

An abstract painting with a rich, textured surface. The color palette is dominated by warm tones: deep reds, oranges, yellows, and greens, with cooler blues and purples at the top and bottom. A prominent, dark vertical stroke runs down the center, resembling a reflection or a shadow. The brushwork is visible, creating a sense of movement and depth.

The Pen

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a collection of fiction, poetry
and art by USCB students

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“He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought that the world’s heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world’s pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower.”

— Cormac McCarthy

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Wasted – Redeemed

She stared at the empty hourglass, asking herself when the bits of sand had joined the others at the bottom. Her eyes ceased to focus on the device and she lost herself in reflection.

An hour – wasted.

One hour was the least of things she had allowed to slip through her malcontented fingers. She had been given a chance for an excellent education, but had declined it less than gracefully.

A mind – wasted.

Finding herself destitute after nigh a year, she had thrown herself at the richest man she could find. But despite the riches and quirks that came with her position, she felt perpetually filthy, eternally tainted.

A soul – wasted.

After her initial rise to the status of near celebrity, the inevitable happened, as she knew it would: she was cast out . . . and replaced. Marred and jaded, she was passed from man to man, her wealth and health deteriorating and fragmenting along the way.

A lifetime – wasted.

But then, she saw him.

William had won her body through gambling – the only time he'd ever gambled – but she struggled to keep him from winning her heart. She knew he'd loved her selflessly: he'd even married her to extend legal and social protection to her, besmirching his own good name in the process. He'd known

her past and the kind of attention she was used to from men, but he never expected it, not even after the marriage. He had loved her unconditionally for seven years . . . and never asked for anything in return.

Every night, she'd ask him why he had bought her – for essentially he had: she was his legally – and every night she'd receive the same response.

“Everyone deserves to be loved,” he'd tell her just before kissing her gently.

He had died a slow and agonizing death, his life's blood slowly escaping its proper place in his veins from a tragically misplaced bullet lodged near his heart. As he lay dying, she felt her own heart shatter as he uttered his last words.

“Never forget that I love you.”

In that exposed moment of her life, she had even told him a truth she'd hidden away, a truth she didn't want to admit even to herself: she loved him. Not the fickle, conditional lust and desire she had felt for every other man in her wretched life, but a pure, unadulterated love. He had laughed with his eyes; his breath had long ago become filled with blood.

“I know.”

He had died without the fanfare she knew his spirit deserved, his gentle loving-kindness unknown to the masses.

A love – wasted.

Now, in her own last moments fifty-six years later, she sat in the garden he had built for her, staring at his hourglass. Slowly, she stood and turned it over, a new hour flowing through the narrow crevice in the middle. Golden rays from the rising sun filled the garden, and she could see William standing before

her, his hand held out in welcome. As darkness overtook her senses, she felt herself melt into his warm, tender embrace.

A life – redeemed.

Shade

-- Scotland, 1873 --

Khrystabelle awakened, and the darkness that had veiled her sight gradually lifted. She felt the blades of grass against her neck and shoulders oscillate as the breeze tousled her hair. Strands of her hair blew across her face, mimicking wisps of smoke. A church-bell tolled in the distance, and Khrystabelle found herself being lifted, her form weakly obeying the invisible force pulling her up. Once upright, her clouded mind began to clear.

The sun had set, leaving a faint glow in the west. Twilight had long ago claimed the eastern skies, revealing Orion and Gemini. The soft wind transformed into a howling gale and displaced air ripped around her. Out of habit, she reached down for her cloak only to find it was not where she had left it. Her still-rousing mind could not fathom where else it would be, and she was surprised to find that she no longer cared about where it was. The wind had died away; there was no point in dragging the cloak around anyhow.

She began to wander aimlessly through the hillside along Loch Maree. A stone gave way beneath her, and she plummeted down the slope, coming to rest at the shoreline. She felt no pain, so she stood quickly and began to brush herself off, but there was no dust. Khrystabelle examined her arms and legs and found cuts deep in her pale flesh. No blood. No bruises. Mortified, she approached the onyx water of the loch and peered in at her reflection.

Her once russet-hued hair had turned silver. Her lightly tanned skin had a deathly pallor and was cold to the touch. Her hazel eyes had shifted to a pearlescent grey. Panic rose in her bosom, but soon disappeared.

She knew what had had happened.

There was no way of reversing what was already done. She lost her strength, collapsing onto the ground beneath her and pulled her knees up to her chin. Khrystabelle closed her eyes and found herself longing for the willow tree she had often found comfort under as a young girl. The sounds of the gentle waves lulled her to sleep and the last thing she remembered was the rough bits of sand against her cheek.

~

The selkie arose from the dark waters and cautiously drew near to the woman lying on the shore. She reached forward to touch her hair when she sensed a presence behind her.

"Don't touch her." The voice was deep and wary. The selkie turned to her brother.

"Why not?"

"Meriel, you know better than to ask such a question. Our races do not belong together."

"But look at her. She is-"

"Human." He spat.

"She is pale. Is she-?"

"Yes. We can do nothing for her. We must leave her."

Meriel obeyed, slowly backing into the waves.

"But you stay behind, Calder. Why?"

"To dispose of her. She ought not remain here." Meriel nodded and disappeared into the loch.

Calder turned back to the woman, his heart beating faster than it ever had before. He knelt and lifted her left hand. She still wore the ring. He placed his hand on her forehead. The lie he'd told Meriel had been the truth. He gently pulled Khrystabelle into his arms as he rose. With one glance back at the loch, he turned and carried Khrystabelle back up the mountainside . . . to where she belonged.

~

Khrystabelle smelled the lichen as she felt herself being lowered. She gave a start and tried to push herself away from the one who held her, but her strength and will were gone. In the darkness, she could make out the shape of a man, but something was different. His cerulean eyes glowed like dim sapphires against the black sky. Khrystabelle knew she should feel threatened, but she felt nothing, and that alone was enough. The man said nothing, but Khrystabelle sensed an air of familiarity. She thought for a moment, her eyes never leaving his.

“Calder?”

He nodded slowly. Devoid of emotion, she simply stared back at him before he finally spoke.

“Do you know what's happened to you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know why?” She thought for a moment, then shook her head.

“No.”

“I'm afraid that this is my doing.” It was barely a whisper, and Khrystabelle felt him grasp her hands tightly, turning the

ring slowly. "Part of the vows of our union . . . you've bound yourself to me. You're . . . becoming one of us."

"I don't think so." She felt his smooth cheek and kissed him lightly. "We'd know if it were that. I'd look like your kind. As it is, I don't."

"I daresay not." Khrystabelle and Calder turned towards the third voice. Mariel stepped into the moonlight which illuminated her fair skin. "And is this what you meant by 'disposing' of her, Calder?" she asked softly as she approached. Khrystabelle glanced at him, but said nothing. Mariel knelt beside them, her gaze never leaving Khrystabelle's face. "I often wondered what drew you from the loch." She regarded Calder's other half with curiosity. She nodded and leaned back, satisfied. "She is worthy, Calder." Meriel stood and turned away. "But they will search for her when she does not return to her kind, just as I searched for you." Calder drew his wife closer. "They may search, but they will not find." Khrystabelle shook her head.

"My love, I am-"

"Thabharfainn fuil mo chroí duit¹."

She smiled weakly and leaned back against the willow tree.

"I know. But you can't."

Khrystabelle's eyes slowly closed as voices echoed in the distance, warped calls of her name. Meriel turned to Calder, her once azure eyes smoldering a pulsating orange.

"They come. We must away."

¹ I'd give you the blood of my heart.

"You go back," he responded, holding his wife against his chest. "I'll not leave her."

"Calder, please."

"I'll not break our vow. She's not gone yet."

"They will slay you," Meriel said flatly. "You know that."

"Let them." He motioned for her to come closer. "You are still young. Find love, as she and I have. That is my wish for you."

A crystalline tear traced a glassy trail on Meriel's face and she nodded, taking one last look at the fading Khrystabelle.

"Yes, brother."

She turned and bounded over the hillside, vanishing into the shadows.

"Calder." He turned to his wife and caressed her cheek.

"Please don't stay. There is . . . no reason to end your life this way." She struggled to inhale, her breath coming in ragged gasps. "Find another . . . find another, *a grá*²."

"Never."

The voices grew closer and Calder could see the moths circling the torches carried by the townspeople. Khrystabelle reached up and pulled herself up to speak in her husband's ear.

"I am a flower quickly fading," she whispered, "but *tá mo chroí istigh ionat*³."

² My love.

³ My heart is within you.

Her body fell against his as the villagers neared, firearms and farming tools held up aggressively.

"Who are ye?" one shouted, raising a torch higher, casting the garish yellow light on Calder and Khrystabelle.

"Is mise a fear céile⁴."

"Are ye now? I don't recall sightin' ye at the pub."

Calder stood, lifting Khrystabelle with him. He stood two heads taller than the tallest among them.

"A selkie!"

Gunfire rang out, reverberating through the valley. Calder dropped to his knees, crimson blood seeping through his pale skin. He gazed at Khrystabelle's face as his consciousness faded.

"Gráim thú go síoraí, a stor⁵."

~

"I pledge my love to you, and everything that I own.

*I promise you the first bite of my meat and the first sip from
by cup.*

*I pledge that your name will always be the name I cry aloud
in the dead of night.*

I promise to honor you above all others.

*Our love is never-ending, and we will remain, forevermore,
equals in our marriage.*

This is my wedding vow to you."

⁴ I am her husband.

⁵ I love you eternally, darling.

The Illusion

the air was soft as silk;
it carried us up and away to better days.
days when i could see the sun & believe in something
beautiful
days where i could've sworn we'd felt the earth move &
breathe
it was in those days where i could promise you the sky, if
nothing else
the paper clouds, the sequin stars, & the endless water color
blue,
i'd have made sure it was all yours; reach up & hug the
warmth
put my hand in the fire, walk through it unscathed
we were everything, more often than not
we were in laughter & cocoa beans & everything else that
was good in the world
we were in needle and thread, pulling and poking
trees & whispers & wind & pink & gold
we were burning
burning with color, bursting into feeling & light
there's a method to every monster but in the dark...
in the dark they were ours!
we fueled their fear, kept them waiting
being one so new to the path of wild abandon, let's break
let's forget & run
i dreamt there was a boy, handsome as you, he was
but not quite there, the boy
he had your eyes
lost in the circus; happy but nervous
the same way i am when i can't sleep
i was shaking
i saw the future unfolding like a napkins in my lap
there, you caught me in your eyes, in your hands;
there was nothing i could do
let the music play, you say, it won't mean the same thing

tomorrow
& you laugh
i was laughter
you were sweat
you were sweat & dreams & sugar & blood
you were fast & i was becoming...
absorbed, like a familiar story, you held me there
with an unbound sense of wonder that is only heard of in
folk tales
like sandal wood & smoke & sweet, sweet vanilla
i stay up until morning bursts over the treetops & oh...
oh, i fall in love with the morning everyday
you are dew drops & rain clouds clearing & i am spinning
on wings! on magnificent, blessed wings!
we fly.
we fly higher & higher each day & each day i fall in love
innocence is gone; we can still pretend
for the sake of the common man; rejoice!
we are alive.

Sadie

I remember the days of sun and fruit.

Days where we could've sworn we'd felt the earth move and breathe beneath our bare feet. These hills. This is where it all started. We were everywhere. California's big mouth opened up and swallowed us whole. We were her children. We were Charlie's children. He loved us so much. He loved us with every bit of him.

I remember the family.

In the daytime we would do his bidding, sewing him beautiful vests of hair and blood to wear for his teaching by the water, our bodies and stories spread out like wings from his loving arms. He took us to the river and shaved our heads and freed us of our aesthetic beauty and showed us our natural selves, our pure selves, our real selves. We weren't generic anymore, we weren't a hair style or a fashion statement. We were faces. We were names. We were everything and everywhere and everyone, and we were all each other. The trees would move, and we would move and whisper, and we'd all kiss and share our love for Charlie and for the family. It was a collective heaven of his making.

I remember the days where we'd lie in the tall grass 'til eventide, bathing in the silvery blue moonlight.

Charlie played his guitar, cicadas singing to us in the nightosphere, lightning bugs flashing and falling with the embers of the fire, holding soft hands, flesh on flesh, hips and tongues and rushes of love. My sisters, sweet and lovely, would stay up and listen to him for hours. We came alive at nighttime. We'd sing and run and spin, soft yellow daffodils danced around our ankles, summer time buzzing all around us. Everything was beautiful then.

I remember the desert.

Sand dunes cascaded fast against the sharp sun. We couldn't

wait to get there. The desert meant Helter Skelter and Helter Skelter meant death and death meant the end of the world and the end of the world meant freedom. We couldn't wait to be free. We slept in the day time and danced and moved in the night time. Charlie didn't like it when we danced though. I didn't think he liked anything anymore.

I remember the night of the wolves.

I no longer have any doubt that the Devil is real because he was there that night. He was in all of us. He was in me, Tex, Linda, Squeak, Patricia...but he wasn't in Charlie. No. He was Charlie. Helter Skelter was gonna reign down on all of us.

I remember Helter Skelter.

Everything was so quiet, you could hear the sound of ice rattling in cocktails shakers in the homes all down the canyon. They were greedy piggies, living high above the rest of the world, audacious and looking down on us. We were going to free the world of their greed. We were going to free everyone. There was no death on Cielo Drive that night. Only freedom 'cause we were angels, and we were bringing peace and light and taking away everyone's pain. We were reckless. We were fierce. We were elated, euphoric, senseless, crazed, impractical, everything and yet none of it. Nothing could be the impact that we left on the world that night. We were changing the world.

I remember Sharon Tate.

Filthy pig. She should have been grateful that Charlie included her in his plan. How dare she scream? How dare she try and deny his love? Couldn't she see the sacrifice she was making? Charlie was the way, the light, he was gonna save this world, and she just couldn't grasp it. We needed her, and she needed us. They all needed us. Filthy pigs. Vermin. Nothing was beautiful anymore. I didn't mind. We were doing it for Charlie. He was a God to me that was so beautiful, I'd do anything for him. I'd do anything for God,

Brody Flowers

even murder if I believed it was right. How could it not be right if it was done with love? I had no remorse for doing what was right to me. I had no guilt in me.

I remember these hills.

We were part of everything when we were in these hills because everything was Charlie's, and we were part of him. He made us part of him and made us part of everything. We lived in the natural world, away from the secular and aesthetic, and we lived free in Charlie's kingdom. The grassy walls, the rock and sun raised up all around us, crawling and itching and sweating and bleeding in the trees and the foxholes and our insides and outsides. Skin wasn't sweet anymore, the air wasn't fluid, and the water wasn't replenishing. Pretty soon it was screaming and echoing through the sprawling valleys and in the canyons and up in Hollywood. The world heard us. They say nature is Satan's church. My body is his playground. My mind is his cage. But we still had Charlie. I'll always remember Charlie.

Silent Passing

Symbol of life, the tree
Abides the death of its own,
Scores of brethren lie beneath,
Burnt offerings,
Mute fortune of dust,
Silence accepts fate.
The wealth of death,
Falling, in love of life,
Rustling mimic of memory,
Your rest animates abundance,
Breath scatters existence,
Rapt and bursting,
Oblivious of seasons,
Changing in time.

A Moment in Time

I awoke to find myself
Sitting in a rowboat
Fishing on a tranquil lake,
But nothing moved
Not even me.
Only the sun should be at rest
Its bright light was not blinding,
Spring had no warmth.
Birds in stationary flight
The sky indifferent
For it was always still.
Clouds unmoved
Helpless to rain.
Voices approached
They seemed so near
Fading as though walking past.
In the middle of a lake alone, powerless,
Feeling the gaze of passersby
Watching, as if to admire the calm.
Was I a ghost or were they?
Not remembering a past
Unable to ponder the future
Captured by a moment.
For a thought has no memory
Of before and after
Living in a painting.

Ageless Journey

If all poetry were anonymous
Its forms would still speak
But stoic and silent
Until breath bestows life.
Is poetry anonymous
Because it is timeless
The faceless character
Of universality
Being all art forms
And none of them?
The poet is mortal
But his words are enduring
United through the centuries
A timeless voice heard
But not remembered.
The poem is a synthesis
Of humanity
And language.
Emotions passage
Beyond action
In mindful care
Of existence
A gift Intrinsic
To the essence of expression.
Poetry nurtures inspiration
And gives philosophy
Its legacy of wisdom.
Poetry discloses thought
Hidden in the sanctum of
The subconscious
Where emotions seem to
Transcend the world
And words succumb
To limitation

Forrest Jones

Where ecstasy and agony
Coexist.

The Dream of the Dying

That night there were dreams. They visited him often in the dark companionless hours. The whiskey he drank to stave them off instead comprised their insanity. Abstract reminders of a past played out time and again, a night when the lightning had flashed under the belly of bellowing dark clouds, casting sparse light over the desert brush. A cold dry wind blew over the men's tucked heads. They were weighted in heavy uniforms, shouldering rifles, spitting fiery lead in procession down the line. The muzzle blasts mirrored the essence of the thundering sky and their rifles talked, answering each other. Through the static night they witnessed the building before them being reduced to dust, falling in crumbling debris.

Silence descended across the line from far end to far end, ushered in by the wailing sand strewn wind, and an order was passed down for their band of men to move across the plane to the remains and assess the dead. They moved from their foxholes, taking up their heavy rucksacks, weighted with rounds, and maneuvered in tactical progression across the terrain, blanketed by darkness, lit by the erupting heavens, to the wreckage they had wrought, where they lined against the crumbling bulkhead, riddled from their assault. Their boots crushed the dry desert weeds below their weight, each step stepped deliberately, each breath hot on the neck of the other. They stopped at the breach, the point man holding up his fist. He watched as the point man raised the first finger, breathing deeply into his lungs waiting what waited within. The second finger raised and he exhaled the fear that pressed up from his balls into his guts. The third finger raised and the first squad breached the threshold.

The first man was straight in, the second hooked back along the wall, and the third rushed into the corner not yet claimed. The rest outside waited in anticipation, but in the silence was more silence and nothing happened, so the rest began to

file in as before. Shards of light fell on the shattered glass, playing shadows off machines and webs of wire that sagged from rusted beam to rusted beam. Their rifles covered high and low, more rifles covered the assumed hidden hideaways of assassins, but there were none. In pairs the men stepped lightly making labored progress with each silenced breath.

Then some lost drifting weep brought them to a halt. Eyes, weapons, instincts shifted in premeditated sweeps, tracing the hidden corner and high ceilings. The men squatted, lit by wavering blue streaks of light, listening for that soft cry of surrender.

It came to them again on a wind that flowed amongst a low drone of grievances carried from an obstructed corridor. Eyes shifted from one to each other, a silent roll call, then fell their look to the point man. His weapon aimed for the threshold, pulling him step by step, and him pulling another, the men falling in until the last two who followed pulled their weapons, covering that which they had crossed, loosing no ground. One by one over debris of fallen cement they filed into death's dorm. In sporadic light it became known, this enemy they had sought. A woman swollen with child, hand against her leaking womb, atop the pooled blood collecting on her concrete berth, lips mouthed foreign babble to those same fiery heavens above. Her eyes unveiled from her black shawl fixed upon some far off hope that faded her life away into a last fleeting breath. Her child within sunk into the dark sea like recesses, and it too was no more. Motherless a girl wept beside her, fumbling small fingers over her mother's garments.

The room was full of them, the dying, pierced with holes, seeping death down into pools that spread about the room. The rodents sparing no time in feeding off the fresh wounds, congregated to the bodies of the dead and dying alike, they discriminated against no man. Chants of prayers hung heavy

in their presence. Weak and frail the fingers of old men and young boys fumbled clumsily over beaded ropes, searching each for some forgotten peace, to be remembered in rest. With each clear flash from a heaven that refused to rain, and clean away those stains, the men read curses uttered upon the lips of the innocent as their ghosts flew from their bodies and their lips fell still, the heat from them subsided into a blue cold. The rank odor of fecal death persisted, and for him lingers still.

They left that place of the dead. The unit moved on, and when away called down from the heavens a storm of lead and fire that would consume the carcasses there and bury them in stone so that no man may ever know that they ever were.

They marched through the night along the roadside lined with irrigation trenches on either side. All remained silent, and the clouds had passed giving way to the speckled blackness above and there was nothing in it for him. The road was straight, it bore off through the darkness toward the river and though it had been cleared, battles were being fought on either side, their light igniting over the burnt small crops, and the war drums trembling the still water beside them. Still they marched on.

They came to a small village where the darkness was fading and the last bitter grip of night was lost to the impending sun. It was a sun not risen from the east, for they stood as far to the east as could be stood, in a place where the first sun had risen on the first of warring men, a place where the sun was old. It rose from a far horizon, the place from where it had set on their own countrymen.

The grass of the marshes in the lowlands glistened in their early sway amongst a cool breeze, and the people who occupied the rivers arose from a troubled sleep, that had been

interrupted through the night by the explosions nearby, then taken back into their deep unconscious, in their minds visions of the days of slaughter, this generations penance for the gift of life, to suffer under the pretence of human condition, and to bear it with humility, believing in the comforting concept of destiny and an ever after that repays the debts of the struggles that have swept their lands, brought on by lesser souls, whose dominance was in this life alone, their infidel souls shall burn. The people wake to another day, but they were not true believers for they too had often submitted to fear.

A makeshift door swung slowly open. The cold blue eyes of their captain against a face blackened by the tools of their trade, fire and smoke, shifted across the village to see the thin figure of a woman, sent by her man. She stepped from her threshold, but at the sight of him stepped back into the darkness of her familial compound, barring the door made of sticks and covered in goat hides. The eyes of the captain shifted back to his troops gathered under the canopy of palms and resting at their bases.

He too rested at a base, his weapon at his side, and withdrew from within his uniform a paper image, a contrasting soul containing eyes that could never see such places. He could not endure the losing of himself within them, not that morning, or ever again, and he cast the image to the dust, rising, taking up his firearm, and leaving it there.

At that time a band of men came by along the road. Some atop the long legged desert camels with their curved necks and humped backs, and some walking with switches beside a heard of sheep and goats that trotted swiftly, nestled tightly onto the dusty roadway. The sands of the desert were lost in the like shade of the herdsmen's faces, weathered by the sun and sand filled winds that exfoliated their youth, but in the last of inhospitable habitations they had survived for generations, these wanderers, unflinching to armies old and new. They

were indifferent and in the absence of the foreigners the people of this land would fight themselves. New wars arose with new enemies, and they would fade back into the deserts for each to wait for the white face foreigners to go, as they always had.

Their rags touched the ground, sweeping indifferently from side to side as they pressed on into the city through the high palms past the rued mud bricked homes, and on away from the village center where the rubage draws in domestic pests, vectors of plagues, feeding off the human waste where loose papers, discarded produce, rotting carcasses and human feces from chamber pots are collected and burned, filling the air with a foulness only immune to by those toothless villagers who lived in this village, an outskirt to an even fouler city. The herdsmen and their property begin to disappear behind the far curve and around houses.

Lastly in the caravan rode a bound girl in black, gazing from out her shrouds of cloth, hers the only of that tribe whose eyes looked upon the foreign men. She had never seen the like. Her glances to each and all of them aroused in them desire for pleasures long abandoned, that same forbidden temptation that left her to be sold by her kinsman. Her shrouds crusted with dry blood about her groin. The temptations of her sin to never be pleased in again.

A hand strikes him. "Time to go," it says.

The sun had risen over the marshes of the ancient of most ancient rivers, against gray and black smoke, the sky old colored in the sepia light.

Shining Eyes Threadbare

Grace did not become her
She was better off knocking into life
The lines upon her face
Were never meant to hide
They told stories the world didn't want to forget
Nor did she, not really
Now mirrors never held her right
Uncomfortable strangers looked back
Cold disbelief
Where did the little girl go?
She ran away when they covered her up
She never came back
Not even as the demands for false-love poured in
Not even as her threads ripped bare
Clinched fingers could never hold a hand
And offer the warm shock of hope
That was all she ever needed
But the only thing she never knew
She slapped their cold wrists away
And met their demands, alone, by her own hand
Her tattered dress fell to rest upon the brick
In time with sulfuric tears that sizzled
Singeing the black hearts
Of the guilty wolf masses
That, too hungry and wet-mouthed,
Would never let her simply
Just be.

Reginald's Divide

"No amount of fire or freshness can challenge
what a man will store up in his Ghostly Heart."

—Ernest Hemingway

The storm outside his screened door woke him fast yet foggy like the air blanketing the yard that stretched beyond the porch. He ambled towards the screened door but paused, bare feet curling against the cool of the maple floor, and focused his soft eyes upon the rolling bar that made a comfortable corner in his sleeping space. Steadily, blindly, grabbing the tongs and stabbing cubes into a glass, he soaked them knowingly in a rough and smoky bourbon, something necessary for the step into the night. Something to wash the odd flavor of the wet hot night down his raspy throat, milking out that familiar drawl from his ancestral roots. Even the scent of the dark was familiar, something comfortable for a fool, trickery by the familiar, allowing for the unexpected. He stood firm, groggy yet protective against going out into the four a.m., unaware and unready for just what might soon come. He tasted the night his daddy died, the one he fell in love under the stars, the one his best friend was shot, and the one he sang all night on stage in cheap bar glory, drunken eyes enamored by the sins in his voice, and the vision of a man indeed.

It could be anything or nothing at all that was waking him, just like the many times his heart started to call. Opportunity for change and the accoutrements that were built to rearrange rang true throughout the night, but how and in what way the world would shift was a song to the unknown. Say anything, he thought to himself, just to split the silence ringing throughout your skull. Say something, at least, to creep the shadows from beneath your now barren bed.

The door creaked across its tracks like a screeching demon in the woods, breaking silence with something greater than a branch-crack, something devilish in its jarring stabs to the drum. It stunned him for a moment, jangled the ice within his glass, like a man struck on down the line, dripping sweat upon the tops of his feet as he moved forward towards the fear of a decline. He had worked so hard to make his life something easy, dulling in repetitive but safe expected moments, a plan for all the feelings and something that rarely sought to leave him reeling. That is what was plaguing this night, the truth in the fear that routine would change to something uncontrollable, wholly invigorating and loveable, but unsafe in its very design. It was what would later be called, by a number of medical and mass-media, detractors, 'an intuition of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience.'

His life was no different than most. He lived, ate, worked, talked, drank, loved, side by side with and as regularly as anyone else. He did seem to draw people in; they were magnetized by his presence in an inexplicable manner. He was not overt or loud or sometimes even contributing, but his mere presence could bring an odd light to a room. Like a lamp out of place, an antique that had witnessed the scope of life, and whose absence would dull the light into oblivion, un-remarkableness, that area of days that get forgotten. He was reason alone to remember, unknowingly, and wonderfully in retrospect. Especially with what was to come. He never denied nor embraced this, only kept along as he always did, with a knowing smile but no push for the moment, no shoves to walk along his path. Only urges with eyes wet with their fire. Slight words delved deeper into souls regardless of their banal veils. His loves that made his former lives up had taught him that, each one a new concurrence on the man he had become. Real inferences to the heart that beats along life, bloodily, repetitively, and mercilessly, as it trails us all along.

The whole modern experience thing, the human get-to-know, was a draining thing indeed. With the influx of distractions and technological contacts he often wondered if many others felt their body to grindstone. Cheeks pressed against the pavement leaning from the open door of a speeding car, a driver cackling all along at the wrinkle scars left to grace the passenger witness's former friendly face, limbs akimbo, was a feeling he found familiar. It was never so bad, but sometimes it really brought out the stifling aches, the long worn yellow days and wicked sleepless nights, just like the one he jumped right into, shit-scared and swift right out into the quiet of the great unknown. A lovely task and tale and aspiration, he sought outright for his own freedom, indeed. A spark into the break of dawn to garnish real light upon the day, a full moon built up in his heart. Stars shifted right into his eyes, and focused five points quick and lovingly alert unto the encompassing sense of night. In this new time he would feel alive, and in this deep damp humid southern twilight, alive was all that ever was right. He would jump down in and would fall into place before he knew it, ready as ever to take part in the structural reforming of a new and directed way of life.

As he stepped upon the second story porch, a wave of just dreamt-notions bathed his mind in numbing delight. He was falling then tumbling through a crowd of bodies down into a mini-sea, one that was an aquarium filled with life itself, a sight for our eyes to see. The helicopter of his childhood hung gravitating in the sky behind him, left to float on to the open ocean. Remembrance became a thing of the past itself, but these newfound glass walls of life did confine. He sank to the bottom where his feet ground into the gravel of decaying souls snuffed from the flames of life. Then, before he let complacency set in and accepted his surrounding he turned his loving hands to fighting fists, and gave one hell of a knockout punch to the walls. A small crack snaked and slivered into the constraints, and then another, stronger one filled with vigor met the crack into a smash. A break upheld

the truth into freedom and the water rushed out, sucking him and all the living right through the hole, into the open sea, where life would finally flow with the tides.

He freed his soul and all the others without a word. He swam into forever with a light upon his eyes, and though the salty swells did burn his pupils, he could see at once eternity would wind forever, turn with the seasons, and become a reality to overcome. Life would move on as it were intended, and happiness could at once breathe again. Gills would pump the oxygen into all the daily motions, and the past and future and now all become a moot point for the ones that made the decision to live and bleed with all pistons pumping with a burning and a yearning for a greater design. He was a silent savior that showed how to go along through action, through love, with fighting fists retired after a single war. Truth and love now lived again.

His two prior lives swept across the landing and out over the oak lined front drive, dancing in the night, a portrayal of what had passed and what would be felt again. As he let the cool night air wake him widely, he weighed the costs of living a new life and found that it was all another movement, like the tides and winds that soaked the beaches of home again. Resurrection was a moment in the necessary light of night. If he left then, lives were going to wreck, and most of all his own delicate existence would crash into edges of tomorrow. He needed to take on the presence of a lighthouse, the guiding beacon to the function of tomorrow, to let the past become the past and set all differences aside. This would need his wits about him; this would require the truth behind all the things once felt. He would need his allies, he would have to fix the bridges that caught fire in the night. There was a black wind coming and a shelter would come handy as it darkened these vast lands. From coast to coast his light would need to shine. The saving bonds his mind was to construct with hope to break forever from the oncoming bind.

Constance was a Georgia star, as witty as she was beautiful in the eyes of all she danced across. She had stolen many of his thoughts across the years, her cascading hair framing perfectly loving-looking eyes. These eyes learned eagerly, and were ready to taste the world, so similar to his own vigor, and so open to the lightness of each day. Often they almost stood as opposites, her seeking the light and him tasting the dark, matching one another, looking into every corner of this vast expansive experience we all call life. Due to this, they also shook each other's lives to the foundations, brittling the necessary structures of moving along fearlessly. They bled too close and screamed too far, and in one another's arms their bodies sang like the sweetest instruments resonated by the cobbles trailing the dark alleys of this cacophonous town. Their songs would swallow all other interruptions, and in that, moments of peace and beauty were readily found. It was in the tearing of this that the realities of tolls this collision did take. Perfect together yet destined to be torn viciously apart, necessary to the structure of human life moving along, two young souls left bleeding for a reason to show others how deep the cuts of life could split. Two people closer than any others, distant best friends now, not speaking but always knowing the functions and pushes and tickings of the hearts of one another eternal. He missed her presence but couldn't live with it, but felt her coming on quick all the same, and silently braced himself a bit, a preparation ill-fitted to her onward love's hurricane. If there was one way to go, he knew he'd most wish it swept to death in her arms, and he may just get that wish, at least that's what the winds, and this night, were whispering, urging to him in his underlying thoughts. He tasted her clarity and smelled her shampoo. He thought of the others, he would need them, too.

Nights that poured into the soul like this were nights meant for lessons, for change, for tired eyes met with desperation and recollection, all to drag a worn body closer to the truth beyond the light. He'd had his share of them. Hell, in this day

and age, all had, but sometimes there was just a little more to some than the spirit of the day to day. Some dealt with battles and lineage; some played over lifetimes and were passed down from beyond the grave. This was one of those. This was not small and not slightly relative to the passer by. This was something bigger than any common man, than any family, and than any friendship that was passed along. This was built on bonds that stretched beyond words and the lighter senses, this was a fire, a brilliant combustion, of the possibilities we just might be able to achieve. This is a saving lives story, and a story that can save lives as well. A lesson, a blessing, and a curse to come for all to tell. A savior, a beauty, and a love that'd never die. A stumble, a fall down, and a phoenix left to light up the crying sky. Forever a song, this would draw them all in, and cause them to dance until the break of a new tomorrow's dawn. The reality spurred him in the spine wide awake.

The creeping death started to move within the shadows. Squalor was prevalent in the jarred motor functions of the beings slipping past the gates of his family's land. He was unsure if these things were real or not, but that did not matter now. He knew it was coming, and coming hard and strong, a fierce breadth of decay to wash the land. The good parts of his heart had the answers. He would be the savior, and he would need Constance, and the others too, to tackle these demons. As the stilted movements of the undead grew closer to the house, his body grew fast with a fire. He downed his drink, made another, and pulled on his favorite pants. He finished his drink as he opened the gun case and filled his daddy's old military bag with all that he could carry. Might as well bring the best of things; everything else would have to be left behind. As he heard their craggy fingers stripping down the clapboards, their bawdy fists pummeling the front door in a hellish unharmonious beat, he grabbed the bottle and his phone, and bounded out the back door. Not before one

last thing. He opened the gas stoves his mother had been so happy for, and as his first foot led out the door, he dropped a match. He began the burn of his familial history in one fell swoop, to save it. He set out to find the loves he needed and to send the growing plague upon the world to hell. It was time to take hold of life and for it to crash into the shores of tomorrow. Reginald was the last hope for a world slipping into the cracks of the underworld's true grit, a light incumbent.

The Reuniting of Love

The lead thorn now moved from breast,
A maid's doe eyes relinquished rest.
The saint rejoiced at Cynic's descent,
Back to the dank, unruly, id labyrinth.
The surgeon smiles to the eyes azure,
To repay her debt: his wing, the cure.
Lame marksman follows her around,
Till love's true form, she has found.
The wing he gains after faith sincere
ensures return by summoning tears.

Mortal Musings

The muses whispered in my ear, but as I strained to hear,
my hands relinquished equipment of my craft, leaving
naught but a dusty draft.

Can You Figure Out What Duffy Has Lost?

David Duffy hates work. David Duffy hates cows. And most of all David Duffy hates hay bales. David Duffy does, however, love his grand-papi, and after a hearty breakfast, he pushed all of his hates aside in order to give Papi-Duffy a hand. David Duffy always was a strange character. His full name was David Michael John Duffy, but three first names just weren't enough options since all of his friends just call him Duffy anyway. It was a miracle that he was awake before 2:00 in the afternoon, and even more of a miracle that he managed to roll hay bale after hay bale up and down the property's sea of hills with the assistance of a crumbling old man.

--Hang on. Before we go any further, you should know a couple more things about Duffy. His working may give the reader the wrong impression that he is not unbelievably lazy. This is both a myth and a fabrication of misinterpretation. Duffy is the laziest person that anyone would ever meet—ever. He just really loves his papi. You see, Duffy's father is a multi-million dollar divorcee with a knack for allowing his son to be lazy. Duffy has had eight jobs. All for less than four weeks. His work ethic is also like his work-out ethic. Duffy is 6' 3", 195 lbs, with about 8 percent body fat, even though he has never lifted a weight or done a push-up. Nobody messes with him because of his size, so he has never been in an actual fight. Good thing too. It's all for show. He once lost an arm-wrestling contest to a 16 year-old kid who was 5' 5", 125 lbs. The kid couldn't believe it. Anyway...

Our arm wrestling champion was pushing the final hay bale to its destination with the assistance of the crypt keeper.

"Big guy like you...can you finish this up on your own...my bones is rusty."

"Yes sir Papi-Duffy, I can do it."

Father time took his time inch worming back to his house. Once he was out of sight, Duffy returned to his typical self, first taking a much needed nap on the hay bale (which was never going to reach its intended destination). While asleep, Duffy dreamed about Super Mario, specifically, the first part of the first level, where Mario hits the block and gets the mushroom in order to power up. Upon waking, Duffy looked over and saw the same exact mushroom from his dream growing beside his foot. "Woh". If it worked for Mario, Why wouldn't it work for Duffy? One mushroom turned into two, two became four, four, eight, sixteen and before he knew it, Duffy was in the spirit world. "Woh, where's that music coming from?" It is a very confusing experience to be in the middle of a sea of hills with the theme from Super Mario seemingly coming from nowhere:

"Boop Doop Doop, Doop Doop Doop Doop, Poop Poop Da Doo, Da Doop Da Doop Doop Boop, Na Na Na Na Noop Nump Nunt Na Nump Nump, Na Na Nump Nump Na Na Na Noop, Nump Nunt Na Nump Nump Boop Doop Doop Doop Doop, Oop oop oop."

"The only thing that would make this cooler would be if Luigi was here."

"I am here Mario! Itza me! Luigi!"

"Woh."

"Uh, the only thing that would make this cooler would be if Jesus was here."

"I am here Duffy, my son."

"Woh."

So what started out as a routine days work turned into Duffy, Luigi, and Jesus forming a super team in order to battle whatever bad guys might be in their way. For a while there Duffy and Luigi were having a blast shooting fireballs at the cattle, blowing them to bits, while Jesus pulled the Lazarus maneuver, bringing them back, and keeping the mess down.

“Hey Jesus, what’s up with a chocolate sundae?”

“I washed Judas’ feet and you think I won’t make my Duffy a sundae?”

I’ll let you use your own imagination to figure out what Duffy actually ate, but it most definitely wasn’t a sundae. After his meal the super team was having a great time chilling in some plane of existence between this world and the next when something extremely horrible happened. Duffy’s most evil ex-girlfriend (and I mean this bitch is evil), Jessica, popped out of BadtripTopia and into the fray. No “Woh”, this time, only an “Oh shit dude”. Duffy gave Jesus a look that said “God help me”, and Christ being the omnipotent Deity that he is replied, “Yeaaaahhh, sorry man but I don’t do Dr. Phil. She looks pretty pissed. Good luck my son.” Apparently The Good Lord doesn’t do relationships, and before they knew it Luigi and Duffy were left all alone to deal with the soul-sucking succubus before them. Luigi didn’t know what was going on and being Luigi he made the mistake of saying “Hi! Itza me Lui—“POW! Left hook to the face. Full mount. Shreds of green clothes flew everywhere. It is a horrible experience to hear a video game character beg for their life with an Italian-English accent. It was a whole lot of “Mama Mia!”. Duffy, being the guy that he is, left Luigi to fend for himself and made a mad dash for the trees. He would never make it to safety. Like all characters in a horror movie, Duffy made the biggest mistake of all time. He tripped. Jessica caught him, beat the shit out of him, and left him unconscious at the bottom of one of the hills. He eventually woke up, bloody and confused, with a discombobulated sense of reality. “Woh.”

The Missing

The noon sun glared down upon the woods, its reaching rays fragmenting and filtering through the tree branches, sending dapples of light to dance on the ground below them. The cool wind hinted at the approach of autumn as it raced through the hilly terrain, rustling leaves and bending boughs with its tendrils.

Atlee looked up at the sky and then continued on, step after tired step. Midday? Already? Regardless, the hours that had passed had been too many, no matter the number. His heart still hammered the same frantic rhythm, fueling him through sleep-deprived weariness, and pushing his legs to move faster. Off in the distance, the echo of other voices called, but he could not trace their origin. As he approached another hill, he hoped once more that his eyes would catch just a glimpse of what they searched for beyond the crest. But again his hope rose and faded, all in vain.

After this, he would not take things for granted, he kept mentally muttering. *After this*—as if some part of him was still certain that there would definitely be an “after”. His mind played scenarios of a horrific flavor as he trudged on. After this, he would not work such long hours. He would not be away so long—*After this*.

Pangs of regret attempted to penetrate his resolve. But Atlee refused to heed their beckoning. The earth beneath his steel-toe boots sank into the moisture from the previous evening's rainfall—yet another reminder for his need of haste. As if he really needed one.

The other voices echoed out towards him constantly, like those of earthly phantoms, calling him deeper into the woodland to lead him further into the unknown, the unfamiliar. Their

indecipherable words sent the pulsing emptiness within his chest into a renewed agony. It spread from that cavernous hollow space, throughout his body and soul, leaving behind the resounding call that reverberated throughout his being and into the distance to mingle among the trees.

This would be easier without the hills. His legs ached, and with each steep climb and quick dissent, the ache grew stronger. To Atlee *this* was all that temporarily existed. There was nothing beyond these woods. It was what lay within their tumultuous boundaries that mattered so much. Walking and searching was all that he was capable of. Growing anxiety and emptiness, and the shadow of overhanging guilt. And still, the voices in the distance did not cease. He descended.

No semblance of the familiarity that he craved lay among the bushes or the grass. No sign or symbol or beckoning remnant called out to his searching vision to ease his fears. Atlee's lungs exhaled with grief, the heavy syllables that flew to join the distant yet pressing voices. His mind wandered, running a race through memories and all of the "what ifs" that panic scripted just for him. Each path that his thoughts took could not remove him from the one his body remained upon, not knowing which direction was true.

Half-buried in the earth a small distance away from him, was something that at least used to be white. Atlee, approached it, and his heart sunk. Bending down, he scooped the small muddied shoe from the dirt, and with a fingertip, traced the tiny flowers sewn into its edges. It fit his careful fist, and a refreshed sense of urgency sped him on.

Among the greens and browns of the trees and hills something caught Atlee's eyes—a brushstroke of light, innocent pink on the limited horizon. He broke into a sprint. The hills no longer stood as a barrier. The trees no longer masked his journeying steps – now born forth with renewed strength.

The mud and thorns and dampness of the world around him did not matter. The sunlight beamed down upon grasping fingers, and jubilant smiles, warmed and dried up the tears. He kissed the blushed, porcelain skin. He shed his jacket to keep out the cold that the rain and the darkness of night rising into morning had left behind. The smudges of dark dirt, and dried scrapes and tangled tresses couldn't detract from the beauty of the smile or the bell-like voice that greeted his embrace. He held the world within his arms. His world.

Nothing else mattered but its safekeeping.

Ballad

There once did roam a lonely man,
A poor and humble soul.
I watched him travel 'cross the land,
To try and fill his bowl.

From house to house, he searched for food,
To feed his feeble soul.
The doors slammed in his face – so rude,
And none would fill his bowl.

He did this every night, it seemed,
The answers each the same,
While I lied in my bed and dreamed,
He hung his head in shame.

Then one night to my house he came,
And rapped upon my door.
I gazed upon his sickly frame,
All battered, bruised, and sore.

I told him to come in and sit,
And wrapped him in warm clothes.
His limbs were red and frozen-bit,
And also was his nose.

I fed him all the bread I had,
Until he became full.
I gave him wine and just a tad,
And tucked him in a bed of wool.

I seldom heard him stir that night,
As I did drift to sleep.
I felt content in my own sight,
While slowly counting sheep.

I woke next morn with a surprise,
For what I saw was queer.
Was I deceived by my own eyes?
The man just disappeared.

In place of where his body lay,
There sat a bag so old.
I tore it open straight away,
And what fell out was gold.

I cannot say in absolute,
That what I saw was true.
But such kind deeds stand resolute,
Not to the great but to the few.

Vince Sighed

Of all the things Vince did like, weddings weren't one of them. In particular, he felt like this was the worst possible wedding he could ever attend. He didn't even want to be here, but he'd come anyway, since the bride had so earnestly insisted he be there on her special day. Vince was, after all, her closest childhood friend. As Vince made it off the grassy green hills and trudged through the sandy beach front, he unfastened his bow tie and sipped a bit of whiskey he'd swiped from the caterers. It wasn't expensive stuff, but it was his favorite.

Being there for the bride was one thing. Vince would do anything she asked. But the groom, Vince was not so fond of. Or rather, he was fond of the guy, and *that* was what bothered him so much. Micah was a great guy, and a really nice upstanding gentleman with a successful career ahead of him. He was too good, Vince thought.

Vince hit his stride on the boardwalk near the beach, his shiny black shoes playing the planks like keys on a piano. He was being forced to attend a special day that wasn't his. It could have been, but it wasn't. He unbuttoned his tuxedo jacket and loosened the collar of his shirt, the late setting sun still roasting him inside his suit.

Vince reached the end of the pier, slugged another gulp, and leaned his elbows on the railing as he stared at the orange glowing orb boring down into the waving horizon. He squinted hard against the glare of the sun, staring out for a while until he heard his name being called from a distance. Vince turned to regard the approaching figure.

An all-white, form-fitting dress, the rehearsal attire so delicately poised itself on the bride's shoulders, as if she was born into the

gown, and it awaited her until the appropriate time. Vince marveled in a melancholy haze at how simply beautiful and elegant Beatrice was.

"Where are you off to, then?" She scolded, hands falling on her hips fluidly.

"Needed to clear my head," Vince replied shortly, shaking the bottle in the air in front of him. He then took another swig. Beatrice sighed her disapproval, gliding over next to Vince and taking the bottle from him before he could guzzle too much.

"Not with *this* vile stuff," Beatrice scolded, putting the bottle down on the railing on the other side before turning to face Vince, "its more likely to knock you out."

"Sort of the point," he chuckled. After a moment he added, "You look good, Bee." They had only spoken over the phone since she had moved away. So Vince was pleased to finally see her.

"You do, too, Vincent," she replied quietly.

Vince knew by the way she said his full name that there was something on her mind. Something she'd put far from her thoughts a long time ago, after she and Vince parted ways. Since she'd gone to college, met Micah, and whatever else in between. Those thoughts were still stowed away when Micah had proposed to her, but since she'd begun planning the wedding, it started to nag her again. She could faintly recall Vince's voice, a sort of reverse echo augmented by time, slightly distorted. It was like a piece of Vince stayed with her, a manifestation of her consciousness resisting her decision. It grew stronger as the wedding day drew closer. "Micah? You're marrying a guy with *that* kind of name? Combs his hair like his mom did, pretty blue eyes, wow, *how dreamy*. Come on, Bee, *this* is who you're settling for?"

It wasn't like Vince actually knew all this, but to Beatrice, it was like he'd seen it all with her. Just like they had been through everything when they were younger. A world where Beatrice and Vince didn't share knowledge on everything was just not the world Beatrice knew.

Beatrice turned to look out at the coast, the last fringes of the radiant sun cooling off into the open waters. Vince stared back at the country club and the lifestyle Beatrice was about to marry into. The glitz and the pomp, the riches and the niceties. The high life, Vince supposed, would treat her well. At least it had better, or the high life would have him to answer to.

"Vince, what am I doing?" Beatrice sounded almost helpless all of a sudden. It was a state of Beatrice that Vince was unfamiliar with. She always presented herself as a casual, enthusiastic person. Vince admired how easily she smiled. It was a gift that the more brooding and contemplative introvert known as Vince lacked. Despite the stark differences, they had been good friends when they were younger.

"Well," Vince started, barely hiding his grin, "It looks like the club's all set up for some event. Last I checked, the gentlemen are in black, and the women are dressed in white, and I do believe I heard Wagner's Bridal Chorus."

Beatrice laughed, nudging Vince. He nudged her back and snickered, "And you look to be the prettiest, so I'd say you're getting married." He turned to her and his smile faded as reality came back into focus. "Just a guess," he added quietly.

"I know," Beatrice said, not looking at him and thus unable to see the disheartened expression he wore, "I know. I'm getting married. Its supposed to be exciting. I'm supposed to be with

all the guests. I'm supposed to be by Micah's side. But I keep thinking, 'what happened?' I had so many possibilities. I just didn't think I'd get married this soon."

"Weird, huh," Vince muttered, looking down at the whiskey bottle.

"Mmhmm," She added, turning to regard Vince. She stopped when she saw his expression, his crumpled brow. They stood for a silent, still moment, staring.

"Remember when you were talking about how you wanted it to end?" Beatrice asked suddenly, recalling a time when the two of them sat under the stars on her porch and watched the night sky together.

"Yep, sure do," Vince replied, "I said, 'Achilles was told he could live at home, have a family, grow old and be forgotten, or he could go to Troy and die heroically in battle, his name remembered throughout the ages.' That's still how I wanna go out."

"Such a romantic," Beatrice joked, "I think you missed the Trojan War by a few thousand years. But I prefer the first one."

They stood for a while, recalling the moment in their past together. Then, Beatrice added, "You were really close to me that night, remember?"

"Yeah, it was cold. I didn't want you to freeze."

"It wasn't *that* cold, Vince."

"You never know."

"You know what I never knew?" Beatrice turned suddenly, her tone much more serious, "I never knew where we stood."

"What do you mean?" Vince asked. He knew full well what she meant, but wasn't sure he wanted to get into it.

"You always were close to me, and I always thought we'd... I don't know. You weren't ever clear on what I meant to you." "Meant to me?" Vince asked, "You were my closest friend. You meant a lot to me."

"But were we just friends, Vince?" Beatrice asked, throwing her hands out, "Remember when we went to prom senior year because Dave broke up with me a week before? We were slow dancing, and I basically stood there waiting for you to kiss me."

Vince blinked. He didn't want this to register on an emotional level. He knew where the conversation was headed, and the timing was nothing short of cataclysmic.

"But you just sat there staring at me, the whole damn night, just staring. You never made a move ever."

"Its not like I didn't want to."

"Then why didn't you? Why didn't you, Vince? I loved you. I loved you so much, okay? You were more than a friend to me. You were... something more important, something vital. When I left for college, I cried every night because you went somewhere else. Do you know how much that hurt?"

A dark void in Vince's chest made him feel nauseous. "I didn't know."

Beatrice threw her hands up, exasperated. She walked a few feet away, stood for a moment, then turned back. "Vince, you know why I said I wanted to settle down that night?"

No, Vince thought, *don't say it. Not now. Please, Bee...*

"I wanted it to be with you. Not with Micah. Not with anyone else. *You.*"

God, why.

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Beatrice turned away again. The churning hole in Vince's chest made him feel dizzy. He had always loved Beatrice. He just didn't know how to say it. He was shy about opening up like that, so he always hid, hoping Bee would find it. His hopes had come true, apparently, but neither one of them could really express it to the other. Beatrice turned back to face him, and they held each other's gaze again.

It was another moment before Vince broke the air with, "Micah's kind of a *girl* name, isn't it."

Beatrice rolled her eyes and nudged him pointedly with her hands. The tension had passed, even though the void in Vince's chest was still lingering. Beatrice sighed and reached for the whiskey bottle to sample what her old friend had been drinking.

She immediately spit it out into the ocean breeze, and said, "People *drink* that?"

"Some do," Vince laughed, taking the bottle and helping himself to a hearty glug. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, saying, "People who need to forget things."

"Like what?" her voice grew even and quiet. She knew the answer.

Vince faded as he looked past her down the beach line, watching the stars begin to peak out of the cloudy dark. He yearned to answer her question, pour out the truth with

that bottle of whiskey. The ruin it would cause if he said what he felt, and they acted on it, felt like a worse burden than remaining quiet.

"We should probably go back," he finally said. "Wouldn't want to worry anyone."

"Yeah, probably." She sounded as crestfallen as he looked, but it couldn't be helped. The quiet, bitter compromise Vince had made with life when Beatrice went away could not be broken now, not on the eve of her wedding.

"It's a drink for the people who know they walk alone," Vince quietly said as they gained the hilly golf course again. Beatrice stopped to regard him as he stared up at the rising moon. The breeze picked up suddenly, and Vince turned to face Beatrice as her hair reached for him like long tendrils, waves of perfection dancing before him.

"Vince," Beatrice started, but he didn't look to her. His gaze never left that wide open moon.

"Every guy gets lucky at some point, meets the right girl, says the right thing, and you know, I think some guys just know how to say what they feel."

"Vince, please stop-"

Vince turned to Beatrice finally and said, "Some of us are just good at that sort of thing."

"Vince, can you just listen to me for a second?" Beatrice implored. She looked as though she would give up at any moment, come running away with him. Half of Vince screamed furiously at him to do it, say he loved her, finally take hold of what he always secretly wanted. He stood at the brink, the decision looming over him.

"I gotta run," Vince spoke at last, "Have a good wedding."

Marion (an excerpt)

He awoke facing a fluorescent pool of his own vomit swirling against a brilliant white backdrop.

-‘What did I eat that was that color pink?’-

There was a crackling in his mind, like dying embers. Where was he? Who was he?

There was a flash, a scratch, an image. It always came first. The worst of it always came first. Marion awoke in the morning, every morning, thinking October, feeling the grit on his skin, beneath his nails, all down his windpipe and to his very soul. October. October. October. With this memory as a solitary reference point, floating forever in stasis, Marion could reconstruct his reality.

-‘Caroline’-

From experience, he knew that at most, he was out three to five minutes. His throat burned, and he saw a stain on the sleeve of his brown suede jacket, but he could clean up in no time. He went to the mirror.

III

Caroline turned around in her seat to face him as he walked into the auditorium, now slowly creeping its way toward darkness. Years had passed. Marion emerged from a wormhole to a world just awakening from a centuries' long nap, sloughing off a forest of thorns and the bones of a once fearsome dragon. He tried desperately again to latch onto something, grabbing at every thought he could find, but the cobwebs of darkness crept in on him and softened existence. His head filled with cotton stuffing and time slowed down,

slower, slower, slower; Marion traced the diminishing path of the stage light as it fell, as a feather onto Caroline's shoulder, and here her smile glowed. Suddenly he found himself at her seat, smiling and sitting down, thumping his boots one by one on the carpet casually; kicking up a storm of microbes visible only to him. The townspeople commenced their dancing and daily chores, oblivious.

"I missed you..." Caroline said with another yawn, stretching and then drawing in to herself with a warm smile.

"Did you?" Marion smiled back.

Caroline nodded and presently a hush fell over the crowd as the stage lights came on. Marion saw movement behind the curtain—the flicker of a hand. He looked over at Caroline and saw she had just finished glancing at him. He heard footsteps backstage. A bony face peeked out from behind the curtain, the hair pulled back and tied like a corset. He felt a scowl cross his face and hastily brought his smile back. It occurred to him then. He leaned over to Caroline to whisper in her ear. The proximity nearly brought him to his knees.

"Hey, do you want to go somewhere else?"

"What?"

"Do you," -'pheromones, those have to be pheromones'-
"do you want to get out of here... with me?"

-'attention, ATTENTION, ATTENTION!'-

"Now?"

The gangly brunette with the corseted hair emerged at the side of the stage, and Marion knew this person. He knew her piercing gaze and the power it had to make him feel like shit.

“Yeah, now...”

“Hmm...” There was the smile again. Marion was sent briefly into another world. It was a tableau seen in three-quarter perspective. A bell chimed.

“Sure...”

“Hm, then we should go now. I don't want her to see me.”, Marion pointed.

“Barbara?”

“Yes, Barbara. What kind of name is Barbara anyway?”

“An old one.”

“Come now.”

“By all means.”

A wise choice it was to take her hand. Up the stairs, stumbling falsely for a giggle, out the door, casting a ghostly glare on the crowd, giggling, in the hall, giggling, and out the front where the sun met them both and for the first time they were face to face with one another. Caroline lost her edges and faded into the background. The color went out of the world. Her eyes remained inky black pinpoints in an overexposed photograph, and that was all Marion was able to or wanted to see.

IV

October...

“Hey, um... are... are you ok?”

Nothing... and then she turned to him. Her eyes were aflame with tears. Never had Marion seen such redness. They were poised to melt out of their sockets and drip onto the dusty ground. All of a sudden Marion was struck with a terrible fear that this girl's eyes might be contaminated. So he felt the grit gathering in his own, felt the dust, and was thrown into a fit of uncontrollable blinking.

"Oh my god... um..."

Cuts, bruises, scrapes. cross-hatching in blood all over her extremities; A ripped skirt, ripped shirt, torn left bra strap, salty puddles of tears, snot... something else. The open sores on the girl's knees had stopped bleeding but now secreted watery plasma. Her hair fell in wads hiding her dissolving face. She really was melting. Marion rushed over to hold her skin to her body. A tornado of leaves blew sideways up the alley, throwing the tail of Marion's jacket into a frenzy as he knelt down, compelled by an undeniable burning in his chest, and began to encircle the girl in his arms.

"DON'T PLEASE!!!"

Marion shot backward.

"Okay, okay, okay..."

"Please don't touch me!"

"Okay, I won't"

There they sat in the alley, Marion and the bag of broken glass, as the scene stealthily crept toward the closest tear in the fabric of space and time.

V

"I thought Dr. McDaniel said you had to be here." There was laughter in Caroline's voice.

"Yeah... He'll be fine."

"Didn't you have a reason for coming?" Caroline asked.

"I weighed my options." Marion answered. The fire was rekindled in Caroline's cheeks.

"Damn..." Caroline said. An entire rack of pristine Waterford crystal was crushed by a poorly anchored ceiling beam, "ha... I guess you did."

"Hmm..."

"So", Caroline rocked on her heels, "what now?"

"Dunno... How's coffee?"

"Sounds decent." Caroline answered.

"Do you have a place you normally go?" Marion asked.

"Yeah, Johannes's. How's that?"

"I've been there. Let's go."

"Should we ride together?"

"Don't know, where's your car?"

"I got dropped off."

"Oh, well why didn't you say so?"

"I think I did.", Caroline laughed. Marion was rocketed into space, descending once again on a tableau.

There are those brief shining moments in knowing another person when one is truly in love. And by love, Marion imagined to himself that at that exact moment he would dive in front of a train, guzzle down raw sewage by the quart, and slit his mother's throat for this person standing in front of him. Love professed at any other time is a statement of the past, or some hope for the future, which may or may not be realized—which is entirely circumstantial. Marion experienced his moment and found something tangible on the tip of his tongue. He swallowed it, and his mouth was dry once again. He knew that a taste of something so sweet stomps on the thinnest edges of primal voracity.

...What to make of the melting girl..?

Sunday, April 13th

An urgent breeze
flutters through the open kitchen
window and warns of
storms brewing miles off the
coast

as leaves bend in the gusts
showing their green
underbellies the sky
deepens into grey as a
small bird alights on the sill
shocking me with his color -
an unnatural yellow, vibrant,
electric

his black eyes
watch my every move,
seeming to question the
actions of my hands –
the importance of their movements –

his feet, sharp as
razors, frantically hop up and
down as if crimping the edges of
my pie crust and while
his tiny black beak squawks out its
fierce foreign language
the air grows
quite

frustrated by my lack of
understanding he takes flight
and his abrupt absence
fills me with an
unexplained sense of
doom.

Alienation of Affection

The dock gently rocks
and sways with the water's
choppy movements
as she lies on her back
shielding her face against
the bright day.
Through squinted eyes
she watches cloud
shaped memories float
past, parading their way
across the seamless summer sky.
She reaches up -
daring to break the invisible
barrier separating the
earth bound and the
eternal, only to come back
empty handed.
As her heart sinks,
heavy yet hollow, to the
bottom of the murky water,
she curses aloud the time
forced apart, not able to
know that her mother,
lying on her stomach, patiently
waits for a glimpse
of her child through the slow
drifting clouds.

Stepping Through Memories

Damon saunters through the rolling hills. It is his solace; he demands the lonely expanse. Grass gives life to the dirt—a blanket against the staccato morning dew. Damon walks these hills searching for what is no longer his, rifling each blade of Kentucky blue. Naked toes cut the meadow supplying memories, directing him the way a compass guides the captain to the shore. No matter the height of the waves, north remains constant.

In a memory not too old, Damon thinks of Henry and his two boys, Isaac and Jeremiah. Grandfather Damon treasured every moment he had with his miniature baseball players. He was a young grandfather, only forty-five. Retirement was twenty years his senior, and only Grandfather Damon aged. Saturday morning joy came on a clay diamond mounted in a Bermuda grass. He watched his younger generation chase balls in the shallows of the outfield, and the cool breeze acted as his time machine.

Henry was named by his mother. She said the way his name felt on her lips gave her comfort. She practiced saying his name when she talked to her womb, whispering to Henry how she loved him already. And when she prayed, she would ask for Henry's safety just to satisfy her mind's want to hear his name.

After Henry's birth, his mother never carried another child. She was unable to love more than one, she thought, and she wasn't willing to find out if jealousy was her wickedness. Henry didn't play baseball, but soccer instead. Damon coached Henry's teams twice a year until Henry started seventh grade. Damon marked every game on his pocket calendar and made a habit out of arriving one hour early to watch warm-ups. He was able to sit in the lonely bleachers enjoying the

succor of seeing his son run across the turf. The repetitiveness of kicking drills provided reprieve, and Damon remembered life as a married couple—before children.

Damon carried Robin on their first vacation as husband and wife. His favorite spot was the white sands on the gulf coast, but hers the Carolina foothills. In a feeble attempt to go on holiday with the ocean, he told her the hot sand was good for her feet. In protest, Robin reminded him that he loved her enough to spend their first vacation where she wanted to go. In his adoration, Damon conceded to the Carolina foothills.

Grass swept over their campground, city lights absent, a new moon present, the galaxy felt achievable. The night was still warm—the affection the sun loaned the St. Augustine was tepid on Robin's skin.

“Declare your love for me, dear knight.”

“But a knight should only declare his love for the one who loves him, prove your worthiness, and your request be granted.”

“Damon, you know but to ask, and I'll do. So hear me say with the spirit of each star my witness. I love you, and at death I shall not leave but only if Lucifer himself steals me away.”

“My lady, I have heard your proclamation, and I understand you promise to deny the duty of your body to die, unless Satan himself claims you. Am I correct?”

“Sir, you hear me rightly.”

“Then, since you have taken a vow to not separate yourself from me, except by supernatural means, I shall fulfill your request and grant you the words you ask, but be warned your ear may decline such proof, when it is presented.”

“And why may this be.”

"Do you not see the distance of the universe, my lady?"

"Yes, but why should it matter?"

"That distance is the result of my first vision of you. My eyes cast those stars to their locations, to appease my jealousy; I could not have the stars steal you away."

"Am I to believe, dear knight, you cast away the stars?"

"It is as I say."

"Then show me this power,"

This was Damon's fondest memory. His imagination never interfered with the purity of that single night.

"Her mother and I do," was the announcement to the audience in attendance. Damon never remembers this day the same way twice. His certainty ended as soon as he took Robin's hand to repeat his vows. The moment overwhelmed him and is his only regret. A husband should remember the moment he kisses his bride, but for Damon it was an impassive moment. He never understands why he can't remember those fifteen minutes.

College was Damon's goal and on a baseball scholarship. But Robin was his future. Damon always swung for the fence, but with Robin, bunting the ball for a single seemed just as satisfying. His baseball glove was replaced with intertwined fingers, and his bat with a young man's hormones. He was good enough to be drafted after a few years of college ball, but not with a full time girlfriend. She had to be the one. Baseball from three years old and never one girlfriend, until he saw her. Red hair, school teacher glasses, tank tops.

His next step wasn't in the grass, but imported sand. Damon visited the gulf coast just a few weeks ago and returned with the ocean's property. Half a day's journey and the beach is a marker—a small blemish on these hills.

Ancient War

To the battlefield warriors are brave,
swords swinging through the flesh produce fresh blood
bring death with fierce edge of metal wave
the ruined life of peace put down in mud.

Savaging each corpse, my reward to glean
trinkets dead foes have left across the field.
My purse is full no more I take, thirteen
struck dead. I should be proud so many killed.

Aroma burns the senses with the flame
as bone of bodies leaves this earth in smoke.
Repent and yet this Viking feels his shame
with only final wish for death awoke.

The music of my heart strikes fear with knell,
While with a felling skill I paint my hell.

Friendly Fire

Arrivederci. This is it. I'm done. I've had it.

My mind echoed these thoughts over and over like it was stuck on repeat as I glided along I-77 North towards Charlotte to make my next big pick-up. For the past three years, it had been my weekly routine-back and forth like a human pendulum. But one tends to get sick of that which is routine.

Actually, I wasn't sick of the frequent trips to and from Charlotte. My only sister lived in Charlotte, and I got a two-for-one deal out of the situation: the pickups and spending some time with her. Honestly, the best part was seeing her, but she had become suspicious as to why I was constantly coming to Charlotte and leaving only after a day. My reply was always, "business." I am sure she found this a little confusing seeing how she thought I was a janitor working at a local high school.

While on the subject of my "disguise" career, let me bring you a little more up to speed on who I am and what it is exactly I do. Name is Pearlsom McCreary. Pearle to family. Pretty fucked up name, right? No doubt a bright idea of one of my mom's cocaine-induced states of mind. But my friends and business associates know me as "Squirrel" because I like to play in traffic. Yeah, I am a drug trafficker. A rather large one. I ain't talking about dime and quarter bags. I'm talking pounds and pounds. I am the guy that gets the product for the guy who sells it to the next guy who sells it to the next guy who sells it to the next guy who sells the dime and quarter bags. I owe it all to my best friend. He introduced me to the guy who provides the weed to me straight off the plane. Not the most highly respected job, but it pays well and gets me all the ass I want. I'm talking grade A, top of the line, model-type booty. You realize you have more friends than you thought, too. Superficial friends. But such is the life of a big-time trafficker.

But lately, I have been reconsidering my career choice. Thinking of getting out. And this trip to Charlotte was compounding these feelings. I wanted something else. Something more fulfilling than just fast cars, nice suits, and bad bitches. Plus, it takes a toll on a person when you are in a state of paranoia twenty-four seven. I am twenty-seven years old. I look and feel like I'm forty. It's in my best interest to get out. *Yeah, this'll be the last pickup.*

I stomped down on the accelerator of my 2011 Porche Cayman, peeling around the car that must have been on its way to church. The familiar blue and black colors along with the big red words "Bank of America Stadium" emerged into view as I approached my exit.

My car engine purred as I zig-zagged through the warehouse parking lot where I always made the pickup. As always, nervousness consumed my body. It was just a block down the street from the police station, and I hated that; but my dude owned the business warehouse, so it wasn't suspicious for us to meet there.

Come on man, this is the last time, I'm done, I've had enough.

I grabbed two oversized duffle bags and headed in. I no longer had to check in at the front office, just walk by and give a friendly nod. Everyone had become familiar with who I was from the frequent "meetings" Bone and I had. They just didn't know what took place. Hell, I had almost become VIP.

I read the door to the room where we meet: *No Access*. I found that humorous. I access it every week. *But this would be the last.* I rang out the secret knock, and the door was opened. Instantly I was overwhelmed with lingering smoke that engulfed my body and lungs. It smelled of sweaty sex, and I always found myself a little confused at that. But I didn't ask questions.

“Squirrel, get yo’ ass in here. Come try out the new flavor.” Bone was surrounded by his two usual men. What he called “guards.” Hanging from his lips was a spliff huffing out smoke like a chimney.

“Ah. Come on, Bone, you know I don’t smoke. I wish you would refrain from asking me every time I come here. Answer ain’t gonna change.”

“Squirrel, Squirrel, Squirrel. So stuck in your ways. What’s new?”

“Well, that’s actually something I need to talk to you about. I’m done after this. This is it. I’m getting out the game. I’ll take this shipment and distribute it, but I’m moving on. Nothing against you, and I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. But get yourself a new mule.”

“Is that so. I’m sorry to hear that. But you have to understand. We had a verbal contract. You’re breaking it, and I don’t take too kindly to that. You’re costing me money. I don’t think that’s something you really want to do. Maybe you should rethink it.”

“There is no rethinking to do. It’s been playing in my mind for a while now. I’ve made my decision, and I have no second thoughts.”

“Sounds like you’ve made up your mind. Can’t say I’m happy. Why don’t you go ahead and take this and get the fuck outta here. Don’t let the door hit cha on the way out.”

It wasn’t surprising the reaction I got from Bone. I had expected it. Thing is, I never really thought about how it would cost him money. Never really thought about repercussions for my bailing out. It’s not enough that I have to endure this last bout of paranoia while getting rid of these 10 pounds of

grass, but now I have to worry about retaliation from Bone. I decided to let it go. Nothing could be done about it now. I made up my mind, and that was that.

Getting back home sure was a trip. Blown out tire going 78 mph down a two-lane highway'll sure give your heart a spasm. That was nothing compared to dealing with the State Highway Patrolman who pulled over behind me to offer his assistance. Ten pounds is easily more than half the rest of my life in prison. I couldn't help but think how stupid and risky this crap was. *It's almost over. It's all good.*

I breathed a sigh of relief when I finally fell into the la-z-boy in my lounge room and flipped on the television to the sound of Peter Griffin ranting. "Pow, right in the kisser. Pow, right in the kisser." A good episode, but I've seen it a million times. I flipped to channel 176, 70's rock and roll, and performed my best air guitar—rocking out with Led Zeppelin's "Stairway To Heaven."

Just as I was finishing up my solo, my cell phone brought me back to reality. It was my best friend, you remember, the one who introduced me to Bone.

"Rabbit, talk to me."

"Neh, what's up, Doc?"

"Good one, ya crazy goofball. What's going on? You in town?"

"Nah, I'm still in the Big Easy. Back tomorrow in the a.m. Flight arrives at 9:27. And you know I'll be drunk by the time the thing touches down."

"Wouldn't surprise me. Your liver's about as dark as the other side of the moon."

“And your comedy is about as funny as ‘The Blue Collar Comedy Tour’. But enough. I need to talk to you about something serious.”

“Shoot.”

“That would probably be the last word you’d use if you knew what I was ‘bout to tell you. Bone paid me a little phone visit about an hour ago. He isn’t too happy about you getting’ out. Says you are fuckin’ him. Costin’ him money and time. Cause for concern.”

“Listen, silly Rabbit, I can’t do it anymore. Wanna be able to relax, get a real job—one that is respectable, making money the legal way. I can’t take the paranoia or anything else anymore. It’s a move I have to make.”

“For your sake, I hope Bone can let it go. You know this makes me look bad as much as it does you. I’m the one he trusted to find him a good man. Ain’t too happy with me either. Which makes me not too happy with you. You’ve embarrassed me. Made me look bad, and Bone’s just as pissed at me. I am in as much risk for his wrath as you are.”

“Look, don’t worry ‘bout it. He ain’t gonna do nothing’. Let it go and get at me when you land tomorrow. If you are able to dial the numbers. I ain’t worried about it, neither should you. See ya.”

After my conversation with Rabbit, I began thinking about what he’d said. Maybe I was being too lax about it. I surely didn’t want Rabbit to be any part of it. He had nothing to do with me leaving. But I knew that was unrealistic because the guy who brings in the guy is responsible for his man. I decided I would give Bone a call tomorrow, try to mend things, at least with him and Rabbit. How hard could it be for him to find

another guy anyway. I didn't see what the big deal was. *Yeah, callin' him first thing tomorrow.*

Morning shined its golden rays through the partially opened blinds of my bedroom window, alerting me that it was time to call Bone. I wasn't even gonna wait for morning coffee. After all, the early bird gets the worm. Only this early bird was trying to make amends with a drug lord. A little different. I grabbed the cell and speed dialed Bone.

"Yeah."

"Bone, it's Squirrel."

"I know who it is, asshole, this ain't the first time you called me. Did you call to renege on backing out?"

"Bone, no. My intentions are the same. I wanna clear things up. Make sure we're cool."

"Ahnahnah, there ain't no cool. You back out, we ain't cool. And you know what, that lil' bitch Rabbit got something coming too." Click.

After my unsuccessful yet enlightening phone dialogue with Bone, I didn't know what to do. Surely Rabbit would be calling me soon. We'd have to go from there. He would know what to do. He always knew what to do.

It was strange that I hadn't heard from him yet. It's almost 10:15. He always calls me right away to meet up and cut up the product. I dialed him but to no avail. *What the hell? Rabbit is always prompt.*

I decided to go down the street to the Quik-E-Mart for a pack of smokes until I heard from Rabbit. After locking the door, I turned around and was met by a shower of gunshots. As I lay

bleeding on the brink of unconsciousness, with the last bit of strength in my body, I raised my head expecting to see Bone with a smoking pistol in his hand. Imagine my shock when I realized who the man was jumping in the car. It was Rabbit.

I survived the assault. But I still don't know why Rabbit wanted to kill me. After two weeks in the hospital, I finally got the go-ahead to return home. Those two weeks—immobile and wired to machines—gave me loads of time to think. Revenge was on my mind. My mission was to take Rabbit out. His inability to finish the job was my invitation to finish him.

Through numerous phone calls, Rabbit's whereabouts became known. he was cooped up in his slut-of-the-week's house just outside of town. Probably didn't think I'd find him. Surely he'd known I survived. Maybe he didn't know I was out of the hospital. Maybe he didn't think I would retaliate. For whatever reason, it was no matter to me. It made things easier for me.

Night overtook the day, Rabbit was seated at his laptop at the kitchen table. Checking his stock consumed his attention, but he jumped like a kangaroo at the sound of the door being kicked and me protruding from the shadows, pistol locked on Rabbit's dome.

“Knock Knock, mutherfucker!”

“Oh, Rabbit. Shit. Hold on, man. Come on, just hold up!”

“Why, 'Bit?! Why'd you try to kill me?”

“Squir..”

“Fuck you. why'd you try to kill me!”

“B-Bone offered to spare my life if I took you out. I had no other fuckin' choice.”

"Your best friend, Rabbit. You sold out and tried to kill your best friend. Fuck you. We would have figured out some way to deal with Bone."

"I couldn't wait around hoping we'd figured out something with Bone! The offer was made. I had to take it. Don't you see?"

"I don't give a goddamn. You don't try to kill your best friend. For anything."

"Pearle, I really am sor...."

"Don't! It means nothing!"

My pistol screamed out piercing an aperture in Rabbit's shin.

"Aahhh, fuuccck, you asshole!"

"You're lucky I'm a good fuckin friend. You'll live."

Four-and-a-half hours later, I was standing outside of Bone's front door. No lights were illuminated inside, but he was home because his green, rust-outlined car was camped in the driveway. There was no hesitation. Two deep breaths, a short prayer, and I was kickin' down the door. Into the bedroom, two shots rang out, and the deed was done. Bone was no more.

Now I'm done.

Oranges and Lavender

My lover waits for me on lavender sheets
but I am in the marketplace counting oranges

The soft blond tendrils of my summer hair
have been bound in braids that pull my scalp

My lover calls me to the garden to sink my fingers into warm,
black soil
but I am sorting oranges in the house

I long to sit out on the back porch and eat oranges with my
lover
spitting seeds onto the earth and waiting for them to grow

Then we would make orange wine and drink through the
night
collapsing on lavender sheets with black dirt beneath our
fingernails

God

God never talks
But she said to me
That he never gets mad
But that she is very angry
Because everyone is trying
To tell him who she is and
Not really listening to what
The other one says

When the frog sang in the forest
God said, "That frog really gets it"
When the baby cried in Harlem
God said, "That baby is onto something"
When the college student said
"I don't know, I just don't know"
God said, "You're getting warmer..."
Then the rock sat still,
And so did God

God said to me
"Don't they see that I am always becoming?"
Then I realized that I was talking to myself
And God smiled

Leaving

Every moment was a wonder to me then
From the time he picked me up
To the last hours we spent
Sometimes a week,
Sometimes a month
But it didn't matter –
It was never enough.
When it came time to leave his house,
(My house too until the divorce)
I would leave little notes around
In the cereal box,
With the silverware,
"I love you, Daddy"
"I miss you, Daddy"
Couldn't we have just one more day?
One more hour?
We would meet my mom half-way
And I would put myself and my stuff into her car
I couldn't stop crying
How could hurt reach that deep?
As our cars drove away,
In opposite directions,
I would watch his car grow smaller and smaller
Through the rear window I would strain,
With my child eyes,
For as long as I possibly could
Until he got very, very small
And was gone

Not That She Was Born to Hate All Men

It's not that she was born to hate all men,
Though sometimes she'll exclaim, "If the shoe fits"—
She simply has confusion now and then.

At times her feelings are quite hard to pin,
'Til seated by a cool misogynist.
It's not that she was born to hate all men.

To love a woman would be a mortal sin,
But, while with a man, parts cease to exist—
It simply breeds confusion now and then.

Her first kiss was fueled by a pint of gin,
Caught in the vice by the hair of her armpits.
It's not that she was born to hate all men.

And love, don't feel ashamed as if you've been
Another reason to add to her list
For why she feels confusion now and then.

Look deep into her eyes and you'll see woman,
And female heart desires that cause her bliss.
It's not that she was born to hate all men,
She simply feels confusion now and then.

Movie Night

The flickering screen holds my eyes in the darkness.

Landau as Lugosi explains:

“The pure horror, it both repels, and attracts them...”

Men always think they know women—

Take them to the scary picture show to get laid.

Of course, I'm no different. I have a clock, it ticks—

Some inner workings that can only be explained by
Metaphors of gears and wires, but...

It's really blood and guts, afterbirth and lochia.

The neighbor's having contractions

Four houses down, and I'm horrified.

Retrospection

A man once claimed that love will tear apart--
Words of troubled love on rainy days
Force one into a solitary place.
Aphotic chambers of the lonely heart
Swell with a memory, a rusted barb.
The stain that never seems to wash away,
Despite the time, a thousand yesterdays.
The rising acrid taste returns so sharp.

Some swallow hard, desperate to forget.
Why not allow the surge to settle in?
Embrace the feeling; do not ever let
It drift too far away to imagine.
These little reminders of past regret
Keep one from self betrayal, the greatest sin.

Women and Memory

—A bed and a sink and a walking space of a foot around each. Great place for us to hand launder our clothes for the first time in our lives. Clothes hanging from light fixtures—a proud place, that one.

—Sunrise.

Both women giggled into coffee cups. The lovely old joke.

—Then sleep and the terrible knocking. And the Clock. Holy Shitt. The worst late ever. The clothes were still on the fixtures, the room was shit. What's the French word for shit?

—Merde.

—An hour the bus waited before we stepped on.

—The walk of shame. No one was smiling that morning. You remember I fell asleep in the shower?

—I've been trying to forget that. Had actually forgotten. Thank you. And then why don't I remember about the.

—You wouldn't remember that. (She glances over at the two little girls playing on the floor next to them.) You were. Sleeping.

—Oh yes, that's right.

Switzerland. Vodka orange juice dancing. Cold tile and thick down. The town in the valley. Cowbells. A monastery with a payphone. Driving through Germany. Pictures on the bus with a blur of Black Forest in the background. Black pines.

—Did you know the bridge in Germany burned down the month after we got back.

—Bridge? Erfurt?

—No, it was Switzerland. Lucerne. Chapel Bridge. Paintings in the ceiling, on panels in the rafters. Oldest wooden bridge in Europe. Fasnacht.

—Ah, ok.

—They built a replica.

—And we saw the original.

—Yes.

And Baden-Wurttemberg. The Rhine, the castles. Cologne. Pulling into the marketplace. The open space. Wooden tables with Ofen Brot, potatoes, cabbage. The sprawling Cathedral in the background. Kolner Dom. Neighborhood cathedral. Gothic spires. Hosanna. Stone lace, gargoyles. A vendor gave her flowers. Held them in the bus for an hour.

—Remember the boys in the café in London who wanted our addresses. I had a pen pal for awhile.

—You're kidding. Did I know that?

—Hmm. I should have been a better pen pal. I could live in London.

—Dreary grey there.

—In an old stone house near a moor with

—Heathcliff—no, Rochester. Darcy.

—All three—we're Americans.

—It would be most democratic of us.

—I believe in equal rights for all men.

—Me too! (The small brown-haired girl on the floor has spoken. The motion begins.)

—Oh god.

—Merde. (They had been listening. They are always listening.)

—So then what? (The other small girl asks.)

—We got lost at the zoo in London. Quite a nice zoo they have there. The camels.

—And Westminster Abbey

—is a lovely 'church'.

—We never saw the Mona Lisa. We just had to go shopping.

—And couldn't afford anything. But we did see her. Spent an afternoon in the Louvre. Millet. Caravaggio. Courbet. Not long enough.

—And spent an entire day creeping down the hall of Mirrors.

—The ceiling was lovely.

Never odd or even

The most important thing I've ever done was deny someone a kiss. It's comical actually, I wish now that I would have given it. Sometimes I still hear him whispering, during the day, in the middle of the night. The time isn't much of a matter as long as I can hear him. Whispers of what I should be doing, how I should be living, what my life would be like if I'd given the kiss. I'm most fortunate because of his final words, "Noli me tangere."

You should know that I'm not crazy, but I do know what I've lost. Sometimes I wish when I sat on Alibi, when the aura of the arena emulated the nausea of that afternoon, I could go back to what used to be. Often there are tears, all mine, but the ground tries to mimic me by producing noontime dew. I get that life isn't about wishes, it's all about choices. Unfortunately for us all, this life is also never odd or even. It is for this reason I want to tell you a tale. But please be wary. I shall not be faulted for what you think of me or what you read past here. That will be your choice in this life, and so your gripes with my character are null and void.

His eyes didn't show a reflection—that was the moment I became tentative. Glossy, with the potential to echo, but nothing ever showed. Just recently they'd come to my attention. Dom's personality seemed to be changing, much more irritable than normal. Finally when we had been arguing, I went to storm out of the room. Grabbing my wrist like a bear claw, he pulled me close to him and gently kissed my cheek. "I'm sorry," he said, and all was forgiven. From the distance our faces were apart, I glanced into his one-way eyes. I needed to know what caused them to be that way. It is for that reason I've wondered how this was possible, but because I knew he'd never say without inquiries. I voted to ask one afternoon on Alibi Hill.

“Dom⁶, what's wrong with your eyes?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your eyes, why don't they reflect?” He paused. This awkward silence was enough for me to know he knew what I meant. I honestly didn't expect him to be the type of person who thought something like that would go unnoticed, though I imagine from a distance his eyes do appear quite normal. “It's alright if you don't want to tell me—it's just something I've been meaning to ask.”

Dom, in my opinion, seemed noticeably worried. His answer, however, did not fit my perception. “At one point they were like yours, when we were younger. But we've been on this Earth twenty-seven years now, and they haven't reflected in nine.”

“Are you serious? How is it that I didn't noticed this until now?” I asked.

“Because I didn't want you to.” I wanted to know what he meant. “There are so many things in this world, in this life. Don't you find it strange things are never odd or even?”

I laughed. He sounded crazy. “We're speaking in riddles now, are we? Well why don't you break that down for me. ‘Never odd or even.’ What's it mean?”

“I know I'll never be able to explain it to you, but I imagine I can at least show you.”

“Lead the way then, friend.” And so we walked.

⁶ Latin Meaning: Belonging to God

The slopes of Alibi Hill lead to a small grove in the valley. I wish I could show it to you, but it's more convenient for me to just tell you about it. I know from count that there are twenty-seven trees, all of which produce apples, all in designated lines of threes. Of the nine columns, each tree is exactly identical to the next—with the exception column five, tree two. As centermost tree, from my view, this one towers above the others. It is this tree where Dom would lead me.

“Are we going to Ω ?” I asked. That's what we called it, Omega. It was a fitting name, especially since the tree was so massive.

“Yes we are.” I'd been to Ω many times so I was interested why this time would be different. Clearly there was something Dom didn't know how to say, but he couldn't even figure out how to say it to me? We'd been best friends for our entire lives, I loved him like my brother. Thoughts creep in and out of my being, what is so special about this tree today?

Approaching Ω , the atmosphere of the moment felt different. I could see Dom out of my right peripheral. Eyes wide, he gazed humbly into the tree. Even from where I was standing I could understand what he was doing—talking and listening to Ω .

“Dom, what are we doing?”

“Just a second.” His momentum enhanced while I remained frozen. Cautiously walking to the lowest of Ω 's branches, he plucked an apple. “I must explain to you the rules, and if you so choose to accept, then you'll get why I'm different.”

It's important to mention I had no idea what Dom had become or what he intended to turn me into. We're too far ahead from there now though, and the normalcy of my former years is no longer an option. He offered me an apple and a set of rules, an offer I couldn't resist completely before hearing his explanation.

"You who so chooses to question the Seer, thou shall be given a chance to live the life. Walking in the footsteps of the past, a simple bite will seal your fate. It's a simple farce to lose one self, to gain another. Unless a kiss were given in return to an unrequited lover."

I gathered his words carefully before I even imagining responding.

"Why would I agree to that, Dom? I have no idea what you just said. But of what I did get, you mentioned I'd lose myself in some absurd trade. Why would anyone every agree to such rules?"

"I did." He smiled. "And that all worked out okay." I'd tried very hard to understand, but I couldn't. He was in such a state of ease that no words or noises that escaped my lips could tamper him. Without a moment's hesitation—which I wish had been taken—I approached Dom with rapid speed and snatched the apple from his hands. Sinking my canines into its outer layers, I ripped and swallowed a massive chunk of the illicit fruit as I heard a whisper forewarn me,

"Kato⁷, non. . ."

⁷ Latin Meaning: Good Judgment

My jaw unhinged and the apple fell as I watched Dom fall onto his hands and knees under the shade of Ω.

“Oh my God! Dom! Are you okay?” I rushed over to help him up.

“Noli me tangere!”⁸

“Okay, I won’t touch you. Now what do you need me to do?” It hadn’t quite occurred to me that he was speaking Latin, and that I understood with perfect clarity. My focus remained on my friend, my brother, who sat hunched under the trees.

“Nihil aliud quidquam. Quem di diligunt adulescens moritur.”⁹

“Maybe, but not you! Not now.” My feelings over powered me, tears rushing out. Here I stood as my brother laid fading. I closed my eyes for a moment to search the catacomb archives of my memory. “A kiss! You said something about a kiss. What did you mean?”

“Oscula si ergo me et hunc habebis exitum. Mortem tuam erit cognitis et sedebitis in locum tuum substituit.”¹⁰

“So if I kiss you, I die. But you’ll remain. . .” *Whose life matters more?* I couldn’t answer my own question. In my mind Dom was everything; stronger, faster, nicer, more benevolent. I couldn’t live to his standards, so perhaps I shouldn’t live at all.

⁸ “Don’t touch me”

⁹ “Nothing, simply nothing. He whom the Gods love dies young.”

¹⁰ “If you kiss me, then you shall have this fate. You will perish, and I will stay in your place.”

"Let's do it." I moved closer but with his remaining strength, he crawled backward.

Again he hissed, "Noli me tangere."

"I don't want to die Dom, but I don't want you to die either." A surge of information hit me, and I realized the true essence of Ω. "This is Tree of Knowledge isn't?" By biting into its fruit, I was becoming a part of it.

"Sic et non. Similia similibus curantur. Sed figura potentia, etiam tu. Jam alligatus es vinculo inter se, quamvis longo tempore, nisi aliud quaerit vos sunt."¹¹

"That's why you brought me here. I asked about your eyes, and so you had to." It was beginning to make sense. Dom didn't want to change me but because of this life, this curse, he had to. My bargain with death was becoming clearer by the moment. Dom continued to wince at my feet. I knew in my being that any moment now he'd change his mind to escape the pain. "Kiss me," he'd say, and I would die in his place. But the fact of the matter is that I see this life, as watcher of Ω, a greater burden. To stay endlessly, with no guarantee of death unless someone wants to know why you're different. *What if I were to isolate myself and gave no man the chance? Would the same rules apply?* My thoughts would prove useless in my final decision.

"Kato, help me. I can't do this anymore." By this point Dom had begun to cry.

¹¹ "Yes and No. Similar things take care of similar things. Ω is a symbol of power, and so are you. Now you are bound to one another, no matter the length of time, unless another inquires of your state."

Before he had the chance to ask, I knew I couldn't save Dom. As he began to die, his feelings as a human being, not an ethereal creature, began to return. He suffered, and I watched. He begged for the kiss, and I couldn't deliver. There were single seconds where I wanted to save him, but he knew that his fate would be better off than mine. Dom's final words would be, "Let me go, don't touch me," as his body departed in a mist from this world. I was becoming one with Ω , and my eyes had already reflected this change.

The funny thing about biting into Ω 's fruit is that you actually get to know everything but understand nothing. While I've lost Dom, gaining this knowledge has in turn caused me to lose much more. I sit now on Alibi to caution all those who inquire knowledge. Dom and I were both tricked into this ploy, and for that I cannot blame my friend. I am however grateful that his words now make sense -- life is never odd or even.

Reception

July 19, 1992

Infantryman A. W. Bole:

I know that you won't understand, but I feel that I must tell you anyway. No, this wasn't all a dream. It was all as real as reality can be. And you decide what that is: reality; really. As long as you're lying to yourself you won't know everything is a lie. Your irrationality was your downfall the first time; you refused to believe your lies. You refused to believe my lies. But this time is different. This time you'll be okay. You'll be able to forge a new creation.

Sincerely,

Rifleman Antony Baw

The first time I read this I did so very quickly. I did not understand. The second time I tried to make sense of it all, but I couldn't come to any sort of conclusion. After my third run through of the letter, I decided to attribute the words to past letters. I remember telling that jarhead bastard about my wife's death. I remember writing, "It all feels like a dream." That must be what he meant. But about my deciding what is real—what is reality—I don't understand. I know all of this is real. I'm not lying to myself, and I don't know why I would. Irrationality? What first time? What lies? And what is "this time"?

It's overcast today in London. Typical. The rays of the noontime sun haven't even come close to penetrating those horrid clouds. It hasn't rained, hasn't rained in a while. Everything has been rather dreary, and there is no sign of it letting up for at least a week. Outside of my window I can see Grosvenor Square. Lacking in color, the trees hardly present themselves with a green tint. The grass is plain and evenly cut. There are a few benches, all of which are empty. One person, a businessman, is walking toward the chancery; he walks out of sight, four stories beneath me. I tire of gazing out of the window, but I cannot refrain from looking at the dismal view. I'm reminded of a sort of apathy. I feel what I see. Before I

return to my desk, I see a raven fly to the ledge outside my window. It doesn't see me. Though there is no sunlight, I see a spark in its eye. Then it flies away, and I sit to write my reply to Rifleman Baw.

Rifleman Antony Baw:

I'm not so sure I understand anything you said in your last letter. Please explain in your next reply.

London is getting to me. All these people and their accents. I don't know if I'll be able to leave here American. Still wish the Army wouldn't have given me a desk job. I feel like this is the worst position they could put me in, and all because my wife died. I'm not suicidal, for God's sake, but I'm sure they could use my abilities in the field instead of this forsaken building. I could use the escape of adrenaline. All this place does is make me think of her more.

I wonder why you didn't speak of your loved one in your last. I'm curious to know more about her. She sounds beautiful. My Lacy was quite beautiful herself. I know I sent you a picture, but I wish you could have seen her in person. Speaking of which, I feel like we should meet sometime. Perhaps when I'm stateside.

Sincerely,

Infantryman A. W. Bole

July 20, 1992

Infantryman A. W. Bole:

I knew you wouldn't understand. And if you're lucky, you won't have to. I'll see you today at noon.

Sincerely,

Rifleman Antony Baw

It's almost noon, and I have yet to see Rifleman Baw. I wonder how it is that this marine, who I've met only through the correspondence of letters, plans to see me. I had no idea he was in London. I don't even know what the man looks like;

I wouldn't know it was him if I saw him. The only thing more curious is these past two letters and their vague words. Truly, I feel like this man is just screwing with me.

The sun broke my train of thought. I'm walking through Grosvenor Square, and the clouds have parted and rays of sunlight are prevailing over the gloom. I can see an almost unfamiliar blue in the sky, and the trees are a bright green. The grass doesn't seem plain anymore. Everything is beautiful. A butterfly appears out of nowhere and lands on top of the bench nearest me. Wind blows softly and with warmth. The insect is carried away with it and flutters somewhat helplessly until it catches the wind and glides onto a new destination.

I realize now that it is almost 1300. There has been no sign of Rifleman Baw, and so I wish to make my reply. On the way to my office I pass a man—the businessman from yesterday, who nods his head. I nod mine in return. As soon as I sit at my desk I begin to write.

Rifleman Antony Baw:

You continue to confuse me. I really thought we would meet today, and I wonder if we still will. I've been waiting for quite some time to make your acquaintance.

I hope to hear from you soon. In more of a sensible manner, I hope. The curiosity is killing me. Until then, I really don't know what to say.

Sincerely,

Infantryman A. W. Bole

July 21, 1992

Infantryman A. W. Bole:

This is to be my last letter of correspondence with you. I apologize for so much deceit. I do not desire forgiveness, but for you to forget. All of this has been for your benefit, really. And I assure you, Bole, we have acquainted ourselves with

each other on more than one occasion. I'm hoping this meeting will have been our last.

Sincerely,

Rifleman Antony Baw

I must admit that I am still confused, but what has affected me more is that this is his last letter to me. I'm tired of trying to understand. The loss of the only friend I have is one of the worst things that could have happened. At this moment... I miss Lacy more than anything.

Everything outside is gray again. Rain is falling from those relentless clouds. The trees are almost black, and the grass is flooded with water. No businessman walks to or from the chancery. No butterfly glides through a wind, which remains absent. My fifth story window is tainted by the drops of rain as a bird flies to the ledge. Drops of water fall off of the raven's feathers in a seamless manner. The bird is staring at me. I walk over to the window and open it. Once I've done this the bird flies away beyond where I can see. Without thinking, I pull myself out onto the ledge. Fifty feet doesn't look so far down. But I'm not afraid of falling.

"I'm sorry, Lacy. I can't do it anymore. I have to move on."

Arms outstretched, I jump to fly.

Rifleman Antony Baw:

I have seen no better days than these. I feel so alive.

Thank you,

Infantryman A. W.

























