frame. I used a GameCube power supply for it."

I had no idea what he was talking about. All I knew was that I was holding a Commodore 64 laptop, despite the fact that laptops weren't even around when the original Commodore 64 came out. I wasn't around when the original Commodore 64 came out, but I grew up with a computer geek who owned every home computer ever made, so it became part of my child-

hood.

“Do you remember that, William?” I ask him now, sitting at home in my reading chair with the computer in my lap. The room is dark save for the screen’s blue glow. The only sound is the whoosh of tires from cars passing by outside and the hushed rattle of treetops from random breezes. “Remember how we played games on it the rest of the day. Space Taxi mostly. You loved that game, how the character said, ‘Hey, Taxi! Pad 1, please!’”

“Sure,” he says. “But can I tell you about this gift I got Mom? I wanted to send it, but the Post Office was closed today.” I try to steer the conversation back to the Commodore, but it’s no use. William says, “The gift has to do with the Trevi Fountain. Remember?”

“I remember,” I say. “I especially remember that one guy, that rose seller.” I was a teenager, maybe 16, the year all five of us went to Rome. The sky was blue as a robin’s egg, and the heat baked into your skin. Occasionally, a blast of cool breeze rinsed the heat off, leaving you feeling restored and, strangely, wanting to feel that oven heat again. There was the sound of falling water. Near the fountain stood a guy with shoulder-length black hair and a bushy mustache, as if a black rabbit’s foot charm were stuck to his lip. He was selling roses to tourists. He caught me looking at him and scowled at me so hard his eyebrows crossed. Moments later, Nancy walked up to me holding a rose. When I looked back at the rose-seller, he turned away from me and walked toward the other end of the fountain, where tourists sat huddled among the giant, ecru rocks. It was one of those snapshot moments that stayed with me over the years, and even today the man materializes in some of my dreams—dreams that have settings far from the Trevi Fountain. And he’s still angry with me. He never says a word, just shoots knives out of his eyes. Once, a couple years back, I woke up from one of those dreams in the middle of the night—my head still lightly humming with some dark sound from the dream—and there he was, standing over my bed in the darkness, staring at me silently. I startled, shook my head and he disappeared into the night, little by little, like a black and white TV that had been turned off.

"I don't remember him," William says, but I don't care if he remembers. I want to talk about the Commodore 64.

"Can you do me a favor," I say. "Just one thing?"

"What is it, Mikey?"

"Can you say, 'Hey Taxi! Pad 1, please!'" I needed to hear him say it again. The idea—maybe 'lie' is the more appropriate word—that William was still alive would seem truer if he just said those words.

"Why?" William says.

"We used to say it all the time, joking around about the game. Please."

"I just don't understand why," he says, and I shut my eyes tightly. I can feel my heartbeat.

"Please."

"Sure, Mikey," he says, and I breathe out a long exhale. He says, "Hey taxi! Pad 1, please!"

"Thanks," I say. "That means a lot to me."

"Sure thing," he says.

I lie in bed and let my mind wander, try to reach to deeper recesses, the places where dreams come from—thoughts and ideas floating down there like clusters: miniature galaxies, tiny labyrinths, unintelligible unless you let yourself dive deep enough and hook one, reel it in until it's palpable.

I can understand my parents' confusion about William and The Line when I think about his voice in the post-death phone calls. The vocal chords that produce his voice, it all begins with the lungs. You need those hallowed organs to live. So, if there is a voice, shouldn't there be life? The computer is William's lungs now. It's his vocal cords, his articulates. And yes, I know this. It's obvious, but probably more obvious to someone who isn't enrolled in The Line. Because with The Line, it seems so real. So very present.

I wake to the sound of a ringing phone. It's 3 a.m. and I forgot

to shut my window and so the world breathes in, the white sheer curtains billowing, the bottom lip of the blinds lifting forward and smacking back onto the window in a random beat. I look at my phone: it's my brother. This doesn't make sense. The Line promises 'No calls between 9 p.m. and 9 a.m.' Outside, a song blaring from a passing car swells and rolls away. I lift the phone, say hello.

"Hey taxi! Pad 1, please!" William says.

"William?"

"Hey taxi! Pad 1, please!" he says again, and his voice sounds different. Metallic. In the brief pause before he says it again, there is a sound like a shovel scraping a sheet of wrought iron. And then again: "Hey, taxi! Pad 1, please!"

"William," I say, trying to interject. But it's no use. He keeps repeating it—"Hey, taxi! Pad 1, please!"—and something keeps me hanging on, hoping he'll say something else, anything else. But tonight it's only this. Five minutes go by before I tap 'End' on my phone and lie back down. I close my eyes, hoping for silence, but all I can hear is my brother's voice in my head saying that phrase over and over and over and over until I can see the tiny taxi itself floating through empty, dark space, thrusters firing off behind it, sending the car up, left, right, and all I can think is, Please don't let the phone ring again.

The next afternoon, he calls and, before I pick up, I hesitate.

For the first time, I hesitate.

But I do pick it up. My desire to hear his voice, to live in this other world, is stronger than any surfacing unease. Right away, he mentions something about eating frog legs, and a memory immediately comes to me, and I ask him, "Remember that frog?" When I was nine years old and a friend of mine whipped a frog hard with a jump rope in my parents' backyard until the frog lay on its back, apparently dead. I buried it and, a few hours later, after my friend left, William and I dug it up with a garden shovel and the frog launched itself out of the hole, somehow alive and kick-

ing. I stumbled and I tripped over a tree root popping out of the ground. I don't know if my friend had just knocked the thing out and William and I dug it up at the right time or what, but I didn't care. We laughed and laughed and laughed.

"Did we cook frog legs together?" William asks now.

"No," I say, "the frog that Greg thought he killed? When we were kids?"

"I don't know what this has to do with f-f-f-food," William says.

A stutter. Where did it come from? Then from the phone comes a noise: something like a distant clang, like a sledgehammer meeting rock. Now there's a light, steady buzz in the background.

"Rye," William says.

"What?"

"Rye," he repeats.

"I just wanted to talk about that frog that we dug up—"

"I don't remember ever eating a frog."

"We didn't eat it."

"Well then why bring it up?" A little annoyed now.

"I'm just reminiscing," I say.

"What?" he says.

"I'm just—"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT RYE RYE RYERYE!"

It's the voice of a madman, guttural, angry, the cadence robotic. I feel dizzy. An image claws at me: a cloud of bats flitting around telephone wires at dusk, something my brother and I saw one summer night during our childhood while sneaking a cigarette at the gazebo in our old neighborhood park. We were alone, and the bats seemed to fly about in chaos. That's what my brother's voice sounds like: chaos.

I hang up on him. He does not call back.

Nancy calls for the first time since before William left for California. She tells me she canceled *The Line* today. I can see that wave starting to foam at

the crest again, promising to finally breach.

“Why?” I ask.

“I can’t do it anymore. It’s creepy. There are too many glitches lately, and I…” and here she starts crying.

I let her go for a little bit, and then I say, “The glitches go away. They always do.”

“It’s been three nights in a row. It’s always been just a day here and there, but three nights?”

“It’s been two for me,” I tell her.

“You’re an idiot for even thinking about letting it go for three days.”

You let it go for three, I consider saying to her, but I let it go.

“Do you want to know what happened this last time?” she says. “What he said to me?”

“No,” I tell her. “Don’t relive it, if it’s just going to make you more upset.”

“Fine,” she says.

We’re both quiet. I try to dissect her ‘fine,’ wonder if there was animosity behind it, or if she appreciated my sentiment.

“You should consider it,” she says.

“Consider what?”

“Canceling.”

I tell her I’ll consider it. I don’t want to hang up yet. But the next thing I know we’re saying our good-byes.

The next night, the phone rings again. I look at the time on my stovetop: 2:33 a.m. I know who it is. I know it’s a glitch. So why look? Why not just go back to sleep and let the phone ring? I close my eyes and the phone eventually stops ringing and I congratulate myself. I try to wade my way through the hard currents of sleeplessness and find myself thinking about the time William and I stayed up all night playing Zork on his computer. I had been 12 or 13, and we were both hopped up on Coca-Cola, tortilla

chips and the queso dip our mother used to make. The memory comes to me so quickly, I feel shaken, the feeling of being too close to the street when a truck barrels by you; there is this invisible surge that pushes at your whole body. Me typing, William over my shoulder, the room dark, save for the desk lamp illuminating the map to the Underground Empire. And there are high points in this memory, peaks of vividness that stand out from the more monochromatic moments. We were in the maze and we stumbled upon that pile of bones: *a skeleton, probably the remains of a luckless adventurer, is here.*

“Touch the skeleton,” my brother said.

I asked him if he meant *search*.

“No, touch it.” I did. A ghost appears in the room and is appalled at your desecration of the remains of a fellow adventurer. Then the ghost cast a curse on me. William laughed.

“You knew!” I whisper-yelled.

Out of his laughter, I heard him say, “I did.”

My phone rings again. Without opening my eyes, I reach over and pick it up.

“What took you so long? You screening your calls or something?”

“No,” I say. “I was sleeping. You’re not supposed to call this late.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

His voice sounds completely normal. No signs of an angry machine running it, no buzzing drone in the background. It’s my brother, coming in clear as crystal.

“Never mind,” I tell him.

“Do me a favor, would you?”

“What?”

“Let me in,” he says.

The glimmer of a car’s headlights shine through the blinds and then it’s dark again. I close my eyes and I can see that line on my old computer screen again: *a skeleton, probably the remains of a luckless adventurer, is here.*

“What do you mean?” I say.

“What do *you* mean?” he says. He sounds out of breath.

“How can I let you in?” I ask.

A car door slams outside.

“Don’t be dense,” William says. “I’m right outside your front door.”

I hang up, hands shaking. My stomach drops. I hear that buzz humming like an electric current in the back of my head. Death. It’s the ultimate break in routine. Death stops it all. Death says, you will no longer do what you’ve been doing for decades: breathing, seeing, tasting manicotti, listening to *Tic-tí, Tic-tá*. It’s routine—not life—that we long for at Death’s door. We want to keep doing the things we’ve been doing.

But no.

I move off the couch and walk to the front door. What do I expect to find? I imagine a wormhole, a circle of blackness pulling the night into it and, on the other side of the wormhole, William sitting in a dark room all by himself with a phone to his ear. He apologizes for the glitches, blames it on remnants from the Big Bang, and I just nod in agreement. Or maybe I’ll open the door and find a puff of fading smoke—some kind of symbolic sign of life being snuffed out a split-second before I opened it. Or maybe I’ll find a small mound of dust lying on the doorstep, or maybe an article of clothing—one of his Converse All-Stars. Or maybe I’ll find nothing at all, just the middle-of-the-night—maybe with a bit more weight in the air as if gravity were extra-heavy at my doorstep.

And so I open the door, my eyes closed. I’m scared to open them. Afraid to see him there. Afraid to not see him there and be disappointed. I have to open them at some point, accept what’s there or what isn’t there. But I decide to first revel in this: the idea that he’s there. The possibility. That seems much less frightening than his actual ghost, and much more hopeful than the empty night air. Let me just hold on to this one moment. As indefinite and fantastical as it is, let me just hold onto it a little longer. Then I’ll open my eyes.