

FALL 2014

THE PEN

creative fiction & poetry by USCB students

The Pen: Fall 2014
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A special thanks to our faculty sponsor, Dr. Ellen Malphrus

“It [writing] was the field in which I developed the self that I became.”
–Jane Hirshfield

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Oystermen

Sunrise---waking up on Apalachicola Sound

The fury of big outboard motors coughing, growling as

They start their day.

Heavily tattooed, depictions of past and current loves,
Admirations for the female form and of course, mother.

 These men race across the bay seeking the best spots
at the oyster beds.

They walk the length of the boats like dancers on a stage,
 Wielding twenty foot tongs, opened then clamped together,
 Dragging to the surface, a mound of oysters awaits
grading.

Exhaustive, hard work performed by strong, proud men-----

 These are the Apalachicola oystermen.

 This what they do, what their fathers did, what they
want to do---nothing else.

Fall Rainstorm

The last cicada drones its dying song,
a note that carries far, echoes the past,
of summer days whose heat and sun oppressed
the trees, their needles dry and brown in wait
of more than air, the need for rain straining
their roots. September comes, the air begins to shift,
an early autumn drizzle dots the ground
and sinks below. The needles will soon grow
green again, the cones will fall in time.
The rain subsides, and all around grows still,
quiet, the sound of the cicada hushed
until the heat returns sometime next year.

last twilight home

It's a perfectly clear night,
the sky blank except for
the bright glowing star
moving towards us,
unstoppable. A perfect view.
I stand with my feet
firmly planted to the
earth, gazing up as I
hold your hand tight
and whisper for the last time
unintelligible words
of hope and forgiveness.
I close my eyes and breathe
the burning air.

first twilight home

The sun hangs low on your horizon
as I step out onto the ledge, footprints in fine rust sand.
I turn my eyes to the small blue star
and know that you were once like it,
full of life and hope.
Some still scorn you
and your harsh memory,
your mystery.
The sun fades and the stars shine
like I've never seen before,
and I know that no matter what
you're our only chance to do things right
for the first time.

Our mother.
I hope we treat you well
always.

black

like the slacks you wear
and your heels that clack
across the floor on your way
to me,
in silence held tight,
my back slick under black skin
stripped from its original flesh
to use on dark nights in dark rooms
when I ask you to make me feel
worthless.

Sunday Chores

And as I unfold the crisp white,
bending over to tuck the edge around the
corner, I think of the
dreams I'll have once I lay down,
everything dark.

From a young age I was
given the task of bed-making, no more
help from mom,
instead having to rely
just on myself, with her in the
kitchen doing the dishes.

Lately, it's the rituals like this that
move us, that keep us thinking
not of
only the
present, but of
questions about the future and
relics of moments past
spent the same way,
tasking.

Until I die, memories like this one,
visitors from another time,
will arrive with freshly-washed sheets. It's been
x days since you left, but here
you are still, helping me
zip the duvet cover closed.

August

Our steps echoed off the concrete wall on the other side of the ditch that ran parallel to the street, the wall that closed the neighborhood off from the woods outside.

I felt like we'd been walking for hours. The tense silence suffocated me like the thick, humid summer evening air. I couldn't stand it much longer, I had to take a breath.

"I'm just so fucking tired. Tired of the way we are, tired of how you treat me. I wanted this to work, but it's not, and from the looks of it, it never will."

Kain wasn't expecting that, his eyes flickered with surprise and something I couldn't decipher, but he retained his perpetual blasé, shrugging his shoulders and taking a last short draw from his cigarette, flicking it onto the ground, the end glowing red for a few seconds before it burned out into grey ash that fell apart in the breeze.

I stood still and he stopped. He cast his lazy gaze up to my face, studying.

I had no tears, I was over it. I was ready for it before we even started, because I knew it would come to this. My lips relaxed, parted slightly, even breaths passing through them. My eyes squinted, blocking out the harsh orange glow of the setting sun, my brows furrowed.

He stepped towards me, close, and cupped his hand around the side of my neck, his fingertips encountering the short hair on the nape, lacing through softly in a caress. He leaned down as much as he needed to, his shoulders bowed, his breath tracing across my jaw until his lips met mine.

Then he backed away, removing his hand, fingertips gliding lightly over my jugular.

His mouth formed a slight curve as he reached for another cigarette, resting it between his lips, lighting it, and exhaling a long cloud of smoke.

"I'm gonna miss that taste."

He started to walk again, his shadow stretching long over the wall stained glowing yellow.

Self-Made Cages

Music, that's what the whistle turned into for the man. No longer a burden to his sanity but something to rejoice in, as a way to bring happiness into his life – Oh how could he have ever wished to remove such serenity – such peace – from his troubled existence? Gone were his nightly struggles. He felt free. Liberation cemented when he poured those no-good doctor's prescriptions down the drain. He can't get enough. He's rerunning sound clips of train whistles for hours now, but none could replace the real thing – live in action. He's being patient, lounging around anxiously on alert trying to hear for the freight train that ALWAYS comes at 3 in the morning. He didn't know where it could be, but it's late. It's never late. How dare they? Don't those lousy train shits understand how badly I need it- need the whistle? Fuck it. The man walked out to the backyard and jogged quickly over to the tracks. There's no sign of the train, no warning from the one thing he's been waiting to hear since he woke up this morning. He sat down on the barren tracks, like when he was in preschool. With a wait that seemed endless the man had no choice but to think. Think about how it's stupid that he's been reduced to begging for a train of all things. It's the whistling, ever-present, it longs to be reunited and to harmonize with the real one. He focuses in on that glorious sound, trying to bring the international noise to greater velocity. The whistle grows and grows, his eyes close in peace as the whistle continues to elevate. He can't see the light – or refuses to notice. The sound intensifies, and he doesn't realize it's the whistling, finally getting it's harmony – it's twin.

Night One

His foot twitched in anticipation. Something it's been doing every night as soon as the sun vanished. The subconscious whistle increasing. That damn whistling is the reason for his late nights and lack of sleep. The whistle from the 3 a.m. freight train right in his backyard. He knows it's coming, when the real whistle will sound, he knows when to put in his earplugs or his headphones, and when to cram his head between the pillows. Hell, he's tried everything but

the whistling in his mind refuses to be squashed. And in retaliation, it grows in volume. He can't sleep until the two whistles meet and harmonize in unison, and then all together stop.

Twistedly trains are his passion –always have been. His father was the night engineer for the local train company and getting up to ride with him was the highlight of his youth. He loved the bulky noises and the endless stream of cars the pilot could carry and he loved how a train looks so slow from the outside when it could be going hundreds of miles per hour. So when he got older, a career in the train business was the only option he could fathom. And like all the others he was good at it, so good that promotions just kept on coming. They came so often that they pushed him right out of the “train” field all together and on into corporate. His family couldn't be more proud of his success.

But how could it be a success? He just didn't know and couldn't understand. Leaning back the man smoothed his palms up and down his thighs. This is not what I signed up for...to become some corporate suit. Just sit on back looking undistinguishable from the next schmuck. Trains are his passion, wringing his hands together he pondered over how every man in his family worked on trains at one point or another –actual trains. That's where he should be right now. After all, what did he know about paperwork and filing cabinets –not a damn thing that's what. He stuck with the job of course seeing as no man in his family ever quit either- how could anyone turn down the pay? You sellout. But after a while, a long while, the longing subsided and the man adapted. He is almost able to enjoy his work now or at least he is able pretend he enjoys it. The trade off with the switch in career is moving into a home by the tracks, and every night he'd let the sounds of the night train sooth him.

Night Two

He is lying upside down on the sofa hoping to trick his sanity into believing the noise in his mind is simply the standard

ringing one experiences when a vast amount of blood rushes to the brain. This isn't working. At best all he's getting out of it is a headache –which, if he's lucky, the pain from one may be enough of a distraction to provide some ease for the night. Yeah, but when am I ever lucky? If I had an ounce of luck I'd be able to sleep at a damn decent hour.

He runs his hands roughly over his scalp and is tempted to rip out his hair in frustration. After a couple deep –healing, he thinks with an eye roll –breaths he makes the move off of the sofa and slugs over to the bathroom medicine cabinet. Rummaging through the various prescriptions he obtained the week before he finds the ones given for anxiety and mixes two of those with a dose indicated for someone with high blood pressure, and completes the concoction with his current nightly routine of one sleeping pill with two tablets of melatonin for good measure. Can't forget a little acetaminophen –for that headache. A man's dedication to sleep is parallel only by his dedication to work Comes across his mind whilst looking down at the kaleidoscope of colours in his hand. And after completing the ritual is the next step is to make an attempt to lie in bed and hope for sleep.

Goddamn insomnia. Sleeping pills they call them –zombie pills is more like it. Really should have known better. It was a 'bah-humbug' moment –if it were Christmastime Scrooge would no longer be a figure to hate. All the man wants to do is rest, alone...in his own home. What's so wrong with that? He doesn't want to be plagued by pestering neighbors –or whistles for that matter. And don't get me started on that witch from Hansel and Gretel... and before he could think another thought the house gave off a slight tremor – miniscule, and his eyes squeezed shut, and he dropped down to the ground where he proceeds to mold himself into a vertical form of the fetal position. It is time. The Soo Line is on the verge and the man could feel each and every choo deep in the cockles of his heart. A flash of his eyes he read the time 2:59 –how

did I not notice? How could I have not been prepared? It's been weeks of this R— and just like that, there it was. The echoing, haunting, frightening, gargantuan whistle that some deep hole in his mind craved –while the rest of it wailed. Please stop –go faster –do something other than continue—

Night Four

He's pouring coffee into his favorite Marquette Ave station mug, basking in the afterglow of the best decision he's made since this nonsense started –dropping his crackpot therapist. He went there for advice and aid as to what the cause could be and the advice he received was to think on his own the reasons why a train might be haunting him. But when he corrected that it's the whistle not that train that's the issue he was met with “the whistle is an extension of the train itself” and “the train is the bigger issue here” –Bullshit, that was his job. Why else would I pay a man to ask me dumb questions? It wasn't any business of his anyway, that whistle is all mine. Besides it's not so terrible –it's the most natural sound there is. I grew up with it my whole damn life and just imagine what everyone would say if they knew I considered this a haunting. They'd say I lost my touch, I'm out of tune, spent too much time with yuppies –up there in the clouds with the big fish forgetting about the small fries below. He pauses, to take a sip from his mug. Yeah he ponders slowly that's what this is about. I'm out of tune man. And the damn universe gets that, it gets that and it wants to help my poor soul out. It's trying to bring me back down from yuppie-land –back where I belong. It was stupid to think I needed a damn doctor...THIS is my therapy. And with that revelation, the house began to tremble...

Night Five

One of the things he loves most about his home is the amount of fireflies he can see from his back patio. They take over the entire yard, from the grass all the way through the tree tops. Their light cast a heavenly glow on the tracks and in the fall, with a mug of coffee in his hands as he sits back and zones out in peace 'heavenly' is the perfect description. The only thing missing will be

arriving shortly. His breakthrough the other night has him looking at the whistle in a whole new light –and it’s miraculous. He realized that the only reason he was suffering so is because he fought away the source of inner peace. He rejected the whistle and used up so much energy doing so and that was the reason he struggled to sleep, it was the reason he felt tormented instead of relaxed. He was an idiot –but now he understands so as he sits on his back porch, gazing aimlessly at the wonder in front of him his eyes close and he smiles when he hears the sound of tires on tracks in the distance – tires on tracks that ebb their way slowly towards his home, towards him, coming to rock him to sleep with a lullaby. If I were a smarter man I would have seen this earlier and then I wouldn’t have had so many sleepless nights. I would have felt this completion long ago and who knows what a man can do when he feels completed. And before he knows it the line is upon him. Ah. It’s a perfect night. And in the mists of all the noises the Soo Line bears to him he moves out of his chair and into the house, where he walks down the back hall into his bedroom where he gets into his pajamas and climbs into bed. With a deep breath through his nose he uses the palpable peace to propel him towards a deep sleep.

Night Seven

Harry hates the night shift. All he thinks about is how he’d rather be in his warm house with his family, tucking his four daughters into bed and his wife Betty reads them a story. While conducting at night is easy going –more of a lean back setting –Harry is getting a touch too old for it. He’s at that age where he finds himself sleeping instead of keeping an eye on the tracks due to the late hours. “Not that there’s much to keep an eye on.” The autumn night leaves a chill in his bones and Harry sits back down in his chair and tries to warm himself up. “Yo! Harry, want some coffee?” “Yes please, thank you Pete.” “Here you go. It’s freezing out here man; you’re going to catch your death. You sure you don’t want to come down and inside for a bit? There’s no reason for you to be out here all night.” Harry shrugs in response “I’m alright Pete. ‘sides, corporate’s finding any excuse to send old men like myself home for

good.” “Heard that Harry. If you change your mind come find us.” Harry laughs in response, a jolly one that rivals that of Saint Nick. 3:47 – “Alright gents! We’re running behind, so get your butts up and movin’. We need to catch up.” Harry yelled into the walkie-talkie. He moves towards coals in the fire to crank up the engine –his train is one of the few none-electric ones left. Pete reaches the top of the ladder to help Harry out and freezes. “Harry man... look.” Pete’s pointing toward the tracks and when Harry turns to look he stops stone dead. “Blow the whistle Pete, get that man off the tracks!” Pete frantically blows the trains whistle to signal out the train’s coming. He does so about three times when Harry shoves him away to do so himself. “Dammit, does he wish to die?” “Harry, what do we do? I don’t know what we’re supposed to do.” The old man sighs, this isn’t his first time. “Put it in your log Pete, be sure to note we signaled out to him.” “There’s no way to stop the train?” Harry turns toward the man with a sad smile “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Stirrings

When I came through the door she said it fast, like she wanted the words out of her throat. “Your dog’s dead and we’re having stew for dinner.”

I thought of the chickens. The way she killed them all the same way with her lips spit-slick and quivering like she was trying to stop a smile from spreading across her face as she watched the life dribble out of them. It’d been the same when she put our horse down in the summer. She fired with the butt of the rifle nestled into the notch of her shoulder, one of her eyes open wide and the other squinted closed, her mouth wet and trembling, her finger firm on the trigger, and the excitement ebbing off her like heat.

“What’s in it?” I asked.

My mother washed the red off her hands with soap and steaming water. She took a long time drying them; scraping the scum from beneath her nails, dabbing at her wrists and elbows like she was toweling off after a long bath. She didn’t answer me though, she rarely did. It was never her nature to talk a lot, or talk at all really. I sometimes wondered if her thoughts blocked me out, if she couldn’t hear anything through the rush of them.

In a pot on the stove our dinner bubbled, some brackish concoction with bits of meat bobbing on the surface. A sick oily smell like pork grease and old tomatoes. She mixed it with a ladle, scraping the grime off the sides and stirring up all of the bits that had sunk to the bottom.

“You know,” she said, in this thick rattling voice that reminded me of wind moving through corn husks, “he was a bad dog anyways.” At church once I heard a woman call her sick, whispering the way people do when there’s a casket in the room. I used to think they said the things they did because she didn’t talk a lot, or because my dad was dead, but looking back I realize they saw something in my mom that I’d been seeing for awhile, only they called it what it was and I didn’t.

“You’re wrong.” I told her, “Rod was a good dog. Dad said so too.”

She looked at me then with fear in her eyes, as the ladle slipped back into the pot with a splash and some of the stew spilled over the edge and sizzled on the burner. Her chapped lips split apart and her brows drew together and I could see her tongue quivering behind her teeth as if she had all these things she wanted to say but couldn't. I thought maybe she'd explain about the dog or dad, or even what the women were whispering about on the steps of the church but all that came out was a soft, "Wash your hands and set the table, it's time to eat."

And we did. Big steaming spoonfuls of soup, searing our throats when we swallowed, pretending the mouthfuls weren't hot and tasted good. I was taught to do that.

I finished eating and went to bed even though the sun hadn't sunk yet and the sky was still bright with its setting. I lay there on stiff pillows, thinking about my dog and the way his tongue lolled between his teeth and all of the times I'd kicked him in ribs for shitting on the carpet and regretting them. It's funny how when you lose pets and people you start recounting all of the bad things you've done to them; atoning and apologizing like it makes a difference.

Some place between sunset and sunrise I dreamed about my dad. His face took shape on the backs of my eyelids and he was saying things, words I watched him shape but couldn't hear. When I pried open my eyes I saw her sitting there, on the edge of my bed, where my dog use sleep, her legs locked together her eyes wide and filled with the glare of the moonlight slanting in through my bedroom window.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "About your dad I mean."

My tongue got heavy, and swollen, all of the things I couldn't say building up at the back of my mouth, the words wet and sticky like clay. I could feel my mattress quivering beneath me and I didn't know whether it was from her shaking or me but I could feel the fear in my throat and taste it too, a sharp bloody flavor that reminded me of the stew.

"What do you mean you're sorry?"

She stared up at the cracks in the ceiling and then back at me.

“Just...that I’m sorry.”

“I don’t understand.”

She shook her head and tears started streaking from the edges of her eyes and down her cheeks. “Your dog he snapped at me today and your dad did the same. They hurt me both of them. Do you understand that? They hurt me.”

I thought of my dad’s face on the backs of my eyelids and saw our old quarter horse stoop to its knees and the rifle tucked into the notch of momma’s shoulder, her lips wet with spit.

“Get out.” I said. “Get out.”

And she did, fast, collecting her nightgown in both fists, her feet slapping the floor as she left. I heard her bedroom door open and I heard it close and for a moment there nothing but me with my thoughts, snot coming out of my nose and tears out of my eyes, my throat thick with how much I hated her.

Then I heard a click, a switchblade sound, sharp in the silence.

There was a squelch and a gurgle, the same noises the chickens made when she hacked their heads off only softer.

I stood up on numb legs and made myself cross the hall, grasping at my own stomach, trying to hold my insides in and keep all my pieces together.

“Momma.” I said and I said it again only louder the next time,

“Momma?”

I nudged open the bedroom door and I saw her there on the floor her hair all flayed out and the blade in her hand slick and malevolent in the white cast of the moonlight. Her eyes rolled in her skull like marbles, god did they roll, her pupils pointing to the backs of her head and disappearing beneath the rim of her sockets. She looked more beautiful then than she did those Sundays on the church steps but there was no one to whisper about her then. There was only me in the dim of the hallway and my dad on the backs of my eyelids and my mom stirring on the floor, the red coming out of her wrists in ribbons.

“I’m sorry about your dog,” she said and that was the end of her.

Pouring Down

When drops of rain stream down and block my view
I wipe them out the way, as best I can.
Not choosing when or where they chance to fall
I carry on despite the mist it brings.
Refreshing as it is, it can be hard
when outward signs of hurt are often seen.
Beyond the specks of moisture on the skin
remains a sticky film that lingers on.

Time Alone

The best road trips I ever took
were those I took alone.
The car, itself, it always shook
but life was good with music on.

No GPS to get you lost.
No cell phones to hear ring.
With window down and hair all tossed
It seemed the perfect time to sing.

Flagler, Daytona, and Miami Beach
Were some of the best destinations.
There were many ways to beat the heat
On these relaxing mini-vacations.

But the thing that made the trip worthwhile
Was not dancing nor the tropical drink.
It was learning about life and what made me smile
And the art of learning to quietly think.

Sonnet of Hope

I must find cause to sing of victory.
A conquering of pain will be its theme.
There is this strength; it's buried deep in me.
Unleash its wrath against the devil's scheme.
When evil stares at me straight in the face,
its smug and wicked look I will not fear!
My weapons are secure within this place.
A fervent prayer for those I love so dear.
Great light will pierce the darkness in the end.
A wholeness to those hearts so frayed and torn.
Whose wounds are cut so deep and need to mend.
The hope is here that joy will be reborn.
Stand firm with me, do not give in to death,
I'll hold your hand until my final breath!

With me from the Cradle

I must tell you I long for your sweet peace,
forever you will be like an old friend.
As a child, I knew your roads were special,
enchanted streets I'd walk a million times.
It was with you where dreams would come alive
and crisp, fresh air revived my weary soul.
When quietness would calm my rattled nerves
the stillness there would clear my frazzled mind.

Out on the porch with all its creeks and cracks
We gladly sat and waved while folks went by
Your fragrance, in the air, it smelt of pine
Gardenias bloomed around the month of June
The drive-in movie always gave us fun
The painting on the backside of the screen
A silhouette was done in black and white
And painted by the granddad of Clay Rice
While in the midst of love, did heartache come
Life did exist, despite the death you'd seen.
Those long dirt roads that entertained us all
the secrets of this place you've never told
I thank you that you were the source of hope
And gave me strength when dreams went up in smoke
The fire that he meant to bring me down
Gave fuel to my resolve and I survived

I walked through ashes filtering it out
and picked up what was left and carried on.
Though black soot covered all that did remain
I wiped it off and started fresh again
It all went in a tiny little bag
A home that once existed was now gone
We waved goodbye and slowly I did leave
Not knowing if I ever would return

Your rural sweetness called me from afar
I heard your voice in wind that blew my way
Your whispers could be heard as birds flew by
And to your hills and curves, I did come back
The person that I stand her as today
Is better for the pain that I endured
I'll sit and tell you all I have been through
But first I must remind you, I love you

Road of Trepidation

Protect me Lord while forward I go on;
surrounding chaos hinders paths ahead.
There's no one else whom I can call upon.

The road of trepidation stretches long,
while on this outstretched journey that I tread.
Protect me Lord while forward I go on.

When flanked by war of raging Titans;
amidst their battle; visions of bloodshed
it is You, oh Lord I will surely call upon.

Slamming jolts revealing the confusion
brought on by a vexing voice that misled.
Protect me Lord while forward I go on.

Behind the mountain tops emerges sun
Revealing that all threats have ceased and fled
So thankful it was You I called upon.

Passing silver mirrors of reflection;
around the turn I see triumph ahead.
Protection felt as forward I went on;
it's You, oh Lord, I'll always call upon.

Whispers of White

White, a blank page, for writer's words, a home.
Chance to tell stories of pasts now gone.
White is falling snow; jacket for the ground
like forgiveness covers faults, healing found.

White piano keys, music brought alive.
Slipping in white gloves, the hands of a bride.
White doves overhead dance about and fly
amidst clouds of white, elevated high.

White gardenias, life, traces of new breath.
Peace lilies, blooms of white, upon tombs of death.
White, christening gown of a baby oh so tender.
Color of submission, flag of surrender.

White, beam of light, shines right through heaven's door.
Where once again in robes of white we'll live forever more.

Confessions of a Teenage European Excursionist

Fuck airports. Nothing kills the buzz of adventure like sitting in a chair for six hours waiting for your flight to port. Especially when you're seventeen and dead tired. My player uncle seemed to be on the same page. The two of us were slunk back in the hard plastic chairs, looking pathetic and wondering how in the hell my mother could possibly still be so cheery and bouncy. I suppose when you're in the final stages of cancer and this trip was supposed to be your last hoorah, you'd be a little more excited than the average person with a sore ass.

This all being said, there are very few things that can make a person whose been wasting away on an uncomfortable chair in an airport more happy than hearing over the loudspeaker that your plane is here and your section is ready to be boarded.

I was in better spirits when I buckled myself into my window seat on the plane. Sure, it was in coach, but even the worst seating section on a plane is better than an airport chair. We were to spend the next nine hours on this plane plus another six in order to reach Venice, Italy. Fuck. I tried to busy my mind from such thoughts by pulling out my varied assortment of travelling entertainment. A donut headrest, a CD player, a new manga, and a freshly bought Playboy magazine, courtesy of my mother. I know they say that those donut pillows are supposed to make trying to sleep on a plane more comfortable, but when the chair is already pointed straight up and the donut causes your head to hang down, comfort is nothing but a faraway dream, my friend.

Though the flight seemed like an impending nightmare to me, I couldn't help but notice the extreme case of uneasiness coming from my companions. When the plane started its take off, my mother and uncle reached out and grabbed each other's hands as if holding on for dear life. Apparently, both had a severe fear of flying.

I'm still a little confused as to what made me smile more, the fact that someone was having it off worse than me, or that my Hulkishly built uncle was reduced to a whimpering baby at the slightest movement of the plane. I guess he had a better understanding of his own mortality than I did of mine. I suppose 9/11 does that to people. At the time, I was too naïve and exhausted to consider the possibility of dying in a plane crash. Needless to say, I believe I slept better than they did — that is, when I finally managed to pass out with only two hours left of the flight.

The six-hour flight went over a little better than the previous. We had the chance to sleep in actual beds for a few hours, and were swept up in the fantasies of what was to come when we landed in Venice. The sights, the women, and the alcohol. We imaged everything would be in more excess and of the finest quality. Apparently, we were in one of those moods where if it was different than what we'd already seen all our lives, it was bound to be superior in every way to home. For the most part, nothing could have been closer to the truth.

We landed at the Venice airport in a state of duality. We were those annoying tourists who are always seen running around to every window, every corner of the room, and up to every person to bask in the magnificence of it all. But, we were also suffering from severe jetlag. Plus, we failed to gain full awareness of the obvious existence of being dumped into a place where we didn't have a shred of a clue as to how to understand their language. Okay, I had about a year of high school French under my belt, but speaking French to Italians can only get you so far. We basically just made our way around the airport like monkeys. If someone yelled at us, we were going somewhere we shouldn't, and if they were smiling, we were on the right track. Thank god emotions are the same no matter where you go.

So, we made our way out of the airport plaza and found a ferry boat

(or water taxi, whatever the hell you want to call it) that could take us to our hotel on the Grand Canal. Already, we could feel that sense of wonderment festering in our minds of the Wonderland we were about to embark to. The water taxi was nice and all, but the best thing about it was also the worst — the giant sun roof. It gave glorious views of the clear blue skies, birds soaring in honor of our conquest, and the sight of the canal just ahead. But, all this being said, a guy can only take so much direct sunlight before he begins to feel like his face is about to melt off. My mother and uncle seemed to be enjoying the only space available in the shady part of the taxi while I enjoyed the pleasure of possibly developing skin cancer. This was soon forgiven as we entered into the Grand Canal.

The rows of buildings rose high out of the water, displaying a glorious spectrum of color and design. The native people were busy buzzing around on their boats filled with vegetables and exotic flowers. Rows upon rows of candy cane-looking poles stretched up from under the water for boats to anchor themselves to. Natives could be seen dancing along the banks, and tourists could be heard laughing and popping champagne to toast their arrival to the majestic site. This was Venice. My uncle, my mother, and I all sat in pure awe of it all. The Grand Canal was alive and we were there, right in the middle of it.

The taxi driver steered us over to the dock of our hotel. The Carlton on the Grand Canal, displayed in big golden letters. I believe it was the sister hotel to The Hilton, but fuck it, it was beautiful and we couldn't wait to strut through it and continue onward to the lively streets.

When we walked into the hotel, another layer of vanity was added to our touristic egos. The entire hotel was like heaven on earth. Everything was a polished mix of white and gold. Everything from the immense marble floors, to the elegant seating, to the walls — all of it looked as if it were fit for a king and queen. I couldn't help but

notice the feeling of heaviness coming from my balls witnessing the site. My uncle must have had the same feeling because we both sat down in silence looking at each other as if to say, “Holy shit, dude.” Still fresh in the haze of it all, we made our way upstairs, picked our beds, and proceeded to pass out. The conquests of the streets outside would have their turn soon enough.

When we awoke about four hours later, things were fine for about five minutes. Around that time, my mother had regained enough sense to notice that her entire set of baggage was nowhere to be found. Great, we were in a part of the world where we couldn’t converse with anyone, were still suffering from the last remnants of jetlag, and now my mother had lost all of her clothes and toiletries for the entire trip. We proceeded to spend the next couple of hours trying our best to put whatever sleuthing abilities we had to use. We even managed to find ourselves all the way back at the Venice airport. It wasn’t there. Fuck.

Eventually, we returned to our dock on the Grand Canal, defeated and confused. By some odd chance, my mother summoned the balls to walk up to a taxi driver and yell at him to find the one who cruised us out here. It was a good thing my mother had found the driver to be particularly attractive and could list out every little detail of what the man looked like. Ultimately, with fear in his eyes and confusion in his countenance, the man grabbed his radio and, I assume, told every other driver to come to our location. I assume this because a line of water taxis all passed by, each in turn floating over to yell to the man that they didn’t know us. That is, until our driver eventually arrived. And, wouldn’t you know it, the bags were all piled up in the back of the boat in plain sight. We didn’t know who to be more pissed at, ourselves for being so blind, or the driver for failing to take out all of our baggage when requested. But, alas, the dream was restored and we found ourselves in the mood for exploration and alcohol.

The sun was setting and the crowds made their way to St. Mark's Square. I tried being one of those typical tourists who wanted to revel in the foreign culture, so I decided to raid the merchandise carts that were lined up along the bank. Nothing really peaked my interest as much as this one mask I saw on display. It was black and white and had intricate designs that swelled down the incredibly long nose. The merchant grabbed the mask for me, then spurted out his native gibberish. For all I know, he could have been telling me about what a piece of shit the mask was, which I would discover soon enough. I smiled at him like a little kid on Christmas day, reached into my mother's bag of travel money, and pulled out a handful of euros to give to the man. I had no clue how much it was all worth, but I assume from his happy send off, it must have been too much. Excited, I immediately tried to fasten the mask around my head only to have the string fabric flake off the mask. I was not happy at this. The foreign merchant had betrayed me. Happy Venetian bastard. I hoped his house would sink and then followed my uncle and mother to the square.

Even at night, the square was stupefying. The lights gave it all a romantic ambiance, and the local bands set the mood with renditions of The Pink Panther. The architecture that surrounded us was breathtaking. Cathedrals that had a weathered majesty to them stretched far along every corner of the square. Each were adorned with angels, winged lions, and murals of Christ and heaven. "Holy Christ." The square was alive with people. Some sat around and enjoyed the food, some had discourses of the nature of their travels, and others broke off to venture through the alleyways.

My uncle, my mother, and I were not very apt at direction. It must've been something in the genes. Either way, it was not an ideal skill to have when walking through what seemed like a maze of back alleyways in the dark of Venice, Italy. Still, there's nothing quite like getting lost in St. Mark's Square. Sure, eventually, we'd worry about being stranded at the square, but for the time being, we

simply enjoyed the quaintness of it all. The moonlight shined down on the waters just below, and couples caressed each other while being ferried about on gondolas. It was all very romantic indeed. Alas, the time had come and we eventually found our way back to the hotel and passed out with the pleasures of the night still fresh and the thoughts of the arrival of the cruise ship to port just hours away.

When we awoke, the sun was shining and there was hardly a cloud in the sky. We grabbed our baggage and retreated down to the dock to await the arrival of the ship. The ship appeared to be running late, so to pass the time, we took advantage of the complimentary breakfast at the hotel. Halfway through the meal, the hotel announced that the ship had arrived and were boarding passengers. Giddy, my uncle, my mother, and I all grabbed our baggage — all of it this time — and stepped outside to see the ship.

“Holy shit.” The size, the beauty, the sheer sublime of it all. I’d never seen such a large ship in my entire life, and judging by their faces, neither had my uncle and mother. This was our Titanic. This was to be the vessel we’d use to scour the seas of Europe. The cruise ship was aptly titled “Royal Caribbean’s Legend of the Seas.” I say it was aptly titled because it was most certainly legendary. There’s nothing that quite reminds a human being of just how small they really are until they stand as ants below their own modern marvels. We were excited upon boarding, to say the least. Eleven decks, six pools and whirlpools, and eight bars and lounges. Guests had unlimited access to the Vitality Spa, the Solarium, the Casino Royale, and the Theater. The Vitality Spa offered a top of the line fitness and spa center, the Solarium housed adults-only access to exotic pools, the Casino Royale housed every form of gambling known to the Western world, and the Theater provided guests with nightly shows and musical performances. As for the décor, its beauty can hardly be described in worthy terms. It was a sight that truly had to be seen to be believed. Everything shined.

Imagine a large undersea cove, but instead of giant reefs, there were silver and gold pillars. Instead of fish, there were hundreds of lights whose radiance reflected round the entire ship. Instead of rocky ledges, there were layer upon layer of bright marble walkways that housed fine art and breathtaking views of the sea just outside. Instead of sea flowers, there sat hundreds of schools of fine leather seats for intimate and leisurely comfort. Abstract art stretched for hundreds of feet, all coming together in gorgeous unity. It was a ship comprised of and filled with enough treasure and art to sate the vanities of a hundred kings.

Our ship was to take us to Dubrovnik, Croatia, then to Santorini, Greece, and lastly, to Ephesus, Turkey. We were to spend the day and night enjoying all the festivities the ship had to offer, and, the next day, set out through the streets of Dubrovnik.

We awoke the next morning to find ourselves in a completely different part of the world. The floating city was replaced by a sea of brown and white bricked houses and weathered ramparts that stretched along for what seemed like miles. You certainly lose any sense of stability and continuity when you take part in such adventures. The only things that stay the same are yourself and those whom you travel with — and even that is lost by the end of your travels — hopefully for the better. We were like a herd of frightened cattle that were being directed ordered this way and that for the most fulfilling experience.

The streets were filled with white and yellow brickwork that stretched on endlessly. Amidst this impressive setting, I was confused at the state of attractions within. The buildings were rich with history of royalty, but housed bars and cheap merchant shops for tourists. And around it all, the ramparts from the 13th century encircled the city. And, in the heart was the Rector's Palace from the 15th century. These were to be our main focus for the tour. We were all given a set of earphones and radio devices for the tour directors to use to herd the sea of tourists through the city. Mine

didn't work. Go figure. Everyone else seemed to be smiling and laughing as they passed through the ancient city — the tour guide must have been funny. Thankfully, a teenage mind still has the imagination to create fun out of thin air in a moment of crisis such as this. The Rector's Palace became Bruce Wayne's summer home, and the ramparts became the Justice League's abandoned fortress. Of course it wasn't real and it yielded dick to the experience, but, hell, they were probably being fed the same garbage by the guide. Either way, it was a marvel to behold, regardless of the history. By the end of the day, we were all exhausted and in need of a rest, so we made our way back to the mother ship to let the experience soak into our memories. Well, not exactly. I had learned nothing and my uncle and mother spent the night drinking in celebration at the bar, probably to memory-erasing proportions. Our stay in Croatia was through. Come morning, we would find ourselves thrust to the banks of Santorini, Greece.

We woke up to another beautiful day in another beautiful part of Europe. I couldn't help but say to myself, "What the hell is it about Europe? Why is every day so damn beautiful? What, is it a literal heaven on earth or something? If I asked, would anyone in this part of the world know what the hell a storm cloud is? Christ, it's like being beaten over the head with a happy stick." It was impossible not to admit that there was a certain air and beauty to Santorini that couldn't be ignored.

I'd never seen buildings so white, water so clear, and islands so vibrant. The buildings were so white, it looked like Crest had expanded beyond whitening strips for teeth and moved on to power washers for exotic buildings. I'm being fucking serious. It was so white, the ground and houses glowed in the sunlight. My mom was obsessed with the jewelry — women — and my uncle was obsessed with the beer — men. As for me, I was obsessed with one thing. I'd heard that Santorini was famous for its nude beaches and I wanted to see one first hand, dammit. And not just see one, I wanted to frolic in it. I don't know what it was about Greece,

but the women there seemed to be straight out of a man's fantasy. Blonde, tall, tan, fit, busty, youthful, sexual, and crazy. If there is a heaven, I highly doubt it would be better than this. When we were sitting down, enjoying a plate of feta and soaking in the view just over the ledge, I noticed a small group of native women mingling in the marketplace. There was one in particular girl — there always is, I know. There was something about her. Her grace, her countenance, and her body. She looked at some shirts that had funny sex quotes on them and finally — the kicker — she grabbed a cute little figuring of rabbits humping, smiled, purchased it, and then walked away. Where the hell was I? Women are not like this in real life. But, it was real. Only in Europe, I guess.

Our travel guide for the day arrived back from his break and asked if there was anywhere we wanted to see on the island.

“I want to see the beach,” I said sternly, probably with a look of desperation on my face.

“Of course, there is a lovely family beach just down the way. I can—”

“No! Not that kind of beach. I want to see one of those nude beaches I've heard so much about.”

“Sir, travelers aren't really supposed to go to those areas. It's not on the itinerary.”

“I know. But,” I pulled out the rolled of euros my mother lent me.

“Luckily, you're from around here and you must know of the best one around here. Right?”

“Well, there is one around here. It's called the 'Red Beach.' It's about a 10-minute drive from here. It's not on the itinerary, but if you insist.”

“Thanks, man. You're alright.” I'm sure my smile would've made even the Cheshire Cat jealous.

Where the hell was this guy taking us? I hadn't seen people for the past five minutes. Really it wasn't all that long, but when you're in a foreign land and only thinking with your dick, sooner or later, your

brain starts sending out random impulses of impending danger. My brain was a buzz kill. The cart stopped on a ridge where the sand turned to a rocky red — maybe my brain was right. Fuck, he was going to drop us off the side of the cliff!

“Here we are,” the guide said with a look of fulfillment on his face.

“Uh, where’s the beach?”

“Oh, sorry, just over that ridge there. You can’t miss it.”

We thanked the man, hopped off the cart, and made our way over to the ridge. And when we gazed down, my prayers were answered. Hundreds of topless women laying in the sand reading, splashing in the water, and tanning with their friends. Thank god, we weren’t going to die. Okay, so there were guys there too. Fat, pale, balding guys down there. Probably falling into the same trap that I was going to. My mother wasn’t impressed and she was showing signs of fatigue. Fuck. The cancer had taken its toll on her body and she was at a point where she could only walk about a mile a day without becoming short of breath. Hang in there, mom, just for a little bit longer. I had no shame. I was naïve and selfish, and I wanted to see those women a little closer up, dammit.

We all agreed to give it a shot. My uncle pulled off his shirt and started doing that thing that guys do where they flex their muscles to pump up their ego. I didn’t blame him, if I had muscles like that, I would have done the same, tenfold. The running joke of the day was that when he and I stood next to each other, it was like the Hulk and Bruce Banner. Anyways, we made it halfway down the ridge and my mother suddenly kneels down and starts to cough. There are very few things that can stop a horny teenager from running through a sea of tits — my mother almost passing out is one of those things. So, we walked her back up the ridge, and set her down on the kart with the guide. As a sort of memento of the day, I decided to buy an exotic necklace for myself from some old bum looking native. The day in itself felt like a venture and

a half and we were all glad to return to the ship and call it a day. Tomorrow we would be in Turkey and we would experience all of the finery that it had to offer us.

When we awoke the following morning, we were acquainted with a pleasant message that the ship would not be porting in Ephesus, Turkey, due to very recent bombings of American tourists around the area. Lovely. Why in the world would anyone want to bomb us? Are we really that annoying to the native life around there? It's one thing to talk shit to foreigners and give them a hard time, we do it all the time back in the states, but we don't blow them up over it!

Turkey was supposed to be the last big hoorah of the cruise, so we decided to make do with the many attractions of the ship itself for the day instead. It was another beautiful day, of course, and there was plenty of attractive men and women and exotic foods to be had on the upper deck.

The upper deck was nice, but no amount of quality food and physical appeal could balance out the annoyance of hundreds of little kids causing complete anarchy from end to end of the entire ship. We needed a place far away from this craziness. Some place relaxing, quiet — a place where only adults were allowed. The Solarium.

The Solarium definitely lived up to the hype on board. Dining services delivering grapes to relaxed guests while they reclined in the comfort of the shade. Heated whirlpools, refreshing mini-pools, gorgeous views of the sea outside, and a bunch of statues of men with little dicks. That last one was a bit surprising. In fact, so much so, that being the adults that we were, my uncle, mother, and I took turns taking photos of us making weird faces and pointing at the defenseless, exposed statues. It was all quite classy. It was the last thing I remember of it all.

The cruise was over. The adventure was had. Now, it was time for us to return to reality. When we got back to the states, we couldn't

help but be conflicted. It was like we had a small taste of heaven and were never to return.

Looking back on it all now, I wish there was a way to have stayed there forever. My mother died some few months afterwards from her long battle with cancer. I haven't seen or spoken to my uncle for a couple of years now. And I'm here, in college, trying to find a way to relive the best experience of my life so far. Though we may never meet again, the few memories and photographs that I have of our adventure together will remain with me forevermore till my dying day. To my uncle, I wish him the best and that he remembers it all with as much joy and laughter as I do. To my mother, I hope she was taken to a better place, much like those sandy beaches and clear blue waves she loved so passionately yet never felt. As for me, I live on with one eye down at those passed and one eye forward to the adventures that lie ahead.

// input. output.

it's hard to function when there's fear spindled
so deep in muscle in tissue in bone and when
fingertips are numb it's hard to pound away
at this keyboard and listen to the soft tik
tik tik of my heart's contempt. i am a raging
force of something balled together and sewn
shut, something meant to burst at the seams.
i am something unforgivable. i am something
forgettable. i am something altogether awful
and not even the cigarette burns on the skin
of my knuckles can hold me together this time.

// the itch.

Purple is the color of falling from love because it's not quite
passion but not quite reprieve. of my tongue being heavy and
coated with lead; i'm poisoned because i've already
convinced myself that i'm not yours, and yet i let you lay
claim with tongue and teeth and it's the imprints
on my skin where you broke through. i can still feel them.
there in my thigh and it's the veins of my arm that i
trace after too much vodka and he's saying "go to sleep, please
go to sleep," because i'm self destructive and purple is the color
of the christmas lights strung up on my headboard. i bathe in it
as my head swims and i'm reminded of all the times that you
whispered that you loved me. but that was purple too. like the
bruises. the ones that still fester beneath my skin and i try to
dig them out and he tries to hold me together and i'm so broken.

// static.

the liquor isle lights up for me as i walk.
a runway of ruined regret corked in bottles,
chilled to just below room temperature, and
served to heavy hearts. i seek red wine
because of the way your wrists looked
when something sharp kissed them and
the floor was spattered purple as i called
the ambulance and they stole you away.
something cheap and generic rests at the
tips of my fingers, common and lost
within the labels of catch-all solutions
to sadness and suffering. your eyes
screamed for me to stop them. i
sit alone in front of the fire place and
cringe at the bitter taste; my audience
the crackle of wood and your ghost.

// 2 am.

you are the ache in my throat, the heat
that comes with the bile. the bite, the
bad taste. the bruises on my arms
from fingers folded. the “please let
me in”s and the “i want to taste your
skin”s and the tears tucked into the
ducts. you are everything i’ve ever
wanted in a nightmare. i’m afraid that
if i close my eyes you’ll be there
and that i’ll go back to being happy
afraid. im scared. sick. and the pale
yellow of the wallpaper is nothing
but static as i vomit. again. Alone.

// your teeth are sharp

her chest aches with the wicked weight
that fell from lips that she once kissed
and loved. they now snap and only bait

it's the letter in his hands she missed
something akin to razor blades, toxic waste
skin needling at the taste; that smile a cyst
three lines, single file with a straw in haste
teeth tight, fillings black like tar
falling into habits just to forget his face

those fingers on her, cold, distant, far
smoke curling, numbing her tongue
he's screaming, face red, pale in his car

he told her once that she was a gun
loaded blindly, barreling to the sun.

// haunt.

ghosts of car horns in an empty
parking garage that makes it's home
on the edge of a black sand beach.
it's said that angry souls live
in the walls; those of fathers
and lost daughters, left alone
at concerts by a boy she thought
she loved. her shirt is ripped
when she walks into the house
at one am; she tosses it onto
the growing pile, that of which
she can't carry in one trip. the
water creeps over a bookbag
as a man's voice echos off
the concrete; he's calling it's
name and seeking. searching.
as her father did when she
hid behind the black suv and
whispered her last prayer into
the paint, the dirt heavy under
her fingertips. there's nails on
her shoulder, and her small
arms hold tight to the wheel.
the tide recedes. she sleeps.

terminal

I sprint grinning to greet her
in hiccupping attempts
through bottlenecking glaciers
in the airport terminal
reunited
finally the voice takes form
eyes growing like headlights
lancing through our recent fog
as we approach to meet in the middle
touching down after turbulence
to delay his thumping chest
with debate and indecision scripted finally
resolved
near the baggage claim
arriving to one final step
in staggering contempt
I command each malingering leg forward

* * *

I command each malingering leg forward
in staggering contempt
arriving to one final step
near the baggage claim
resolved
with debate and indecision scripted finally
to delay his thumping chest
touching down after turbulence
as we approach to meet in the middle
lancing through our recent fog
eyes growing like headlights
finally the voice takes form
reunited
in the airport terminal
through bottlenecking glaciers
in hiccupping attempts
I sprint grinning to greet her

until the boomerang breaks

I've never sent a postcard from you, my hometown
telling fellow tourists I've found my way back
one of many boomerangs you flung to the limit
periodic recall of time you define with ellipsis

those few guided tours I give
ignore your weathered fifteen minutes
focus on my own clarity in staggered harvests of fifteen seasons

encompassed by a traffic circle, with arterial streets stretching cardinal
here's your heart, gazebo, white, pale like the population

here's your public parking lot, beside the police station
where the potheads would loiter
one of the common spectacles playing on school bus windows
shuttling me north to and from your fringes
where lawns grew into fields, where collars darkened
where sidewalk cracks didn't spell out secrets

just before the west bridge, here's your gas station
where we'd refuel on iced tea and rental movies at 2 a.m.
here I'd pick up your weekly on Wednesdays
to see which one movie we'd have for the next month or two

down by the creek, the tavern where your familial faces work their second
jobs
a dive for those stuck in the waves of a beach that is paved

south sits your cemetery -- that's all we'll say about that

these kernels, considered, recounted
during each elliptical routine
the arcs growing
until the boomerang breaks
with you or somewhere in between

two certificates

her head toppled
leaning like a post-wobbled top
a lobbed and tumbled prophet
pre-plattered and presented
settling after ever shortening and slowing rockings
as a slumber-slipping porch grandmother
dust dusting once young apertures
heavy reports, heaving
cleaving passports, two quickly inked certificates

the crash

I drive twenty-seven from door to door,
each one a hunt, a hope to spot your light.
Renounce the sun, I cloud my eyes, dark lens.
Recluse at night, new moon unblind still stares.
One eye, concave, on road; one eye convexed.
Count each, like tag. Not it. Not it. Not it.
There's one, just one. A hope. The path remains
the same for all twenty-seven in night,
in day. Two ways: reverse and there. Then you
and your bright light. Last sight before the crash.

dust off

Before you dust off the door's rust
remove your shoes, bare feet, a must.
The billowing smother of stale air
exhales from basements, all buried,
burrows you crack just to tap to
the past glimpse of cloud eyes,
atrophied, forgotten scenes,
they testify what they've seen.
Blackened, my memory
soaks up the timeline,
strands of hair, left to
draw snaking lines back to
daydreams, lost afternoons.
Tangled in fault lines,
I thought I had buried you.
Your raining, fertilized.
Your shining has revived
a crypt, now an ark to rescue.

thirst

as you, so is the merlot

gone

swallowed by sorrow, unquenched

pinches

Falling asleep alone
is easy
when the next night you might not.

Hope makes you drowsy.

Loss pinches.

dead letters

Alphabetically

belching

consonants

despite

efforts

for

gallantry,

heroic

intentions.

Judge.

Kill.

Leave

me

notes,

offal,

paragraphs,

questions,

recommendations.

Suggest

the

ultimate.

View,

with

x-rays,

your

zeitgeist.

The Finger

Otto Keller was probably German. I never asked because, as a teenager, I never cared about his or any other senile old person's actual backstory, just as long as he remembered to pay me for mowing the yard around his equally old house. I wanted to be a filmmaker back then, so I would concoct my own stories—implausible, in retrospect—while I rode back and forth on the riding mower with nothing else to do.

With a name like Otto Keller, chances are he was a kraut. Not an ex-Nazi or anything, because I did know his wife, Ruth, was of Jewish heritage, but both were practicing Methodists.

Back in the spring of 1987, Ruth went missing.

After three months of searching swamps, wooded areas and morgues, tacking her photo up on phone poles and outwearing his welcome with the police and his estranged family, Otto went a slight bit insane. After three more months of marathon praying and fasting, consulting mediums and alien abduction experts, and scouring a decade of phone records in search of the identity of Ruth's nonexistent lover—she was 74—Otto, truly on the precipice of insanity, had an epiphany of sorts. He knew, from a PBS documentary, Hitler was fascinated with the supernatural. He also wanted to hunt down and exterminate the Jews. So, at least in Otto's frazzled mind, Hitler must have had a magic Jew detector. It took Otto another three months to make contact and set up a meeting with a self-proclaimed "procurer of obscure relics" named Dr. Haberdasher who had just what Otto was looking for. At precisely 2 p.m. on Christmas Eve, Otto stood inside a phone booth in the city of Cairo—Cairo, Illinois—waiting for the phone to ring with further instructions. When the call came, a deliberately disguised voice gave him an address, which turned out to be an abandoned warehouse a short distance away on the Ohio River side of town. After a few minutes of standing in plain sight at least 30 paces from his car, per the phone booth instructions, one of the warehouse's sliding doors opened and an arm stretched out, silently beckoning him inside.

“Are you sure you weren’t followed?” said a British-accented voice from a man Otto couldn’t see yet because his eyes hadn’t adjusted to the warehouse’s darkness.

“I was not.”

“Jolly good. Well, old chap, come in out of the cold. Care for a spot of tea?”

“Thank you, yes.”

As Haberdasher walked over to the hot plate where a teapot was left to simmer, Otto inched his way to a small table with two chairs and lowered himself slowly into the closest one. His mind was excited, but his old, exhausted body wasn’t playing along.

“There you are, my friend,” said Haberdasher placing a plain white cup and saucer in front of Otto, who took a sip before looking back expectantly at the doctor. “Righty-o, down to the matter at hand.” Haberdasher gently placed a large King James Bible in the center of the table.

“How will this Bible help me find my wife?”

“Not the Bible, but what’s inside,” said Haberdasher, who opened the book to reveal a secret compartment cut into the pages. A metal cough drop box rested there.

Before Otto could inquire about Hitler’s sore throat, Haberdasher opened the box and removed the three small, irregularly shaped objects that were inside, lining them end to end, largest to smallest, on the table.

“What’s this?”

“That is Adolf Hitler’s finger. Oh, I’m quite serious. This is Hitler’s left pinky finger. Well, the bones of it for that matter. One metacarpal, one proximal phalange and one distal phalange,” he said pointing to each with the end of his teaspoon. “I purchased it several years ago on the Argentine Black Market from a reputable dealer of such oddities.”

“How can they help me?”

“Well, every school boy now knows the Führer sought to snuff out the Hebrew race. Yet, few people know that when Hitler was

17 years old, he was possessed by a demon with instructions from none other than Lucifer himself to use and empower Hitler to bring justice to the Jewish people. Pope Pius XII himself even attempted to exorcise the demon, and I have seen with my own eyes the Vatican documents to confirm this.”

Otto remained silent, enraptured in the tale.

“Which brings us to the bones before you. Residual power from the demon remains in them, and when floating atop a solution of water and pig’s blood in a silver cup, the finger points toward any nearby Jews, living or dead.”

“Like a compass?”

“Precisely.”

At last, Otto thought smiling, I will be able to find Ruth. The only thing left to discuss was the price.

“Surely a mystical relic such as this is priceless,” Haberdasher said, “but seeing as I secured the finger at relatively little cost and because I sympathize with your plight, I would be willing to part with it for the modest sum of \$50,000.”

Otto’s smile faded. That was way out of his price range.

“I can see the price is not to your liking,” the doctor quickly injected. “Tell me, what are you capable of paying?”

Otto reached inside his coat, pulling out an envelope. “I only brought \$2,500 in cash with me—”

“Then in the spirit of Christmas, my good fellow, that will be your price,” said Haberdasher, snatching the cash and scooting Otto toward the door a moment later.

* * *

When Otto returned to his empty house the next day, he descended to the basement with the water, blood, cup and finger. Once all was prepared according to the instructions, he watched as the finger listed to the left with certainty, pointing directly to the spot in a dark corner of the cellar’s dirt floor where, in the spring of 1987, Otto had buried the body of his wife, poisoned by his hand, for some reason he could no longer remember.

* * *

The Trick

“Trick.”

The two masked children faced each other, the pink Power Ranger tilting her head, Spider-man shrugging his shoulders. Returning forward, they lifted and spread their little fists to open the hungry mouths of paper bags.

“Trick,” Doug repeated, folding his arms.

“Mister?” asked the girl.

“You said ‘trick or treat.’ So, I would like a trick.”

Still confused, the girl looked helplessly across the yard to a man waiting on the sidewalk watching from over a waist-high row of unkempt hedges. Behind him, on the street, a European SUV hummed while a woman, her face aglow from an iPhone, sat inside oblivious. The boy stomped back toward the car, passing the man as he approached the front door to investigate.

“Is everything alright?”

The girl latched onto the man’s leg and looked up at him.

“Daddy, I don’t think he has any candy.”

“Oh, I have candy, but you said ‘trick or treat,’ and I chose ‘trick.’”

The man sighed.

“What are doing, Doug?”

“What?”

“Lucy, why don’t you go wait in the car with your brother.”

She skipped away, as if her father’s liberation also erased her short-term memory.

“I talked Helen into letting the kids come trick-or-treating this year so you could see them, and here we are. Where’s the problem?”

Doug caught himself before bellowing his reply, switching to a stage whisper.

“The problem, Randy, is that I don’t see them. They are wearing masks.”

“Helen let the kids pick the costumes.”

“Yeah, I bet she did,” Doug muttered. “But, I’m not. I’m not wearing a mask and they don’t even recognize me.”

“They were very young the last time they saw you,” said Randy, patiently.

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“I know that, and we’re all real proud of you.”

“But somehow I’m the enemy.”

“No, you’re not,” said Randy, who began to place his hand on Doug’s shoulder but reconsidered. “And neither are the kids. How about I go bring them back and tell them to leave their masks off. Okay?” Before Doug could respond, a sudden and protracted blare upset the brisk autumn dusk. Doug flinched. Helen’s left hand was stretched over to the steering wheel, but she didn’t look up from the phone.

“Forget it,” said Doug, tottering back to retrieve something just inside the door. “Here.”

He handed Randy two swelling bags. On one was printed “Dylan” inside a big star surrounded by other smaller stars. On the other, “Lucy” written in flowing cursive centered in a heart.

Randy smiled sadly, studying the hand-drawn decoration.

“Maybe we’ll try again next year.”

“Maybe,” replied Doug, staring at his feet.

Randy’s mouth fidgeted as he tried to formulate some empathic affirmation that didn’t sound trite. He couldn’t.

“Hang in there, man. It’ll get better. Just take it one day at a time.”

Doug met him eye to eye.

“Well, that’s the trick, isn’t it?”

Proposition 19

They tear you down
Grind you up
Roll you in paper
For paper
Hidden from neighbors
Burn you to smoke
Light you to smoke
In your beauty we choke
You were planted
You're still there
With leaves falling
As my destiny is calling
Winding up somewhere
Next to me
My good ol' tree
You rejoice when I do
Frown and scowl when I do
Let me be whom I want to
Gas me up
Make my inhales worthwhile
And my exhales bittersweet
Reaching my heart, my lungs
You take me away
Up, up, up and off of my feet
But you're not supposed to be here,
Damn, weeds.

Senseless

I just want to feel comfort.
Being rear ended through
an entire international flight
by a couple doing God knows what
behind me isn't ideal.
I just want to see what everyone swears
is right in front of me.
My crushed glasses in my carryon
aren't helping any.
My luggage and my car are now that much harder to find.
I just want to hear excitement as I unload
my baggage and enter a home.
Not this black lonely cat and it's moans
as it makes my house their home
in the bushes.
I just want to taste happiness
when I roll down the windows.
Not this split, twisted, and frayed pine truck
that's stuck in front of me.
I smell all of these allotted spaces
on my breath and in the toilet as
I hold onto the bathroom handicap bar.
"Home isn't too far," I think.
Now a pesky pedestrian is gone in a blink and
I envy them, so detangled and detached lying in the street
Because even they have a better life than me.

Hometown

Escort me to a place where no one knows
my name, my face, or where my scars came from.
These folks they know too much; they've seen me grow.
In silence I've had so much to say;
so much to yell so much to feel. I can't
keep still in such a place like this no more.
I must go on where I can thrive and fall.
Somewhere you all can't meet the real, true me.

Pure White

Whitney Houston
Sir Elton John; Winehouse
Smith, Lohan, Barrymore, Cobain
Cocaine

The wave.

Ripples of white.
You splash my thighs; I gasp.
I go deeper, engulfed by you.
Ocean.

On ice.

Red solo cup.
So classy, how nasty.
Yet, still I sip potent moments.
Late nights.

Middle Child Probs

I've always had these
problems with colors
and matching
and scales
and patching.

I've always kind of smeared
while still under blending
life.

I'm either too white.

Or too black.

Never quite enough.

All the middle fluff.

So in the back of my mind

I'm grey

like corners of all minds,

that only few find

so in that way I blend

but I'm so stuck

here in the halfway

that I can't find mine.

Neither here

nor there

so I just watch Grey's Anatomy

on Netflix

with mixed emotions

while watching actors go through the motions

in spotlights

from the first lights of sun

to the darkness of day's end

and every hue in between.

Long Time Ago

I lied for you,
but that was a long time ago.
I almost died for you,
but that was a long time ago.
I cut down trees for you,
but that was a long time ago.
I drank to thoughts of me and you,
but that was a long time ago.
And I still shed tears for you,
but we was a long time ago.
I loved you but you had to go.
Two peas in a big pot.
You said you had to grow.
I knew a lot.
You hit the door.
I hit the floor.
You've got a girl?
I want you more.
"I won't implore on you no more,"
I said that a long time ago.
I won't come into your store.
I stopped that a long time ago.
That clay cup you got me?
I dropped that a long time ago.
Shattered pieces in between my toes,
but that was a long time ago.
Crushed prescriptions in my nose,
but that was a long time ago.
Your text came through my phone,
but that was like a week ago.
You said, you've got to see me
and tell me all the things I need to know."
like, "she doesn't know," and "you were right,"
and "I was wrong," and "you kept me tight"
and "I can't fight with all my might
not to look you in your
eyes and tell you I think
about you every night."
That "I still love you like I did
a long time ago."
I hate to tell you,
but that was a long time ago.
I'm sorry, babe,
but when you went ghost,
I had to grow – so I got to go.

The Trouble with Life

Day in day out we search as if we're blind –
Confine our dreams to when our eyes just close,
For we are scared of greatness we will find.
Defy your fears and watch your courage grow.
Day in day out we think of what has been,
But we often forget “the whats,” “the whose”
“the whens.” The things that made our hearts open –
and yet we still want our thoughts to be true
Day in day out we paint our smiles – erase
To face the day just how we like – we trust
With all our worries, our cares, and fears in place
But know for sure that we go on as dust,
At night we sit and hate ourselves for this
We wish to be a story, more than a mist –

Feed me.

My soul is empty and I need a fill up. I shouldn't depend on anyone for this but my soul is dying from hunger.

Feed me.

I lost my appetite when love got the best of me and now the rest of me won't eat and my naval is touching my stomach and my stomach is touching my back as if I'm an active feign for crack in somewhere in the back of an alleyway.

Feed me.

I saw a family of three with a sign that said they just wanted a dollar in Spanish but despite the language barrier I turned around and managed to give them \$10 hoping good karma was present and in the area and someone would bless me with their presence of love and

Feed me.

So I went home. Road trip. Just to get a grip. Be surrounded by the love of people who knew me. It was lovely. It was family. We got to talking and they ordered pizza but they forgot I couldn't eat and despised pepperoni.

Got dammit – they were supposed to

Feed me.

So I head back to campus. But before, I stop at the gas station connected to McDonald's to meet my lover and I tell her that I love her and I just want us to grow. She says she loves me but she's got to let me go. She asks if I'm hungry. I say no and proceed to plead and try to speak with her soul. She says she won't feed me lies. That she has to go. She refused to

Feed me.

My soul is empty and my car needs a fill up. She offers gas money. I say no.

Yellow

Like innocence

Or flowers (daisies),

But sour because it is all fake

Like lemons; the sour part, I mean.

I love the sun,

But I hate the specs it leaves in my eyes

And all of this was like a banana.

Soft, sweet and completely refreshing.

We peeled away the layers.

One by one.

But as the bruises slowly began to appear

So did the doubt.

From the outside,

it was all an illusion.

And we began to realize

Perfection . . . was a joke.

I was nothing but a taxi cab

you jumped into for a ride.

You had a desired destination

Once you arrived, I was left behind.

And through this short and thrilling adventure

You saw me for me.

You saw me shine for you like the stars in the night.

I watched you pretend to care . . .

And I cannot help but wonder where the bright yellow

DANGER

Sign was hiding.

::RHETORICAL BLACKMAIL::

Quarreling brothers
bouncing ideas— a surrogate for
lack of a grand plan.

Silver fingertips
asking “what’s the password?”

Not to be confused with
ROLLERCOASTER as a means
of entry.

“Safe word”
—if you’re nasty.

& all is well as
Popcorn Porn plays
in his mental paper bag.

::RHETORICAL SENSUALITY::

a woman’s heart is labyrinthine
& curves are her luring lexicon.

chaotic & peaceful, a tumultuous
(wet) dream.

ruffled sheets after 3 am
—if you’re nasty.

& all the while men sit in awe—
stranded between here and her.

::RHETORICAL SKULLCHUCK::

Dead mans' scroll,
frozen refrain—

a screeching limerick for
the recently deceased.

Not to be confused with
dirges howled by wolves for their lost moon.

Twinkle, twinkle little scar
—if you're nasty.

& all the white noise, calculated by threes,
utter cyphers to the combination of his tomb.

Once the House of God

“I was so close...” she read from a slip of notebook paper seemingly torn from her journal. She had found these same words jotted down on a scrap sheet of paper the night prior and knew herself to make such esoteric scribblings in the fatigued delirium of night, even more so after a day’s hike. “What the hell am I so close to” she asked herself perturbed – how often we wish we could fully retrieve and decipher all of yesterday’s epiphanies; yet how ironic that clarity upon any given situation is found through the lens of retrospect – “...fucking enlightenment, man, that’s what I’m close to. Or nature’s just getting to me, or is it getting me? Maybe it’s just the weather.” She had been hiking a section of the Appalachian Trail for nearly a month now; had found her groove a little less than a week ago. The rain had finally let up, the ground soaked and each footstep followed with the slosh and splat from the damp foundation of pine needles and autumn foliage nestled atop the gathered raindrops fallen from heavy grey clouds. She could hear birds practicing their vocals, songs echoing from uncertain trajectory; a ubiquitous Dionysian tune, unstructured, unrestrained – a celebratory break from the harsh rainfall. Cool pockets of crisp mountain air, ten degrees cooler than in the open sun, rested in the shadows cast from colossal white and chestnut oaks; pitch and short-leaf pines, and countless other towering columns of bark and semi-bare outstretched boughs “*Quercus alba*, *Pinus Rigida*...” she recited to herself with pride, “...whoop, whoop, botany bitches!”— her fist pumping sarcastically in the air— never did she think such elation would stem from recalling something so trivial as a tree’s scientific moniker. With the sun already beginning to hang low in the late afternoon, the algid mountain air biting at the tip of her nose, the dropping temperature of nightfall began biting at her feet; a throbbing sensation beget from sweat now cooling and the occasional frigid ground water that leaked into the crevices of her boots. Her numbing fingertips and the creeping sensation of rigidity in her knuckles and palms began making the access to her

folded maps an issue and operating zippers and flaps they, among other necessities, lay within. Setting up camp before dark became the necessary next step – this way she could make a fire and dry her socks and shoes and reanimate her freezing appendages, which were beginning to reflect a purplish hue.

Three miles after this thought she found an open area to pitch her tent and spark a fire. She was set up in no time, for this wasn't her first rodeo. She'd been hiking for years, immersing herself in nature's solace; a movable respite from "out there" as she would put it. To her, out there was the city with all its bombarding cacophony, its arteries packed full of strangers who occupy a closer proximity than any family member or true friend. The news is always bad and everyone is trying to sell something. She found urban settings unnerving – rustication was more to her than just a vacation, it was a return to home where she felt safe. The natural landscape was the purist piece of artwork she could fathom, no painter could capture its essence with any brush and no writer could articulate its beauty – the destruction of any natural setting for commercialization, to her, was a desecration of her home -- it's times like these she wished she were religious, for if she were she would have to call this place sacred—the house of God. Nothing that wasn't supposed to happen could occur here; something could only happen to it.

Having settled down, she now sat in front of the fire basking in the heat that emanated from the embers. The fire illuminated her campsite with an amber glow, the frantic flames licking the crepuscular stillness giving the trees a jittering appearance. Soon now the only light will be the center flames and the vespertine creatures of this mountain region will be moving about in their cautious solemnity; some stirring, others sleeking, but all that occupy this topography would be moving about while obeying its inherent laws. She felt at ease. Yet, even still, the sublime ruminative effects of gazing into a fire urged her mind to wonder as the surrounding blackness piqued her imagination – as she watched

her soup boil above the flames she acknowledged to herself that she was running low on food, which was particularly odd for she always packs accordingly and thoroughly. Unlike her to ever run low or be without anything and have to rely on the city pit stops for re-upping on supplies due to a lack of preparation or miscalculation. The same had occurred with her camera. Earlier this morning she was bent on capturing the image of two white-tail doe but when she went to press the shutter release it clicked emptily. She was so certain she had at least three shots left in the reel.

She was now second guessing herself and began to reflect on how it has been sometime since her last hike. “Maybe I’m getting soft...” she said “...too much time spent under fluorescent lights and in-between walls and ceilings.” She lost her Bowie knife a few nights ago and has been solely reliant on her Swiss army knife since, “Fuckin’ stupid! How do you lose your goddam Bowie knife on a hike? Dad’s rolling in his grave” she muttered scornfully, “Running low on food and not keeping up with supplies, losing track of how much film’s in the goddam camera – amateur – rookie shit.” She grabbed a branch from the pile she had gathered earlier and tossed it in the flames; fiery specks rising from the coals freckled the night with capering cinders ascending half the height of the surrounding trees as they reach their apex and begin their descent, some burning out before finally coming to rest on the ground. There was no need to mind them too closely for the ground was still damp from the rain.

She rested back on the trunk of a large pine tree, beginning to sense the oncoming of a cold. She began to feel the lethargic residue of a body at war with itself and how it would soon be an impossible feat to continue on with the fickle weather, her incompetent packing and failing attempts to keep up with her gear that would render each day more taxing than the day before. She could feel the eyes of the forest, as if each of its inhabitants were keen to her ill-prepared endeavor and her ebbing health—their hidden glare mocking and

palpable. She acknowledged her defeat. “You’ve won this time, but I’ll be back!” she exclaimed, “You always come back to your true love! The only place I have no fear, thank you, you forgiving forest, you welcoming haven for the willing, able, and prepared. I was so close. Yeah, I get it now.” She then sat down finished her soup and tucked in for the night. She would be headed back to the city’s claustrophobic precariousness in the morning.

It took her about a week to get to Asheville where she could catch the Greyhound back to Atlanta. Her cold was in full bloom and her head in haze from both the fogginess of fatigue and the fast-paced lifestyle of a moving city. A few days had passed before she got around to unpacking which reminded her of the roll of film she dropped off for development the day she arrived. Deciding to use this as an opportunity to get out of her apartment she made her way down the bone white hallway with its jarring red carpeting, the familiar smell of stale popcorn and bread mold. She took the elevator, the same smell just more confined and magnified, down to the lobby and out the front door without making eye contact with anyone. She walked down the street, passed Starbucks and Panera Bread and turned in to Rite Aid where the one-hour photo clerk sat stooped behind the counter. She had never seen this man before. He was old and had a distant glare in his eye, as if this city had sucked what little life remained in him; the countenance of a devoured soul, a victim of urban life. She gave her name and the old man, sunken-eyed and heavy-shouldered began to plod to the back, returning after what seemed like an eternity he handed her the envelope and she was on her way— happy to be done enduring the sight of such a pitiful creature.

Arriving back in her apartment she opened the envelope as she eased her way into one of the wooden chairs surrounding her dinner table. Eager to revisit her precious moments captured in blissful stillness she flipped through the serene images of the vast mountainous landscape; a smile drifted across her face and

peace filled her eyes – but just as quickly as it came, the serenity then replaced with horror. She threw down the stack of photos—they splayed across the table and she shoved back into the chair knocking it out from underneath her as she cowered into an upright fetal position in the corner – terrifyingly unsure of what she had just seen. As her reasoning and rationale returned she pulled herself up and approached the table, taking caution with every gentle step as if to not scare herself into a delirium – her hands jittering like the trees in the firelight, the rigidity returning to her fingers but from terror now, rather than the frigid autumn mountain air. She managed to pick up the stack and her terror was once again brought to sheer horror – for there, residing in the last three photographs was her – nestled in her nap-sack, fast asleep. She then recalled those scribbled words, so strangely lined, which now rang like a carillon, “I was so close...”

Remnants of Innocence

1

To look at it now—it was a tremendous thing. I hurried out of my American History lecture, scurried down the grey stairwell, footsteps echoing leaving a ringing tinnitus in my ears as I pushed open the heavy steel doors that lead to the courtyard just off of Green Street. It was Tuesday and I was thirsty. I ran across the courtyard over to the Russell House where I parked my car on Bull Street next to Patterson Dorm rooms –always a nice spot to catch a glimpse of the freshman sorority girls conglomerating outside the bus stop waiting to be shuttled to some shady fraternity gathering guised as a “formal” or “mixer”—but I couldn’t be distracted, not this day, not the holy-blessed Thursdays where my beloved watering hole, Speakeasy held half-off drinks for happy hour and jazz from four-pm till midnight; I also had a dear friend who just arrived back in town from his misadventures on the Appalachian trail. I caught news that he’d gotten sick and had to return home a few weeks earlier and was now back on our old stomping grounds ready to tell of his encounters and what happened out there amidst that vast mountain range.

I aimlessly threw my books into the backseat of my car, started the ignition, threw on the left-turn signal and swayed my way out of a parking spot where the meter read: empty –not today meter-man, ah-ha!—I came to the intersection of Bull Street and Green Street, threw on my right turn signal –looked both ways, of course—and raced right; down the street, over the railroad tracks, through a serendipitous green-light and passed by Papa Jazz records store and Pita Pit hung a hard right onto Saluda Avenue and caught the first open parking spot on the right in front of Starbucks, where I peripherally caught a gesticulating hand, frantically beckoning my acknowledgment—damn, just Martha, a girl who always tried to get me to join clubs and sign futile petitions. I popped opened the car

door, stepped out onto the black-tarred street, waved in her trajectory while illustrating an apologetically busied face, mouthing the words ...can't—in a hurry. I then, locked my car and made a b-line down the walkway. I passed Delaney's, then the Gourmet Shop, then Nancy's clothing store, Loose Lucy's "Cool Clothes at Kind Prices", and finally came to a halt where I stood at the doorway of Speakeasy's Drinking and Jazz Parlor.

My hand instinctively stretched out putting force on the dark oak-wood door; it opened, and with its opening came swiftly the redolence of pine, tobacco, and mint –yes, I shit you not, mint—cut fresh daily for their famous Mojitos. It was a welcoming and alluring aroma that drew you in to its orbit in such a way that without thinking you'd find yourself motioning your feet forward into the dim-lit, narrow segued room that stretched back like an exaggerated railway car. The olive-green walls lined with black and white photos of yore: The Rat Pack, Monroe, Bogart, Gleason, Toots Shor, and the like resided immortally on those walls. Two tall tables sat on your immediate right and just after stood the bar, framed with the same dark oak as the entry door but outlined with brass rails and behind the marvelous oak-wood counter stood the ubiquitous Jeremy, the barkeep; he looked like something straight out of Tolkien. A hobbit of a man with a long black beard to match his long black pony-tailed hair all rested beneath a grey-charcoaled Irish Tweed flat-cap that mirrored his grey-charcoaled vest. A man of stunted stature and a voice that generated gregariousness but seemingly out of diffidence that likely stemmed from his petite frame –it sounded weasel-like but not in the shady sense, just rather defeated.

"Adam! How'ya doin' man? Got you set up in your usual spot?"

"Doing well, brother –always got me covered."

"You know it. Band's just getting set up."

"Sweet."

I approached aforesaid spot, located at the corner of the bar where the end of the counter met two high-top tables surrounded by four chairs each. Behind them was the lounge area –the band was setting up there. The lounge room, open to the barroom, had two garnet leather sofas and two black leather art deco club chairs all together forming the shape of a “U” in front of a large black-stone fireplace and to their left were six more sofas positioned in the shape of a “W”. The band had a trombonist, saxophonist, keyboardist, and trumpet player who also did vocals –for the life of me, I can’t recall their bands name– A pint of Fat Tire sat in front of my ready oak-wood seat, a glass of glowing effervescent amber waiting to be imbibed. I perched myself in anticipation of hearing from my old friend.

When the band had tuned up accordingly they began their succession of wildly eclectic notes in that distinctly jazzy and dizzying melodic progression. Jazz music seems to never end. That music never even seems to be playing a different song when they change to a new tune. It all sounds like it merely picks up where the previous song cut off. The music surrounds you, you can almost see it. I understand why the twenties were so stock full of boozy nightclubs that seemed to never close. I can feel the Fitzgerald spirit in its rapidly succeeding notes –it’s intoxicating. Booze seems to go down even more smoothly with a jazz background soundtrack. It makes the volition of raising the glass to mouth seem like a dance move, a necessary gesture of ingesting the outside world inside of you, the bubbles of carbonation dancing in golden ring ready to give you the same sensation.

The entry door opened, bright light poured into the dusky drinkery and a dark form filled the doorway –in places like this one during the after-afternoon hours the when the outside world penetrates the homely ambience all heads are magnetically pulled towards the distraction until the door shuts again and the outside life no longer

holds any bearing, its burdens are not only shut out, they are severed –not even a phantom limb of its worries are sensed, once the door is shut—the dark form, turned sharp silhouette, turned to full form –it was my old friend, Chandler, back from the wilderness.

2

A grand white smile outlined by a fiery red beard, unkempt, matching his tangerine burned coiffure. Even through the thick beard I could tell he had lost a tremendous amount of weight. He's man of an average build standing about five feet, eight and a-half inches. He walked down through the stretched segue donning a green Grateful Dead t-shirt, blue-jeans and a pair of green and brown Chaco's with the brown rubber sole –yep, a philosophy grad, indeed. Even with a content and appeased smile his eyes seemed stoic, as if they were seeing things not only for what they truly were but what they could possibly be; the eyes of disappointment that nothing lives up to its full potential, not even this very moment locking eyes with an old friend at our favorite spot did it meet all that these eyes were expecting, or could have expected.

“Chandler!” Jeremy, exclaimed.

“Hey, man. Long time, no see” he replied matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, man. I got you comin' right up. McSorley's?”

“Why not”

iChandler diverted his eyes back to me and rounded the corner to my chair, came up shook my hand and took his seat.

“Good to have you home, brother” I said.

“Dude, nothing changes around here, even when they do –know what I mean?”

“All too well.”

“They've got some shinier buildings, though.”

“Yeah, they are gentrifying the shit out these areas, and renovating most of downtown. It's a new age here, my friend! Whole city has a new image it needs to project. Sports are through the roof, bringing

in new potential students, the arts are picking up bringing in a new music scene –a Charleston vibe, without the boats.”

“You know Columbia was recognized as one of the top 10 best and cheapest places to live this year? Read that in the National Business Magazine.”

“Yeah, less than a million people here. It’s quaint. They are ready to fuck that up for tourists and taglines.”

“Shit. It’s weird being back here. Nothing changes but everything looks different.”

“I think I know what you mean. Wuddya think of the band? “Why the fuck do we listen to jazz?”

“I like it. It’s good live. I wouldn’t buy any of it though.”

I see Jeremy out of my periphery wobble over and slide a bister tinted McSorley’s Ale towards Chandler. He motioned his eyes towards me, at my glass, and back to me again, noticing my three-quarters empty pint. I nodded and tapped the rim of my glass.

“I enjoy it when I’m drunk, I guess” he said reservedly.

“How Franklin of you.”

He laughed while studying the foam in his glass. He looked exhausted. This was Chandler but it wasn’t. He had changed. He almost looked as if he was seeing, inside himself, what he saw in everything outside and around him. He looked defeated.

“So what happened out there, man?”

“I dunno, man. I fucked up.” he admitted.

“Last I heard from you was a postcard from Asheville.”

“Well look. I just—“

And so he went off on his yarn about being out on the trail, his adoration for wild things and self-reliance. He spoke passionately about the idea of only making progress if you force yourself to proceed. Chandler, was speaking in fucking platitudes. This was not him. Some shit had happened while he was out there and I was

listening to these throwaway lines and that just fill empty air with empty thoughts. This is a man who didn't waste time on clichés and commonplace conversation. It was like he had been made aware of some unification between him and people he pitied or downright felt sick towards.

Jeremey would swing by every so often with freshly poured ales with a sly smirk behind his Middle Earth beard –oh the things bartenders silently absorb and move on with.

3

Chandler had moments where I heard genuine adulation of his natural surroundings out there on the trail, where he even got poetic. He spoke of the “incredible silence” found in the night after a long day's journey though the “living echo” of nature. Authentic clarity and platitudes came and went. I didn't see where he was going until I realized he was stalling.

“Dude, what are you getting at?” I interrupted. “You don't talk like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like a whiney bitch. What's the deal?”

He laughed, we had known each other for too long to putting on airs. That's the good thing about knowing someone well, you can tell them to shut the fuck up and get to what's bugging them. The thing was, I already knew. He was distraught because he had gotten sick out there on his own and had to come back. He caught Giardia sometime after Asheville, hence the weight loss. He went on to explain.

“I got 35 miles north of Asheville when my water distiller broke. I figured until I got to the next town I would drink the river water.”

“Fucking figures” I laughed.

“How do you figure?” he chuckled.

“Because that’s what Philosophy grads do –they drink the water.” He cracked up, and I could see a looseness flowing through him again. The old Chandler was seeping through.

“Adam, you have no idea, though. It was bonkers. I could hardly eat anything. This is my first time being in a bar for months. Giardia tears up your intestinal tract and seventy percent of your immune system is located there so you can get better. You just stay sick or get sicker –fuckin’ killer, man. I lost thirty-five pounds in less than two weeks. I’ve lost a good forty-seven total.”

“That’s a bitch, that’s a son of a bitch, brother.”

“That’s not even the worst part. I had to catch a bus, and ride twelve hours with one of the worst kinds of dysentery there is, I had gas the whole way down. Good thing about it was no one even tried to sit next to me. I fuckin’ reeked.”

“Ah, silver lining.”

“But no, I got home and realized my dad, stepmom and sister were at the lake house. They had been there for a while because there was no food at the house. I wasn’t hungry but I knew I need to eat. Dude, I looked everywhere and finally went to the garage fridge and found a two liter of ginger-ale and in the freezer I found a plate of cookies. So I went to the kitchen and heated up six, scarfed them down –because I knew if I slowly chewed them I wouldn’t be able to eat—and then I had a glass of the ginger-ale. I went to the living room to watch TV and lay on the couch. I closed my eyes for what felt like a second and opened them. It was nighttime and everything around me was pulsating. The remote control on the table was frantically jumping at me like those optical illusions on the computer or like the heads in ‘Jacobs Ladder’. I was freaking out, man.”

“The fuck? Were you having a panic attack?”

“I didn’t know. I barely got to my phone in the kitchen to call my dad. I called, he answered, and I told him what was up, and my symptoms. He asked what I had done, if I had eaten anything.”

“Oh, shit. Don’t tell me—“

“The fucking cookies, dude! I told him I had eaten some out of the freezer and he said ‘Ah, shit how many?’ I told him six and he said ‘Jesus, Chandler. Alright look, those are medical marijuana cookies for cancer patients. They are only supposed to have one a day; half in the morning and half in the afternoon. You had six!?’ He then told me to drink lots of water and get an ice pack for my neck and try and sleep.”

“So much for the doctor in the family –and ice-pack and a nap is his scholarly advice.”

“Fucking right. Ahh, a nightmare. I was feeling the effects for the next three days. Just in a zombified stupor. I couldn’t comprehend anything. I was sick, and beastly stoned.”

“God damn, Chandler. You seem to have made a full recovery these past few months.”

“Fuck you, dude.” He dismissed, laughing. “I have the worst luck, sometimes.”

“You know God hates atheists.”

“Only a white God would hate atheists.”

“That’s because God is a white atheist.” I laughed. “Damn, what are we doing with our lives?”

The rest of the evening went just as light-heartedly. Next thing we knew the band was gone and it was almost three in the morning. We decided to call it a night. We told Jeremy we were going to leave our cars overnight and grab them in the morning. He acknowledged with a smile and a look of pride at our wise decision to walk home. We made our way down the segue stretch, opened the oak-wood entry door and stepped outside into the cool early morning autumn air. A huge crowd and flashing blue-lights shouting from the tops of three police cars three blocks away seized the attention of our eyes but we were too tired to investigate. I lived less nearly four blocks in the opposite direction and told Chandler the pull-out couch was still functioning. We got back to the house cooked up some burgers and I went to my bed, to sleep.

I woke the next morning to Chandler banging on my door.

“Adam! Dude, get up!”

“Fuck, alright. Jesus, it’s like nine thirty”

I rolled out of bed, trudged to the door –the dull roar of too many ales still echoing in my skull. I opened the door to see a very panicked, wide-eyed, Irishman.

“What the fuck, man?”

“Dude, you remember all those people around those cops last night?”

“Yeah.”

“There was a shooting last night.”

“You serious?”

“Do you remember Martha, that annoying chick with all those petitions?”

“Yeah, she tried flagging me down on my way to the bar to meet you yesterday.”

“She got shot. Caught a stray bullet from some stupid gang shit. She’s alive – but she’ll probably never walk again.”

Piano's Tune

Lily looked out the far window of the shop, watching the few courageous passersby brave the gusts and heavy rain. It was another slow day at work, though it was always a slow day when she was at Key's. Though she adored surrounding herself with the antique pianos, Lily always felt awkward whenever she was alone. She felt this urge to play on the shop's owner's most treasured item -- a Maori-carved Steinway Grand Piano.

Lily got up from the desk and walked up the spiral staircase to the second floor of Key's where the one-of-a-kind piano resided, and lightly traced the outlines of the intricate carvings on the blood red piano that stood in front of her. Her slender fingers continued across it until she got to the delicate black and white ivory keys. Lily stared longingly at them. She remembered exactly what her boss said to her the day she started working at Key's those 3 years ago -- never touch the keys of his Steinway, and never under any circumstance play anything on it.

Lily grimaced. She had held back the urge for so long, but it was calling out to her, begging her skillful fingers to play anything upon its untouched keys. It was maddening. She gulped down the saliva building up inside her mouth. Even staring at it was irresistible now. She was being drawn closer and closer as she inspected the enameled carvings. The odd shapes looked faintly human, but also like detailed spirals.

It was unbearable. Lily's breathing increased slowly as she drew closer towards the keys once more. She pulled out the bench, sat down, lightly licked her lips, and placed her fingers gently onto the keys. Her heart skipped a beat. Lily gave a twisted smile and began to stroke them, her breathing steadily increasing.

Lily gave one more gulp, and pressed down one of the white ivory pieces. She closed her eyes, enamored with the crisp, melodic tone

that erupted from the Steinway. Her smile widened as she pressed a few more notes, shivering from the music they produced. She couldn't stop. The more notes she pressed, the greater the urge that reverberated through her being became. She had to keep playing, and she wouldn't stop until she was thoroughly satisfied. It was like nothing she'd ever heard before. The tune was clearer, the keys smoother, and the feeling -- intoxicating. Lily just kept playing notes that she had never before, keeping her eyes firmly shut. She could only play from the heart, her fingers moving on their own, keeping their own rhythm. She raised her face up toward the ceiling, her smile becoming more wild with each passing note. Another melody echoed through the Steinway that paired in perfect harmony with the music Lily was making. She dropped her head, staring intensely at the keys. She noticed the new notes that were being played, but something kept her from stopping. It was like the music that flowed through the piano also went through her soul and she finally felt complete.

A set of pitch black fingers flashed into her vision. Lily froze, a chill racing over her. She quickly sat up, her fingers still placed upon the keys out of foreign instinct. She couldn't move anymore. Lily slowly shifted her eyes to look out of the corners' of her vision then began to turn her head.

“Why did you stop?” In front of her sat a dark figure with a maniac's grin. Lily tried to speak, but could only let out a stammer of incoherent letters as the figure's face moved closer to her own. “Why?!” Vermilion eyes opened before her, staring straight back. Lily froze, her lips quivering. She tried to scream, but nothing emerged from her paralyzed vocal cords. She slowly rose from the seat, backing towards the stairs, then turned around and ran as fast as she could down them, sprinted to the door, flinging it open with a single pull.

Her face warped in confusion and fear. Instead of the pelting

rain drops and gusts of wind, Lily was back upstairs, and the black shadow of a figure stood by the piano. She, again, ran down the stairs and out the door only to be met with the same end -- returning back upstairs to the dark figure.

“Let’s keep playing.” The figure’s voice even felt like a melody. She looked up, only to see the dark figure grinning at her once more, its face mere inches away from her own. It grabbed her wrists lightly, leaving burns where it laid its thin fingers. Lily jerked, trying to release herself from its grasp but the figure placed her back in the seat. It moved its fingers slowly down her hands, placing each individual finger back on the designated ivory keys.

“I said play.” The figure sat down next to her. “How about a warm-up.” It began to move its fingers and play the chromatic scale. Immediately, Lily’s fingers quaked then followed suit -- note by note, key by key, sound by sound.

Beautiful Darkness

I am the night,
Soaring through the darkness,
Flying through the cloudless sky,
The full moon shines,
The rivers below sparkle its ghostly reflection,
Such beautiful darkness,
The darkness of night is my home,
Dark, mysterious, and often misunderstood,
Is the darkness truly evil?
The shadows hide what we wish to find,
True beauty and understanding lies within,
Life is also hidden within the dark,
But does it truly mean it is lost forever?
Is the darkness as evil as one believes?
Where there is light, there will always be a shadow,
Where there is darkness, there will always be light,
We are all the same, both light and dark,
The moonlight guides me through the night,
Lighting up my dark home,
My black feathers glow like the ghosts of the night.

He Was Like Adonis

He was like Adonis, that mythical being.
Hair as curly as the hyacinths in the summer.
Nothing compares to what I am seeing;
Staring at him made me feel dumber.
Clear blue sky I saw in his eyes,
Skinny was his body, but muscular.
I loved him and love never dies.
He and mythical Adonis seemed so familiar.
Skin ivory polished.
He was always in my dream.
Our world could not be demolished.
We swam together in a glistening stream.
We were ready for the day of our marriage
And awaiting our silvery carriage.

Lament of the Auspistice

They've got to work.

I know they can.

She's smart, he's...street smart.

And they have the same tastes...

You're smarter than this; think more than taste.

They compliment each other...

No, no, no.

Let's. Address. The problem.

It's getting worse and you know it.

It...

They looked alright, but looks can deceive.

She'll listen...

You're her psychologist.

Not really, but amateur at best!

That's good enough, someone who'll listen.

He won't.

I can count the arguments I've "won" on my...

Focus!!

You can talk to her.

But why should she listen?

He said that he's "the only one who can talk to her about her problems."

Should have known it then and there when he said that.

He complains.

He whines.

He's trying to relive his childhood with all of this junk in his room.

His cluttered room.

She's not innocent in this either.

She lets him indulge in this...poison.

This poisonous behavior.

She cleans everything for him.

She cleans everything in general. Even for me.

She washes his clothes, and-

...calm down.

She even defends him for doing nothing.

...I wouldn't have if I-

No.

I'm...I don't. I want them to work.

They're my friends.

I – look at me.

What do they do...when I want to help?

He makes jokes. Horrible jokes.

But she helps.

Like always.

Like a bully's friend, joining in regardless, like in those kids movies.

But hers are far more biting.

Cutting deep without knowing when to-

But she's your friend.

He's your friend. Despite everything.

But then there's you.

Me, I mean.

This isn't killing me, but I'm slowly losing it over helping them with their problems.

It's not my problem.

It's not my responsibility.

And it's not my fault if it ends.

And I know it will soon.

Maybe not if I leave them to it, because a million things could end it...

...but it will end soon.

So I chose me, then.

They're my friends, but I care about my health and sanity before theirs.

Maybe if I step back, they'll start to understand.

Or she will. This is far too much pressure on her.

She won't take it forever.

Things will end sour.

Very sour.

But everything will work out.
It always has, in my life and the others around me.
They'll move on, with or without me.
Because she's smart.
And he's street smart.
I think I can go to sleep now...

The following poems were created by a literary method known as “exquisite corpse,” invented by Surrealists in the early 20th century. The technique requires individual lines of a poem to be contributed by individual poets without knowledge of the others’ lines. In some instances, the poets are given a vague theme or image to aid in their creation.

EXQUISITE CORPSE #1

Slowly crawling to my destination,
“take your time,”
He breathes; heavy, hard, and it hurts.
Triumph over oneself in death.
The choruses of angels sing.
Watch me dance – find dance.

EXQUISITE CORPSE #2

Dancing upon the stars,
I’m scared to step out into the light
sometimes it’s Hell on Earth.
Annoying slow,
a bump in the road
then God said, “Amen.”

EXQUISITE CORPSE #3

Vodka filled dreams
and the pulse of the beat in my chest.
Peaceful days. Restless dreams.
Looking behind or looking ahead.

EXQUISITE CORPSE #4

Procrastination at its peak.
I’ll lose my voice again.
The ferris wheel spins ‘round
while I’m literally smashing pumpkins.

EXQUISITE CORPSE #5

The tip breaks off between sharp teeth
Costumed monsters with sticky hands
A snatched bag; a dropped mask
I keep tearing your masks off
A day my painted on smile is actually noticed
Pumpkin carving, a tricky sticky task
Crossing the black cat's past

EXQUISITE CORPSE #6

something big from something small, and fallen
a severed cork in an empty wine bottle
I ran into you. I fell off of you.
I trusted you to be strong.

EXQUISITE CORPSE #1

bearded jolliness

bites the shape of daddy's dentures

fluttering, an angel

ice on eyelashes, a knotted scarf

shining in the dark

holiday cheers twinkling in our minds months from its appropriate

time

I didn't ask for this

