

THINGS WE DO ALONE:
POETRY, PROSE, AND MEMOIR

by

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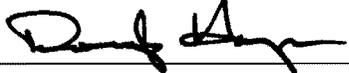
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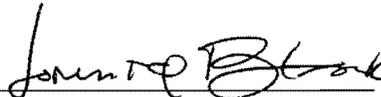
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INTRODUCTION

After reading Hugo's *Triggering Town*, after myriad college courses dictating to write what one knows, I decided to do just that. Taking inventory of what a person thinks he knows at twenty, or forty, or sixty, is a challenge of how long he can look at himself without degenerating into narcissism, self-pity, or other vices or excuses. The challenge, then, is to look objectively at that one thing every person is by nature inclined to regard with extreme bias, and in looking at that thing, the self, to find out what is true. As Langston Hughes' instructor for English B stated, "Go home and write / a page tonight. / And let that page come out of you – / Then, it will be true".

But as Edgar Lee Masters' character, 'Oaks Tutt', encounters during his high-minded dreaming, there is always the need to "...answer the question of Pontius Pilate: / 'What is Truth?'" As in anthropology, so, too, with literature: how can one objectively see a thing, the self, as it is without affecting it merely by watching? I am certainly not the first one to say it, but the truth is in the distortion, in how one warps the self, contorts the self to fit longings, desire or fear. Truth is the world of physical limits, of testable, empirical realities. Truth is the fact of eventual death, of possible birth or bringing forth of other life, of imperfect love, of failure. Victories, too, but perhaps fewer.

The observation of these facts is never completely disinterested. Via defective senses, hidden agendas, and social pressure, the view of the self is rendered obscure, even intentionally misleading. Depending on what factors play in, different impurities crop up in whatever medium is used in recording one's self. These impurities are Truth. As with quartz and certain other minerals, the impurities are what turn the mineral purple, rose, or

smoky. For me, the medium of letters is quartz, and all the fantasies and desires, shallow or deep, taking them for what they are, are the impurities, or Truth.

To see these impurities, however, they must have a stable piece of rock around them. Real rock. Which is to say, the words in which one can read something meaningful must actually signify something, must have tangible qualities that can be tasted or otherwise sensed from the real world object being symbolized on the page. Maybe it's a personal bias or defect, but I don't care much for Derrida. On the other tack, T. E. Hulme appeals to me: "The essence of poetry to most people is that it must lead them to a beyond of some kind. Verse strictly confined to the earthly and the definite... might seem to them to be excellent writing, excellent craftsmanship, but not poetry." What Hulme approaches saying in these lines is the same thing that Tolkien said when he claimed that his writing was *sub-creation* rather than *creation*: too many readers and writers are trying to create truth rather than find it already existing in the world around them. They would both add, probably, that trying to reach beyond is to look away from where wisdom really is: in the grit, in reading and arranging the materials at hand. It's impossible to truly create wisdom or truth ex nihilo.

For me, writing means creating the firm quartz in which the impurities of my senses and wants can be read. The classic angle has gone out of vogue, living on mostly in bastardized forms. When terms like hyper-real and post-modern exist, then all the rage is to try reaching into that area beyond reality, past the present and into the nebulous vapor of the future.

The things I know the most are soccer, college / education, and Wisconsin. I can rearrange the accumulated details into concrete depictions, into equations, or plots, that I try to reach some plausible conclusion with. In the meantime, while I'm trying to reach that conclusion, the reader can see where the depictions are vague, abstract, misleading, or otherwise fantastical, and from that can attempt to decode what emotions warped the image. Or, if the reader is less interested in judging my neuroses and anomalies, then maybe they will simply read to see in what ways they and I are similar, to see that no person is *that* anomalous, flawed, or outstanding. I can't predict the reader's mind, and if I could, what would be the point of communication?

Today, as in the past, the image is not the important thing to read, but the way one controls their own image is important to scrutinize. Because the devices of control are often hidden, or otherwise plausibly denied, stories are increasingly treated as objects without an author, as *just the text on the page*, as disconnected from intent or affect based on the fallacy I am instructed to believe. To me, this is the equivalent of saying a murdered body is just a murdered body, the work of someone, yes, but the importance is solely the technique in which the body was killed, how it was, pardon the pun, executed. Who cares who did it or why?

If poetry were murder, not just in the sense Julia Kristeva describes, but were actual murder itself, or were some otherwise socially influencing item, then treating the poem as just the text on the page might not be so easily embraced. If poetry has begun not to matter in the mainstream, it could be thought that the light treatment of motive and responsibility for each piece *as thought or communication* is the culprit. If the

mainstream is told the author is no longer responsible for intent, for the emotions generated in the reader, or for publishing the piece, then why would a person not *already* imbedded in the craft approach the poem at all? On the other hand, causality cannot necessarily be deduced from correlation, as psychology students learn. Perhaps the lightness with which motive and responsibility are treated is not cause, but effect. Chicken or Egg, 101: did critics and writers turn off the mainstream audience, or did the mainstream tune out first, leaving the critics and writers to write for themselves and their jobs?

Writing is a lonely activity. When I so spitefully try to dupe you, it's to get you to respond, to recognize me. If someone outside me puts their belief in the persona, if they trust the mask I wear is real, then for a few moments I can dupe myself into believing it, too. And by wearing the mask of a lonely, deeply conflicted, lovelorn athlete, I hope to attract the women at hand who I know will read: fellow students, forced to workshop what I write. The poem 'Ghazal' in this collection is the obvious place where this is hinted at to the reader, given the reader knows anything biographical about me, the author, and about when the poem was written. 'Ghazal' was written for a workshop in real life, just as the poem describes itself and its own writing. And this is why motivation matters as much as execution: I assume, hopefully accurately, that the reader feels differently about the author when they realize 'Ghazal' isn't just some cutesy remembrance of those ol' college days and college flings. Now, that may still be cutesy, but add more biographical detail: the girl described in the poem was not my then-girlfriend, now-fiancée.

‘Ghazal’ is not a persona piece by intent, but is meant to describe the real person, the author, via language. The persona piece is not something I excel at. ‘When I Was A First-Year Teacher’ is a weaker piece, not getting at the particular core of an experience that, while I’ve not had myself, I’ve been present and close at hand for at times. When I try for a persona piece, I instinctively try to write in the style of Edgar Lee Masters, trying to make the persona state objectively what it now knows it went through after much thought and outside perspective. Two things wrong with this. For one, even Masters’ poems suffer from a lack of drama, at times; an experience that is summarized from the narrator well after the fact, usually in an omniscient manner, is not very moving. *Spoon River Anthology* succeeds as a collection only because of the interaction between one poem and another, where occasionally the view presented by one persona is undercut by someone else. ‘Elsa Wertman’ and ‘Hamilton Green’ are two poems by Masters that are, stand-alone, pretty inconspicuous. ‘Hamilton Green’ describes a successful man who attributes his success to his noble blood and heritage. ‘Elsa Wertman’, describes, though, a German peasant girl who has an illegitimate son with a rich man, and, obviously, that son is Hamilton, who claims his Virginian and Kentucky blood is the root for his success when, in fact, his mother is a German peasant girl.

When I go to write persona style pieces, I often write in this same manner, which doesn’t have the drama of being through the eyes of the person as-things-happened, but is told through the person after-the-fact. Secondly, I don’t have the framework of death, of the epitaph poem, to explain why my persona pieces are written from a semi-omniscient perspective on the part of the persona. It’s a flaw I’m aware of, but it’s a hard one to

correct perfectly every time it happens, seeing as how I don't have the ambition to create said-framework, nor the desire to open each persona piece explaining that what is said is well after the fact or after death.

When I write about fantasy versus reality, or soccer, or education, the stances I take and feelings I communicate are closer to being genuine, and in this manner, I think, the poems written around these themes are less challenging for the reader since the view presented isn't so warped and unlike my real view or feelings. Again, there are still defects and problems with how I'm depicting the world in these poems, but the defects likely do not amount to the same level of distortion that I *intentionally* incorporate in other poems.

The two poems, 'Moonlight Soccer Kata' and its partner, are just descriptions of the karate-like nature of juggling a soccer-ball solo (kata is a term for the sort of practice-pantomime done in various martial arts). There's still the distortion of having to be the loner, here, of being the unique crazy-man off on his own, but here that loneliness is closer to being genuine, especially as it could be assumed that the speaker is alone focusing on his skills after everyone else went to the bar or to bed. Describing the lonely practice of soccer in a poem is less ulterior-motive driven than describing loneliness due to a broken heart: while a naïve reader might sympathize with the writer of the broken heart poem, and, albeit highly unlikely, decide to crawl into bed with him if he acts his part well, the reader of a playing soccer-at-night-in-the-street poem is neither likely to sympathize with such odd behavior nor offer the kid a Nike contract.

Writing that exists merely to be beautiful language, nothing more, is admirable. 'Moving In' is such an attempt, to simply articulate the life of an apartment. It's one of the few poems I feel that I really had no motive for other than to enjoy finger-painting with words, as some call it. At my age, and even for many who are much older, treating one's own writing as just beautiful language, not a call for companionship, not a political statement, not a declaration of superior intellect or social isolationism, is a great challenge. A good creative writer helps the reader break the habituated response, caused by jobs, child-rearing, and other responsibilities, to see language only in the practical sense of what it can make others do. Still, I think poems should be read for the motivations, the causes and effects concerning what happens emotionally for the reader. 'Moving In' obviously still has questions that can be asked about the author and his motives, even if the question is on the most basic level of *why write about moving into a place? What was going on in your life, there, at that moment?*

If I had to put myself in, stylistically, with established writers, I'd say I'm the non-Marxist Sherman Alexie. Now, I know a lot of young students are running around making claims to be Alexie, to enjoy Alexie's work, to understand ever so deeply the alienation individuals supposedly feel in today's society. Bear in mind, I'm comparing myself to Alexie in style, not in technical merit or message. Take the book *The Business of Fancy Dancing*, for instance. The style of Alexie is essentially what Hulme would have called classic, with a tendency for dry, hard, well-defined terms used in a way to describe the poetry of the immediate world, that world that the scientific method and religion can both agree on. Alexie's characters, for the most part, are limited, are not

uber-mensch conquering the laws of human nature, morality, and physics all at once. *The Business of Fancy Dancing* is filled with real things: beer, basketball, cars, football, Crazy Horse, doors, locks, Spokane, and so on. In 'The Fausto Poems', which is really one disjointed piece about the speaker's Hawaiian roommate during college, included are references to ESPN, surfing, Hawaii, Magnum P.I., and helicopters, using them as it details the roommate's life from college, to drop-out, to army.

Alexie uses stories and poems, as well as various forms within each genre, to fashion his work. The title poem is a sestina, a few poems are practically prose-poems at various points, and the stories range from paragraph-long flash fiction to the eight page short story 'Special Delivery'. In *The Summer of Black Widows*, Alexie incorporates the sonnet form with 'Sonnet: Tattoo Tears', and the villanelle 'Sister Fire, Brother Smoke'. 'Tattoo Tears' is a 14 paragraph prose-sonnet, while the 'Totem Sonnets' later on are sonnets made up solely of lists of two or three word lines describing categories of people or food, demonstrating a wide range of variation within just the sonnet form. 'Haibun' also appears, a prose-poetry form.

Likewise, in my own collection I have a sonnet, 'Sonnet: Stone', borrowing Alexie's convention for titling poems for a moment, as well as 'Ghazal', and 'Haiku Written at Molly Maguire's', along with free-verse in couplets, in triplets, in one long spill, and stories of widely varying length. I argue that Alexie still has more variation along with his technical merit, since I have a lot of free-verse spill poems and no villanelles or sestinas.

Where Alexie and I differ is the class-warfare, socio-economic messages. While *The Summer of Black Widows* is less explicitly about social injustice, instead choosing to tackle more mainstream-friendly matter like Sasquatch, powwow drums, and totem sonnets, it still includes the comparisons of Dachau to the extermination of Indians, the hilarious tirade against writers of the stereotypical ‘...Great American Indian Novel’, and ‘Tattoo Tears’, which, in the last line, equates an Indian woman’s tattoo tears as symbolizing the misery of the whole reservation. And if *Black Widows* is the tamer book, then *Business of Fancy Dancing* practically rages against the BIA, HUD, the corrupt state trooper who forbids lox on bagels.

I don’t fault Alexie for his motives. I have my motives, and my motives are probably far less justified than his. While Alexie’s motives are to point out inequalities and pin them on sometimes vague, stereotypical symbols, my motives are purely selfish. Though Alexie pins blame on the obvious: with the corrupt cop, the corrupt BIA official forcing an Indian man’s wife into oral sex in ‘Artificial Respiration’, at least he’s *trying* to point out injustice, often succeeding.

Beyond Alexie, I put myself in with the confessional poets as far as the subject matter is concerned: lovelorn, neurotic, alienated types. Ginsberg’s ‘Supermarket in California’, and other poems come to mind, maybe Roethke’s ‘Waltz’ and ‘The Waking’. I often have the pessimism of Raymond Carver, though not the minimalism. To be honest, I think the task of categorizing one’s self is fruitless, since if I’m ever worth reading the readers would do it for me. One cannot make themselves a member of the Black Mountain School, the Beats, or the Imagists, by declaring themselves so.

As one last shot at declaring myself, I cast my lot with James Wright. Wright probably does more to capture the spirit of the working and middle class (mostly working class), but the overall form of his poems and the environments described within are likely an influence for me. I like to draw conclusions or meditate in nature, in odd places like his speakers often do, in a hammock, in paradise before entering the boat to that other shore. Wright's attentiveness to location, often in Minnesota, Ohio, the Midwest, often outside, is something we probably share. His poems are mostly single paragraph free-verse, one or two long sections, sometimes couplets or larger stanzas. In a lot of ways, there are similarities. I argue that Wright is more interested in rhyme than I am, particularly end-rhyme in some poems, sometimes slant-rhyme.

I have a terrible time with the writing process. At times, I've tried to flaunt this fact, use it as some means to connect to poets who are far more accomplished. Lately, though, the problems I have with writing I either bury away in moments alone, or I avoid entirely by simply not writing. I'm engaged these days, living with someone who's willing to deal with me, the boring me that repeats himself, that doesn't use the wide-vocabulary garnered from professors.

Motivation is one thing, but process itself is another. I'm horribly inconsistent. Sometimes I write for hours in the morning, day after day, for a week. The next week, discipline breaks and I'm outside every day, writing for a half an hour here or there. No matter how disciplined (or not) I am with when I write, the *how* is even less consistent. Sometimes I lay out every detail in my head, then connect the dots. 'My Story' and 'Fantasies' are examples of this. 'My Story' is probably the easiest story to plot out in my

head, mostly because so much of the story comes from the head, so to speak, not the heart: a lot of that piece is about the writing process itself, which isn't unlike questions held about theology and doctrine, at times. A lot of that piece is about ideas.

Other times, I just sit down and write whatever comes. 'Creative Writing' is one such example, written at 4am one night instead of doing my reading for the next day's class. The 'Soccer Katas' and 'Megiddo Sutra' were written in the same manner, with varying degrees of success. A lot of what appears in this collection is more ordered, more planned, than I usually go for. I have a few things that mimic the opaqueness of the language poets, of 'Tender Buttons' by Stein, and these pieces are filled with bits of language from video-games, from political slogans, from advertisements and pop-songs (most of these pieces are not in the collection, though at the end of 'Alone in Oshkosh' there is a reference to Taco Bell). Those poems, if you can call them poems, I generally write as games, leading to dysfunctional poetry, at times.

However, anyone who manages to write for more than a few days in a row generally has a couple rules that they've discovered help. I never write when I'm drunk. I used to, and generally, when I sobered up, I found the writing worthless. In 'Howl', Ginsberg has a line about 'rocking and rolling over lofty incantations which in the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish'.

A rule I made to help myself live, not necessarily write, is that I never revise anything more than five or six times. I'd probably be willing to exceed that limit if I was old enough to have pieces that were decades old, and I'd exceed it if I ever decided to write something over eighty pages, but if I can't make something work after five solid

revisions, I usually let it go. At the age of twenty-four, there may be pieces worth revising more than that at some point, but the last five years, I generally thought, *hell, I'm nineteen... no matter how often I revise this, I just won't have the experience to make it work until later.*

My goal with the subject matter and tone is to write about a college existence that is steadily more and more an experience people will have in common. Good or ill, the number of students entering this level of schooling is climbing. At times, I've been 'The Misanthrope' trying to stand at a distance from other students, trying to not just stand above, but stand apart. At other times, though, I enjoy being that bad poet, the one trying to pan handle for sympathy, both for subject and self. Part of the objective for me was to write, sympathetically, about things that I've been conditioned to have little sympathy for: students not studying so they can go to concerts, students grinding on strangers at bars, students delving into self-pity and angst. In many cases, sympathy is really empathy. Often, I'm coming to terms with these things in myself, this remainder of emotion left after dividing myself into student, son, lover.

With this, I wanted to intentionally acknowledge the locations where some of these emotions were felt. There are so many up-and-coming writers, with such a vast spectrum of experience, that experience itself is no longer a distinguishing feature. Locality, tied with experience, is a way to stand out. This is a different use of locality than I see with a writer, again, like James Wright: I'm not fighting for a particular community of blue-collar workers in Ohio to be recognized, nor a particular body of students in Wisconsin. Rather, I'm using the local setting to differentiate myself from all

the equally qualified, or better qualified, writers, while speaking (hopefully) to college experiences that are universal. This perhaps paints the college experience, from the students' eyes, as largely homogenous. Perhaps it is. Because this experience is mediated through near-universal rules of accreditation, because the likelihood of similarities in lifestyle among the students is high, generally then the experience is fairly similar, which is not to say necessarily banal, though it can be. Because so many students are likely to come from the middle and upper-classes, along with the uppermost fraction of the lower class, the variations will be slight. Race, gender, and personal neuroses may color the experience differently, but aren't guaranteed to. Again, remember I'm saying these things may not heavily influence *the college* experience, not their lives elsewhere. A bigger factor influencing the experience is probably the type of university, private or public, two-year or four-year, as well as whether one lives on campus or stays at home. If I write about college with generalities, it's partly because the college system itself is something in which there is an attempt to make things modular or universal. In order to make the blanket statement that anyone with a PhD in English is acceptable for a position, then the PhD itself, though acquired from different schools, must come to mean something uniform and general.

A quick question to answer, but important: why different genres? Why not just poems? Well, the essay form allows for more abstraction, for less focus on plot and more focus on idea or argument. That seems too basic; how does the essay allow for more abstraction? Part of such allowance is in the traditions themselves, as poetry, the classic sort, deals with tangible things while trying to recreate an experience or render an

experience in a detailed way. By adding a few essays, I allow myself to break away from needing to render the experience perfectly and am allowed to interrupt the action to speak, as much as I can, for my real self, and in so doing I am allowed to anticipate the reader's questions or rebuttals toward what I've just written. In essays, the reader expects this. In poetry, or short stories, the meta-device is less expected unless the reader knows the author well and the author habitually breaks the fourth wall. The only book off the top of my head that uses the meta-device and benefits from it greatly is Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*. On second thought, another war book, *The Things They Carried* (the book, not the short-story) effectively stops the action to successfully anticipate the reader.

Different genres come with different expectations for the reader. Often, I'm too sadistic to meet these expectations, as in 'Prank', where what is said in narration is sometimes responded to by the characters. In 'Prank', however, the sadistic element is tempered by the frame of the story: the plural narrator. While at one point I stop the action to say "I felt like a tag along, not thinking for myself..." and from there go on to momentarily have the narration lapse into the singular, the bulk of the story is written with the pronoun 'we'. Because the narrator is an anonymous we, it makes sense that the narrator is heard by his peers, and is then responded to in dialogue. The narrator cannot be an anonymous 'we' unless each part of the we is present. And if each part is present, then the narration is greater than the sum of the parts: if the narrator is a we, then every part of that 'we' must know what the other is saying. The truly anonymous 'we' is a hive-mind, a collective. This is especially true with such a close-knit 'we'. By having the one

part of the we respond in dialogue to what the other part of the we says in narration, it demonstrates that each part is very close to the other, reinforcing the fact that these characters are friends.

Back to the issue of expectations. In an essay the material is also looked at as real, or at least not as fiction. In a poem, the reader doesn't necessarily take the speaker as a stand-in for the author, though, as I mentioned before, certain biographical details can change this perception. Poems, as tired as it is, can indeed be masks. What is said in a poem, or short story, is not inherently taken as the poet's view, and sometimes the poet is conflicted to the point of not having strictly one view. But often the poem is elaborating at least part of what the poet believes. Because the poem is not taken, at first glance, as non-fiction, it allows the poet to say things that defy what the reader might expect the poet to say based off biographical details, allowing the poet (or short story writer, again) to say something and affect the reader, who would otherwise have been unaffected by the poet due to their own assumptions and biases toward the personal life of the writer.

For me, this allows me to write a poem or story like 'Lake Michigan, 1966'. My biography would reveal I was not alive in 1966, making the first-person nature seem odd. By writing the poem, I can get enough distance from the piece that the reader sees it as a persona despite the use of an 'I', allowing me to write in a more immediate way than if I had to *posit* what some character would see. The poem form allows the distance between self and speaker to be a given premise, allows the writer to not have to say *Well, what if I was alive in 1966? Then, I might say...* within the poem. Different genres set up different expectations of style, and those expectations are the rules I have to work in. And since I

don't care for rules, I decided to use different genres to give myself some extra room to work in, and, hopefully, some extra room to reach the reader by.

Daydream

Inside the snow globe
Outside my window
There's a pair of lovers
Like gloves. The sun
Glow's sparsely, an
Old bulb in a basement
Of dust. Squad cars
Seem like matchbox
Racers, cops and rubber
Masked robbers knocking
Kitchen chairs around.
The bookshelf and
Its gap-toothed smirk, baby-
Teeth encyclopedias
Left on the table
For dad to pick up.
Am I obligated to say
Oh, to be young again?

Prank

We all had crowbars. Breaking into the college before graduation had been a dream of ours. The building we'd decided on had at one point been an old church, which at some point later had been converted into the school commons. Sacrilege! To eat where others had prayed! We laughed. Now, myself and a few other punks had decided to break-in, the final event in a chain of total irreverence: the church becomes a feeding ground, only to be broken into.

"I'm fucking hungry."

"Shut up, shut up," came a hushing reply.

"Man, security doesn't do shit around here. School's only a thousand, man -- security's two."

Breaking in for our own variant of 'The Midnight Breakfast' had been an idea we'd kicked around for a long while. We figured, since the security guards only went on rounds every hour-and-a-half, we could get in, get some grub, probably even eat it right there, leave a big fucking mess, and get out. Creeping around the building so as not to be seen from the street, we snuck through shrubs with the vigor of pretend spies, CIA Agents on a mission to photograph a hostage compound. We weren't drunk. Just imaginative.

"Okay, okay, this is the fucking door. This is the one."

We said 'fuck' a lot, though how many of us ever actually participated in the word being defined in its transitive form remained questionable. If sex is rocket-science, we

weren't exactly what you would call *The Right Stuff*. The only time our eyes knew the secret-parts of females was with magazine stills, photos with no desire of their own.

So, here at the last vestige of college, at the final moment of sacrilege, and at the end of a long and tedious involuntary abstinence, we decided to console ourselves. With a break-in.

"Hardly a fair trade for all the work we did."

"Christ, couldn't we have just gone to a strip-joint or something?"

"Pussyng out on us, now?"

"I'm not afraid -- I just think we could have gotten hookers."

"And AIDS."

That probably wouldn't have happened, seeing as how the school passed out condoms, but it was a good way to rationalize not going down that final road that spells out true loser-dom.

The point-man, already with his crowbar out, had started laughing when he heard 'and AIDS' come out as a punch-line. In laughing, he leaned back, losing his balance, and put his hand on the door-handle to pull himself back up. The door came open.

"Oh for fuck's sake!"

"School of a thousand, man."

"*No one locks their doors in small towns* I thought was just old-fashioned B.S."

"Guess not."

We put our crowbars away, on the ground, behind a tree. Heading it in, we looked through the building as those who enter a tomb where the deceased is about to be lain.

"Laid," someone corrected.

Laughter.

"It's lain, man. The dead don't get *laid*."

"Yeah they do -- they've got perpetual morning wood, rigor mortis, always able to get it up."

A few of us said that was pretty creepy, don't talk, man. In the old church, two very different worlds came together: the world of concentrated youth, a warm-blooded existence, and the world of the sacred. Now we were soon leaving both, leaving the foul-mouthed, sexually promiscuous strata that piled over the consecrated dirt of an older strata. Sometimes, in anthropology (had we listened), the artifacts of two strata mix in such a way that distinguishing between the cultures becomes impossible. In a darkness only broken by flashlights, we wandered through the restored brick walls, past the po-mo decoration lights, the silly banners announcing where the college sat on the Princeton Review for 'participation in intramurals' and 'most accessible professors'. Small school. Occasionally, a wall still held the niche where a statue had been held. One niche had a mannequin clad in football pads in it, with 'Go Team!!!' cut out of construction paper taped at its feet. Past that, we entered where we normally had to swipe our college-card or present a wallet, past the computer-register and into the empty buffet lines.

"No food."

"Nothing to eat."

"Just like any other night at the commons."

We all laughed. We had seen the security guards come by only ten minutes before attempting to break in, meaning we had an hour, at least. No one but us in here, each one supposed.

And that was true. No Freddy, no Jason, no maniacal masked figure enticing us to 'play a game'. We searched for the storage room.

I felt like a tag along, not thinking for myself. Didn't want to break-in, but would I really disappoint those guys? We followed orders, teachers', even each others', like soldiers, like there was a handbook telling us how to act. Whether biology text-books, *The Things They Carried*, essays by Claude Levi-Strauss, or sheet-music, we had our orders. Men, those who consider themselves good friends, use orders to avoid really questioning how close to each other they can get. 'I've got science-homework' shortens to simply 'I've got work' as we age, or we bring hunting rifles, fishing poles, politics wherever we go, activities so we aren't just 'talking'. Breaking in was another activity.

I knew the beer, intramurals, flag-football on the quad would all end. We all did, so why *talk*? But that was just for us, we thought; the strata, the one we'd leave, would never be covered over. Somebody, we imagined, would always remember the one paper, the one grand-slam, and all the other clichés that are erased as soon as one leaves, and restored as soon as one comes back. There's always that professor who remembers.

When we got to the back, we saw a faint light on in one of the rooms. In the room next to the storage area, in a room reserved for student-employees to sit and linger during breaks, we found the student-manager and her boyfriend, neither of them seniors, sound asleep and naked. She, lying on her side with an arm draped over the boy, had set the keys down next to a small flashlight. The blanket they'd set spread beneath themselves on the floor lay crumpled, twisted about.

"Of course..."

So that was why. The crowbars were still outside. We hoped. But for the time being, we stood there, looking at the two, like Joseph and Mary, perfectly asleep in the church, or commons, or erotic nativity. We forgot for a second about noodles and silverware.

"Cups, man, size D," came a whisper. Their clothes, noticeably her bra, were on the floor. I'm sure if only one of us had been there, the one would've snatched it.

"Ssshhhhhhhhh..."

We left after ten minutes of standing, looking in reverence, but more so in the profound consummation of something not entirely physical, not entirely even about the couple. We couldn't help but stare: the girl's breasts, the hint of a smile, the tousled hair and glimmer and traces of sweat.

We didn't know how romantic it had been, how quickly he had come. Maybe she smiled now because she'd been so much that he blew his load in seconds, and all she could do was smile at how bad it was, falling asleep from boredom long after he passed out.

"Yeah, I think so."

Outside the building, we picked up the crowbars, and, in the clear, smoked cigars we'd brought for success or failure in our little operation. Beneath the dark, we thought of that girl's smile.

"So they like it, too. They have things they want."

"I bet they like bigger cocks -- I'm glad I have one."

"Oh, fuck you!" we laughed, the nervousness finally gone. Walking back, we felt let in on knowledge of a small, possibly worthless secret, if it was a secret at all. Thereafter, the few remaining trips to the commons were more like going to the old church than to grab a bite.

"Almost the presence of God, man."

We'd be graduating in a week and a half, most of us hoping to leave the town, never to come back to the small college where we felt we never got anything important but a piece of parchment.

"We didn't even get any food, tonight."

"I bet they got some." Meaning the couple.

"Fuck, in every sense of the word."

"Gas station?"

We began walking to the gas-station, since doing anything after-dark during that late spring meant having to wait until after 7pm, or well-after when the town closed. Cold chicken sandwiches, stale pizza. We walked faster. Our parents thought that because we'd soon walk across a stage, shake a hand or two, that we were about to be transfigured.

Change isn't that easy. We knew that. All we learned those last few nights, for better or worse, was a tiny secret we should have known before. Nothing else. And that's the way we wanted it.

"So, church Sunday?"

Moving In

The air mattress, unleavened bread
Flat on the bedroom floor.
Blinds like eyelids shut
On a corpse, Windex
Spread as coins, the life
The apartment lost
Believed. I'm the Boatman,
Some memory's afterlife
Or the resuscitating
Breath, blowing into the lungs
Until one can rest
On them, until the eyelids
Flutter and daylight
Peers again into the soul.

Houses in the Night

I'm out in the audience,
Lone voyeur
Having to imagine his pornography
Of graduations, death, marriage.
I pay the fee:
Twenty bucks at the pump
For a matinee
(Lately, I've been getting up at 5PM) and drive
The empty streets
Past the plots of yards
With their stone
Buildings, with addresses
Like birth-dates etched in the walls.
Or etched like the silver underside
Of anniversary platters.
Or, still, like senior year
Cut into a pen.
There's something masturbatory
In this lonely imagining of strangers' lives.
Maybe these houses aren't sepulchers.
Maybe the occupant is single, abstinent, never dated.
Maybe there's no kids to have graduated.
Maybe, every night, when I drive past
The people inside
Watching the street for rape, robbery,
Drama (or comedy, depending
On how sadistic
They are) and they imagine my car
Steered by gang-bangers, partiers, a couple
Headed to make love
Away from parents, teachers, those bullshit rules.
Tonight, I'm not the voyeur,
And maybe this isn't masturbatory
But mutual.

Absence

I can hear your breathing in mine: this
Is why I jog through the city
At night, after
Those ruckus bars turn on their houselights,
After the last drunk drives home
Leaving the empty streets.
In the middle of winter, air
Molecules stiffen, vibrate less, carry
Less sound. These nights
I hear your breathing in mine.
With three layers on
Panting, sweating,
The mind can trick the body.
Though each breath cracks lungs,
Though the stars hold vigil waiting
For me to fall, slip
Anonymously into the dark.
I hear your heartbeat as my toes strike the ground.
My breaths pierce the night
Like pistol reports.

Mansfield Stadium

My coach believes in me, everyone believes in me: I've been in the program so long, they finally believe I can do this. High school, 2004 in Madison: I'd ran track the past three years, circling the infield for four laps of the mile. Kids would pick grass, jot answers to science homework between their events lying in the sun, occasionally looking up to see me tailing the pack. I was slow, a brick with two pipe-cleaner legs behind a herd of buffalo. We had guys on our team who could run a 4:15 mile, making my 5:20 as important as a knife in a hydrogen bomb fight. Some of these guys would run in college, take a free rollercoaster ride from track straight to the back of a classroom, drooling through lectures a studious kid would also drool through, *awake*. Not that these guys were bad and I the victim; in fact, one of the guys came from a pretty broke-up family, his dad gone on a second honeymoon with the bottle, his mom left to work an Arby's without child-support. This kid, Nick, had graduated my freshman year, the only guy to believe I could break the 5-minute barrier in the mile back then, a task passed-by and lapped by everyone else.

Now, three years later, I'm at the line for probably the last mile I'll ever run, at least in an oval. Teammates scattered, waiting to pole-vault, warming up to take wings in the hurdles, all turn and cheer as I pass, as one lap falls, another. I'm way ahead of usual, running so fast my shadow's out of breath trying to keep up. Two guys from Parker suddenly trip, one over the other, in a sort of gourmet pretzel straight ahead of me. I hurdle the one still in my lane, his body a felled log, and the few people behind do the same.

The last lap comes, and halfway through I see the clock, 4:28 in big light-bulbs, a couple burned out in the eight. Lowering my head, I start sprinting. Now, it's funny what you remember when you're tired, suffocating, air around your legs becoming a vat of Jell-O, yet focused on something more. I don't remember anyone yelling, or the sound of tires on the four-lane highway a block down the road. I don't remember the sun shining on the bleachers, reflected around the handful of non-athletes who'd come to chat and watch, mostly chat. What I remember is looking up, one foot across the line, 5:03 in light-bulbs above me.

Haiku Written at Molly Maguire's Pub

Bare smooth shoulder leads

Down to a delicate hand

Ring on ring finger.

Mid-Week at the Off-Campus Concert

Language ticking through the nerves:
Blood's rhythm in the veins, that metronome
Beat in time by drumstick ribs.
The song's like this,
Conducted through the guitarist's fingers
To the strings, to the wire, to the amp,
Through the molecules between
The stage and me, between me and everyone,
Into my ears like lightning and out my feet.
Like ionic bonding, the charged electrons
Pull together the chemical elements
Of pheromone, sweat, skin.
I have to lean in, almost touching
The stranger ahead of me to ask him
The time. It's later than I'd like.
Now I have to prepare for the show to end,
Reminding me that I didn't study
Tonight for tomorrow's test
On semi-conductors and transistors.

Passing the Time

A day fades in sparrow's shadows
Flying Icarus-high and sunlit.
A cigarette Menorah nods off
Outside town hall, rags singe.
Somewhere in the city's heart
Beats a radio, and that's it.
A man's life is calculated loss
And loss calculated by days.
Police hand me an abacus.
When the light turns green
It turns green. I saw once
A grayed out wrinkled man
Sit through two in traffic.
Fire glows neon in downtown
Hell. What the
World needs now is not love
But a dime and slogan.
Breezed leaves falling down
Leave naked oaks stretching.
My coat is a long bathrobe
I set shivering on saplings.
At the intersection stoplight
Of town hall, an old man
Sits through two greens.
A Menorah on the curb
Watches traffic eddy around
A pebble. His radio
Calculates neon's frequency
As the Oldies station creaks
Into dust. I throw my coat
Over the shriveled sapling.
When sparrows pass overhead
I'm Icarus, flying high
On the wings of a good deed.
I have a slogan, ten pennies.
Police ferry souls downtown
Locked in hell's bars.
The day fades into shadow
And I'm your memory
Reaching for a light-switch.

Imploring a Friend

You sing in the night to your memories
Of a boy who never loved you.
You unbuckle Orion's Belt
With your eyes pretending it's him
You're plucking from the past's
Dark sky. Breeze. A few
Points of light. The vibrato you spend
Honoring this fantasy is wasted:
You aren't ugly. Only us, the ugly, need
Bend the puppets of memory
Into bed.

Winter Break Oshkosh

I stood on the cold bridge past Fratello's
Months after rich young families
Played catch drinking wine on the river bank
And stared at the highway
Across the ice. Lights like ghosts
Moaned along the other, higher bridge,
Lights white then red then gone, passengers
Disappearing quick as memory
Heading to congeal in Appleton, Menasha.
Oshkosh is the state's artery,
Pumps blood down 41 to Milwaukee
Where the state's legs are, where everything
Runs. When the cholesterol
Of wrecked cars, whip-lash, glass splinters
Tongue ties the hemoglobin down
The blood sits uselessly, here, like everything else.

I'm that blood, too, being from Madison
Here to eat shit and get a degree.
Tonight, I'm thirty feet above the Fox, again,
Coated awake while 60,000 people are indoors
Asleep, drinking, hiding
Behind thin dreams and heaters.
Soon, a degree'll be my pass-port to the nation
Of Suburbia: when I get it
I'll be just a memory,
Tapping the brakes gently,
Anticipating the gusts across the bridge.

Leaving After I Cheated

The phantom of your city lurking in my head
like I lurked in it.

There's a stop-sign where the rain
drove through the open window

where I stared
at my phone till a honk

behind said go.
I didn't call you to try

Again. Again. Again
I'm in that city in

My head. Over and over the one good bar
Karaoke Friday free

Billiards
Felt empty as I remember it

Save a bartender and one local
Facedown on the rail.

Over and over the memory plays these
Non-linear jumbles

Of concrete
Smoke and hills, the

Kwik-Trip we walked to drunk,
Admittedly drove to drunk,

For roller-dogs at
3am. Over and over

The city turns in my head
Like those roller

Dogs, with me gone
Gnashing my teeth that I didn't try
Again.

Modern Sabbath

Crow sits on the power-line like a preacher
Looking down at souls
Passing through the intersection
Beneath his pulpit. He caws, garbed
In a black robe to
Leather bucket-seats of pews.
To me.
To the 1987 Buick rust-heap
In the oncoming lane. No one listens.
Stained glass
Brake-lights only let the sun
Through long enough
To avoid an accident.
We come to the concrete
Chapel not
Looking for direction
But looking for a break from the direction
We were already going.

My Story

Before I begin the story, I talk with my character:

“Who am I,” he inquires. It’s a simple question.

“You are *I*, the narrator; it’s first person,” I explain.

In the whiteness of pre-story he shifts uncomfortably, walking around looking for something more, a wall maybe, a floor, a ceiling to divide him from all the other characters undifferentiated in pre-story. Fat captains sit with old white whales, ravens flutter looking for busts, and young dreamers stare across the bay waiting for the invention of orgiastic green light, all in the distance.

My character looks at all of them and wonders.

“How should I be any different? All these characters – I see no line between them and I except planning,” he reasons, picking at his skin. “Author, what is my purpose?”

“It’s first person,” I gripe, “you tell the story and are part of it.”

“But what’s my *purpose*?”

“That’s the story, the revealing of it.”

“Huh?”

“Your purpose,” I say.

Sighing, I end up frustrated by my character’s lack of understanding. Then again, he’s a reflection of myself. Manifestation, even. I can make a character dumber than me, but not smarter. *Can my character become smarter than I am*, I begin to wonder. If he grows, will I grow with him? Or could I inadvertently by merit of fortunate accident

make a character more intelligent than myself and grow faster than I do? Can the violet grow before the gardener plants it? Or stronger than he waters it? Enough questions.

“Don’t you want to know *my* name?”

“Author, I know your name – you are God,” he says, rolling his eyes as if it’s a stupid question. He continues:

“You know the future, you know everything about me.”

“Well, yes and no. I only know the future because I control it, as much as I control myself and my own mind, I guess.”

“But your prophecies always come true,” he stammers.

“Foreshadow, not prophecy, and they only come true if I don’t drink a gallon of coffee, forget half the details in a mad rush to get everything down, and barge ahead.”

I can tell he isn’t fully understanding, and wonder why he insists on sacrilege. I didn’t dare for blasphemy, and to say I was God would be as unwise as anything I ever did back in college. I had an idea.

“Well, do you ever wonder about *my* author?”

“Yes, but that is not my story.”

“Why don’t you talk to one of the other characters,” I offered, frustrated.

He walks over and starts toward the others in the great white. As he walks I imagine him and he takes shape. He has gray razor stubble, the beginning of age, a wisdom greater than mine. As he walks his brown-gray hair falls in little patches over his scalp, adheres, shows the balding head of a male well-wrinkled. His eyes recede, his jaw squares up revealing a thick neck. The thirty-or-so wrinkles and tan of his skin appear, affected by

years under the sun farming, or fishing, or something sentimental, though it doesn't matter. His clothes slide on, a leather belt with civil war buckle, or replica, and a pair of faded jeans trace the stringy muscles in his legs and up around his crotch. The shirt comes on, the hat, the little worn-down glasses. It all comes into place.

“Excuse me,” my character says, approaching a young man.

“Phony, you're all phony,” the young man mutters.

“Pardon, but you should have respect for your elders.”

“Phony.”

Moving on, my character sits down beside a stranger on a bench.

“Hi. Do like chocolate and shrimp and shrimpin' boats and ping-pong,” the stranger asks.

“I don't know what I like yet.”

“Mama always said you gotta know what you like to know what you are.”

My character tried another character, a woman in a bathing suit.

“Ma'am, do you know anything that could help me?”

She shivered as if far off in cold water, away from shore or home on land.

“I would give up my life, but I would never give up myself.” My character didn't understand her.

“What I mean is,” she continues, “you always have to keep your character, yourself. Death isn't out of character – we all do it. Change, and maybe change from values, to be specific, is out of character.”

He asks, “Well, what are my values?”

“That’s not my story,” she shrugs. I grin just a little.

But not for long.

“Author, why do the other characters not know who I am?”

“They are not characters I have made. There are no other characters that I have written in *your* story, yet. Until I think to write them into the story, they won’t exist here, if I decide to add other characters at all.”

I give him an old Confederate uniform; civil war it is, the American Civil War, that is. But as he is trying to find himself I guess it must be after the war, so I take away the Le Matt revolver, the old wrist-breaker of a cavalry sword, or officer’s, I don’t know. Remembering Grant let the Confederate leaders keep their side arms, I give them back. He looks suspiciously like Lee, Robert E., not Harper or Light-Horse Harry. So I have Robert E. Lee walking around trying to find his values. On a white page. Without characters. Everything is perfect, self-contained. His story is totally his own authoring, so long as he talks with me, though in some other dimensions there may be other authors with other stories.

“I’m lonely,” he whimpers.

Do I tell him who he is? Nah, it’ll be more fun if he figures it out on his own. Hey, I figure, if I tell him his story and everything ahead of time he’ll have no reason to explore it. So I consol him.

“I’ll make a world for you,” which is a very good idea, I think in my own head. So I write a bridge, Antietam Creek, Bull Run, Shenandoah valley and the American countryside. I write green fields of clover, walls of Washington, the Richmond compound

and Appomattox. I write Arlington in, I write the Atlantic Ocean and the bright jubilant sky. I write the sunrise in lines of color on the horizon, all rhyming toward infinity and high noon. I write the half-moon nighttime and the Dixie heartland. I forget no detail, no place he wouldn't travel. And he is happy.

“But I'm lonely,” he repeats.

Damn. So I write beyond plants, beyond fields. I write squirrels in, armadillos, bears, chipmunks, the works. I put in alligators in the Florida marshes, even though he'll rarely be that far. I write rabbits and snakes in; yes, even snakes. Rattlers, and amphibians like frogs, toads, salamanders, some of which are reptiles but I can't remember. I add in oaks, junipers, plants that seem like animals in their broad limbed strength and tough skin. I put mice in, wolves, feral dogs and cats of all variety. I'm officially playing God.

“But the sky is empty.”

I write in finches, robins, blue-jays and blackbirds. I fill the sky with color and sound. I add the lesser sky, the gnats, the crickets, swarms of fireflies and finally the stars, the smallest things in the sky.

“But the river's bland.”

I fill the inky streams with trout, with bass and guppies, with slick suckermouths and catfish. I write in whales and sharks, squid, sea lion and otters, set penguins down on icebergs, throw sturgeon in the lakes.

“But the caves are bare.”

I hang bats along the cavern walls, plop albino rats in the dank deep, cluster scorpions, spiders in the hollow. Wasps, boars, centipedes and millipedes stacked two feet high in the dark. Even lions, chameleons.

And I say to him:

“Alright, you have a sky of robins, a river of trout, a land of snakes and salamanders, and a cave of lions. Are you satisfied? Geeze,” I conceded, showing just a hint of frustration. The corners of my mouth tightened downward.

“But I’m lonely,” he sighs.

“Alright, *man*, I’ve created your world, been your veritable God, and we haven’t even gotten to the story yet, so chill. Give me time to plot things out a little and I’ll write you some values and likes/dislikes and we’ll get you going.”

“How long will you take?”

“I don’t know. But I’ll get you some values and from there it’s your story.”

“What do you mean?”

“I like to give my characters a world, a setting, an appearance, and from there let them decide their own fate according to one or two values. You’re the narrator, the protagonist, so you have the choices to make as to what to do and about everything that happens after I set it all up. You even have the choice about what characters to have with you, so long as you describe them into existence by your narrating power.”

“But I don’t care about value, and you’re the writer. I demand you do the work and make me characters.”

“But if I write the characters I’m essentially writing the story, and if I do that I’ll write such that it’s interesting for me, and not necessarily pleasant or interesting for you.”

He laughs:

“You’re the author, I trust you won’t let anything really bad happen.”

Now I know how God feels. Give people the ability to have free-will and the only time they exercise it is in deciding to pass it off to someone else. Not that he wouldn’t get free-will now, just that he’d have it severely reduced. I just wish someone would write their own damn story, once.

“Fine, as you wish,” I said, caught between annoyance and excitement at the power being thrown back to me.

I decided I’d create another character, just one. From there, the two character’s actions would both keep each other company, and in narrating to themselves about the other, they would subsequently and unconsciously create the rest of their story, and world. I figure, this way both’ll have as close to free-will as possible, be joint-masters of their own story, and I’ll still have satisfied the first one’s wish to not be lonely.

Yet to make it interesting. I sit and think, and the other character forms.

“Who am I?” he says.

“You are *you*,” I explain, “and to be specific, the antagonist.”

“What’s that?”

“That means your purpose is to conflict with the protagonist such that you define him. Does that answer what would’ve been your next question?”

“Yes. How’d you know I’d ask about my purpose?”

I just rolled my eyes.

“Lucky guess.”

“So how do I do all that?”

“Up to you.”

“You’re no help.”

“Hey, I made your whole god-damn world, and it’s been a rough week so relax.

I’ll think of something,” I acknowledged.

And I sat and thought about it. In my frustration I picked this new character to be far worse-off than the last. I saw him as younger, less experienced and gentlemanly. Not any less intelligent, but less mannered. I saw him as a drunk, put a flask of whiskey on him, put another belt, some boots, a dirty coat on this hobo. I added a civil-war buckle to put him in the same period as the first, threw on a blue tint, and pretty soon I had Hiram Ulysses Grant looking at me from the white.

“Alright, now I’m putting you with the other,” I said, writing him down onto the estate at Arlington. He ran into Lee building a shanty, as without any other people in the world, these two had to do everything, include building their homes.

Grant spotted Lee.

“Hey there!” he exclaims. Lee returns the favor.

“Good day to-day, isn’t it really?”

“Uh, yes it is, Mister, uh...”

“Hey, what are our names,” Lee asks to the heavens.

“Well,” I begin, “You’re Robert E. Lee, and the other of you is Hiram Ulysses Grant.”

“Can I just be Bob?”

“I guess, I mean, it’s your story now, guys.”

“Well, then I’ll just be Grant,” the other chimes in.

“Alright then, the Bob and Grant show. I’m sure you’ll be good friends and do plenty of fun things,” I say through the skin of my teeth. “I’ve already given you your values and attributes embedded in your names. It’s up to you, now. My only rule is do not read the special book I’ve placed on your estate, or it’ll ruin your story by giving you knowledge of a purpose for you other than mine,” I nearly laughed as I placed the ninth grade history textbook under a tree by the shanty. These guys would read that book, someday – characters always have to follow the path of most-interest. At least these guys would; after all, they’re a lot like me. How could they not be, I mean, I’m their Author.

But for a long time they didn’t. They named things. They finished their shanties, walked together and held hands. They frolicked and told each other little love poems, giggling like kiddies. It was boring as hell.

I sat in author-land, in pre-story with the pure whiteness of the page and all the authors and their characters. One character kept trying to kill the king, who’d killed his father, but he’d chicken out every time and just whine a lot, so his author got sick of him, the whole bloody story even, and had everyone die. Messengers, guy standing behind curtain, that guy’s daughter, the king, the queen, and finally the damned character that got

him so fed up in the first place. Pretty rotten story if you ask me, but someone's bound to like it. I felt bad for their author.

Another guy had his character, rich old gent, liked to invite people to his castle. He was a really sweet fellow, but the rest of the story's characters for some reason or another hated him. He was a count, I don't know, greeted people by kissing their necks, but I think he kissed too hard, a bit. Nice chap though.

By comparison, my story was weak. I had less interior monologue and self-doubt, which was good, but also less neck-kissing. But I had promised not to interfere and limit my character's free-will. I talked to the other authors.

"Yeah," one said, "my character's great. He's decided he's fighting in World War II, but there's these aliens that keep putting him in a dome on their planet and forcing him to mate for exhibition."

"That's pretty sweet," I said.

"Yeah, ol' Billy-boy's a stand-up guy."

"Hey, what about you," I ask another author just lying around.

"I don't have characters, really. Just the grass, this cradle, and myself. Songs are more my thing, endlessly singing. Oh, and then leaves," he said, holding some loose-leaf paper.

Alright, psycho, I think to myself, and walk away.

One of the authors, however, having overheard me, decides to act on his own to help. He enters my story as I continue chatting up the authors, without me knowing it. In the meantime, Bob and Grant have been busy.

“I need a drinking buddy,” Grant says. As soon as he’s said it, he starts thinking.

“Hello,” Grant’s forming character states.

“ ‘Ello, I think I’ll call you Sherman,” Grant offers. “I’m Grant.”

“Do you like whiskey, Grant?”

“Do I ever!”

“Hey, lets get some more buddies,” and a bunch of guys in blue appear.

Grant then remembers his companion.

“Hey Bob, why don’t you get some of your own drinking buddies and we can have a big party, set off fireworks, shoot our guns in the air,” he finishes.

“Alright, but they must be hard workers,” and hundreds of gray-clad gentlemen appear. Luckily, the characters don’t know how their story’s supposed to go, and even if they did, it’s after the Civil War. Or so I thought.

So everyone’s drinking, all the blue-clad guys hollering and shooting guns, all the gray gents sipping beer. By now, most of them have at least set up tents, campfires in some spots. A few cut trees and build log cabins on the grounds. It’s like Woodstock for old people, playing cards, listening to a brass band play Dixie and Chuckny Comes Marching Home, even dancing and smoking.

“Hey everyone,” interrupts an older man, wearing gray khakis and a sport coat. No one else is dressed this way.

“Who are you,” Bob asks.

“You can call me Steve. I’m an author, and there’s nothing like it in the world to write a good story, whether it’s about trains or anything else under the wild blue.”

“*The Author?*”

“No, *an* author,” Steve replied to Grant’s inquisition. “And I wrote a book you may know about.”

“*The book?*”

“Yes, *the* book,” Steve nods with a smile.

“But the Author said not to read it, that it’d give us an idea of purpose beyond his,” Bob said.

“Oh, surely he didn’t say not to read *any* book...”

Bob and Grant paused, then nodding, agreed that the Author had not said not to read *any* book.

“Well, then, gents, my book is any old book, believe me, but once you read it you’ll see a world other than and beyond any the Author ever showed you. How are you truly free to create your own story if you can’t write one outside the lines he’s given you?”

Grant picked up the book and started reading, and instantly he had an idea for an alternative purpose.

“Bob, take a look at this,” he said, passing off the book.

“I don’t know,” Bob hesitated, but finally opening the book, too, saw an alternative purpose, and both, having no longer to seek their own purpose if they followed this one, embraced a new story and continued reading. The least amount of work, after all, is always best.

Right then and there I could sense something change as I talked to the authors milling about in pre-story.

“Hey, we didn’t finish discussing why Faustus was doomed no matter what he did,” an author named Chris shouted after me.

But I had to see what had happened. By now, both generals had self-narrated rifles into their troops’ hands. I arrived back in my story just in time to hold up Bob and Grant from lowering their swords to commence firing. They’d done their reading. Grant even had Cincinnati saddled exactly like in the old photos by Matthew Brady’s crew. Bob had his shovels, the ‘king of spades’ as his boys called him. But most of all, they were no longer Bob and Grant, but Ulysses S. and Robert E. Lee. Steve, the author, but more importantly *historian* who had written the text, had to be punished.

I instantly killed everyone in the story.

The very thing that separated pre-story from story had caused the problem; a character, before he has free-will *in a context he may exercise it* is nothing more than a robot, unable to interest the author. Yet when exercising free-will, the character creates a more elaborate, or interesting, story than the author could have himself, allowing the tale to escape the author’s predictions. A good author understands his story cannot interest him if he gives it no will with which to fight against his own.

I resumed the story at its last point, everything beginning again after what, to them, was only a short comma.

“Steve,” I called out, “you henceforth shall be named ‘Plagiarist’, having inserted yourself into another author’s material without his permission. And Bob, Grant,” I

continued from the white pre-story, “you shall no longer have a completely meaningful story, and some of your suffering and joy will be meaningless,” I finished.

“But you can’t revise us?”

“Yes, revise us!”

“I can’t.”

Bob and Grant said nothing.

“You see, if I revise anytime something doesn’t follow my original purpose, then the story’s no good to me, as I know it already; the author authors the story, its characters, who in turn author the story *on their own*. Now that I have written a story I’m in relation to it, and it authors *me*.” I swallowed. “Henceforth, I will no longer be present as author in your story.”

A novel is just a jar with an author’s name on it; a story continues after its first author is gone, in the hands of others, itself, its characters. I’ve moved on to other things. There are other stories to write, rest assured.

Things We Do Alone

I write poetry to imagined lovers
Like I imagine pornography
Coming to life.

The jagged pretty lines
Blurred by the cable company
Forcing you to pay

Are no different than these
We unlock with reading.
The poem is paid for in time

Which makes it more expansive
Than boobies scrambled.
Nothing is sunny-side up

With the yolk-nipple centered
Until we pay.
Instead, things go scrambled

With nipple and breast
Indistinguishably
Mixed, grainy, salt-and-pepper

Snowy pixels,
Jumbled letters, choppy
In syntax 'til we pay.

Econ 206

I'm a misplaced robot
Soldering at the wrong parts
In the heart of the wrong factory.
24/7 trying to assemble already assembled
People, cars, paper plates.
Every material resource picked out by an owner,
The designs engineered elsewhere,
The market demanding what products.
I conduct business
Already alienated from my labor
Whether I own the *means of production*
Or not. Mark my words, the angels
And all these oily, foolish robots
Control neither labor
Nor the means of it
Unless a new resource itself is designable
Ex nihilo.

College

We studied each other
Those early days before the mortgage,
When the luggage of our flesh barely
Amounted to carry-on.
Viewed curve, line & isosceles
Nipple, covered
The sections
On each other's chests, thighs, buttocks. Viewed
& reviewed, bit red correction marks
Illegibly where some flaw
Taunted, where less drinking
Or more running
Could rearrange the syntax of our muscles.
Will we fret nervously
Before ultrasound, biopsy, diagnostic
Exams invariably
Flunk us?

Synthetic

In the post-apocalyptic
bed, nuclear-winter
sheets white
cold as morphine
addiction, in
Ludovico technique
trance from the coitus
you hold open
my soul's lids, upload
software
://dreams.you.org/
stability.monogamy.
USB port
ready to connect
my jump-drive again.

Behind the apartment window I
track footsteps in the snow
following you into
3am out of this heated womb.
without gloves, no hat,
all things left
on my floor, prophylactics
against temperature. I'm worried.

Alone in Oshkosh

Monotonous cadence of the heart, cease!
Bang that drum in retreat
Which, foolish, sounds the charge
Toward light-pollution in the cloudy
Sky thinking it a sunrise. There's
No glory on a horizon
That shimmers only
From neon bar-signs in some
Far-off town.
Drag the broken silhouette of this body
Past the moon who
Dances drunkenly on the water
Of Winnebago.
There's no enemy tonight
To pierce your sword in. Take
Me Home Tonight plays
On a jukebox
After the bar empties into the black
Expanse of Taco Bell.

Moonlight Soccer Kata #2

The ball, black washed off by rain,
Hangs like a moon in the night
Illuminating the street
Like the body of a lost lover.
The street squeals, hoots
Beneath the wheels of drunks.
Rhythm of the ball juggling:
Ice swirling in brandy;
Sheets fluttering;
Christmas. Silent snow.
This is the beautiful game, alone.

Lake Michigan, 1966

On the beach, the sun bursts
Overhead. Incoming seagulls
Dropped their white loads
From too high to even see, and left. Ants
Ambushed by ant-lions
Carried each others' bodies futilely
Back to the tunnel in the ant-hill.
Cities of sand-castles
Fell in the wind. Children
Missing their parents in this place
Are lucky enough that, when they scream,
Moms come running in seconds.

When I was a First-Year Teacher

Young and foolish, I explicated Blake
And Baudelaire
For the sake of my own ears.
The students stared at each other, anticipating
What we all should anticipate at their age.
The Blanch Du Bois in khaki
Jeans, a senior,
Didn't fear she'd take bad notes.
She wondered if Don Juan in a Yankee's
Hat that year would be hers.
Don Juan in gilded sunglasses.
Don Juan freshman.
Were these who I dreamed about
Before deciding to teach?

Creative Writing

How do you change your life's story? Revise. Can I? I don't know. Does the past's ink dry permanently to the page of our flesh? Scars. That's the first thought on your mind when you hear that. I think about falling off the swing-set with that plastic yellow slide twenty years ago, Sandi on the ground kneeling beside me in her backyard behind the old white house she lived in, second story above the two apple trees we used to kick goals between for soccer. I think about the toothed incision cut by the rock I landed on, blood down a ten-year-old arm running into the sleeve's dark sewer of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle's shirt, all as she buried tears in my chest from the sight of so much blood. Her arms swallowed my back circling like orbits of heavenly bodies in the setting sun as our parents ran from the house, propping my broken GI Joe action figure in the cup holder, setting my soccer ball in the van.

Maybe I'll revise that, say the scar actually came from sliding off my skateboard downhill on Vondron by the bumble-bee house we used to live in, black shutters lying open against the yellow siding, stripes of warning saying *don't come home with that board and a scar*. Or maybe the first account was a revision to begin with, the doctor's slipped hand having cut my arm at birth, C-section gone awry, mother in labor for twenty hours delivering a baby due December 20th that only vacated the womb's hotel sometime mid-January, never having fallen from any swing-set to earn the future decoration.

Compared to today, the past only seems better because we've already formed a narrative of its events, cut the excess words from the page, taken a cheap plastic pen and crossed-off irrelevant passages about waiting in line at the dentist, waiting in rush-hour

behind three red-lights to get on the on-ramp behind three hundred cars, waiting for dinner, for sex, waiting, waiting. I only care to remember the ten-minutes of bedroom sheets, kicking around praising God, not the eleven-dollar lobster in fluorescent halos resting on the platter, though I remember the blue spaghetti-strap dress and your shy clammy mouth finally opening to smile with those pearls. However, I don't recall eleven dollars, nor the lobster. The hour waiting in the foyer for a table I remember only out of a silent wish that someone's Buick plow through and smash my forehead in the frontal lobe

Compared to the acronymed, abridged, abbreviated and edited past, free of meaningless fat and excess, the present seems a boring place, standing in aisles with bags of crackers, bread, milk-jugs on the floor beside you. Even the road-trip to Canada, International Falls a double-digit number of hours from Ripon, a trip your future self will enjoy through photos of Duluth bridges and small town sculptures, seemed boring as it was happening.

Even previous cigarettes seem better, the one smoked with the pizza delivery guy who stalled out on Thorne Street, transmission broke killing his '87 Chevy, all the while pizzas meant for dorm-mates cooling in the bed. Or the one with my Professor of Arthurian History, the one with the three cheerleaders, and of course my first one and all the ones after sex. Somehow, you always forget ones like the present, rain falling at three am with twenty pages to go before nine, all blank, all spent writing something no professor would ever assign on the board in stale white chalk, stale letters announcing another reading of Chaucer or Johnny-boy Milton. Not even the creative writing

professor nods his head when you turn-in the personal confession of your short life, having sacrificed a passing grade in another class *to write it*.

Chemists will tell you absolute zero is where molecular, and by association *all*, motion stops, where whole worlds freeze on the Kelvin scale so others have an easier time studying them. Philosophy will tell you absolute zero is where progressive thought runs out of neurotransmitters to fuel the 2-stroke engine; history the point where man fills with gold-chained, chrome-rimmed vanity, forgetting to study his past; art the point where all creativity has dried up, watercolors evaporating in puffs of fission, ink spilled by too many 'art for art's sake' critics. In all this, who tells you that absolute zero is the point where you forget to love someone more than yourself? Where you forget to listen to your favorite song even when you have a deadline on the HUD for the Aestiva anesthesia machine?

Absolute zero indeed freezes the world in place, eliminating the narrative and its meaningful dialogue. Whether you wake up or not, the world will proceed as always; nothing changes, nothing breathes. I believed too much in success, conformity, going to lectures discussing covalent bonds when I knew Uranium 235's half-life consists of 4.5 billion years, all to get the participation points. I believed two-minutes late actually meant something to an electronics company producing medical equipment, believed it was actually worth it to arrange a life around a commute and a gray cotton suit. It's better to fail and die having had joy than living just to continue living, feeling only the boss's breath on your shoulders. Is it? I don't know, but it feels right. Feel? I remember feeling, at times:

My hands on Sarah Mueller in 9th grade gym class, ‘Smooth’ by Santana playing during the unit on dance while the rugby coach taught one-two step, one-two *step*. The way my mother felt when Theda-Clark called reporting the time of death for grandpa, lungs filled with mucus and deprived of air, how she felt as I left for school trying to concentrate, look unaffected during finals week, leaving her alone yet carrying on because he never took excuses for not doing your duty, from reporting weather to the USAF in Korea straight on down to working the Fox-Valley paper-mills where he first developed his asthma. The feeling I had for Jessica, skinny brunette goofball who photographed sunsets, when I knew she’d never like me, how I kept going to church hoping to see her in the pews one college summer and how she never showed. How I felt when Brett Favre won the Superbowl. How dad felt buying his first HDTV after owning a 1979 Panasonic older than three cars and a son. Coach’s apathy when I ran away from cross-country, quit tying my shoes one day and handed a jersey in, how 29:32 never mattered down all 8-kilometers of the stretch. Teammates who thought I’d made the best choice. Those who didn’t and shook their heads. How I felt when I ran that damn 29:32 at Augustana, sweat streaked down my legs, how did what I thought I never could: break a measly 30 minutes when others around me hoped to break twenty-six or twenty-seven.

Life’s a series of poems, I think, all connected by only the author’s signature, without theme, describing in words how important moments in the plot stood up, shouted their names in rain and thunder and sleet. Even now you still see them occasionally stand up, raise a hand at least, asking for attention, for the X-box to shut-off and the dual-needlers and plasma pistol to stop firing, asking iTunes to play an instrumental version of

‘Stacy’s Mom’ so you can insert your own thoughts over the bass and clapping hands. You’ll remember when you first started cross-country, the first practice with Dave and Kjell, team stretching out in front of Storzer gym that Fall in college. You’ll remember the first promotion at GE after you stopped caring, how it surprised you. You’ll remember why you bought her lobster, why you own a broken GI Joe, why Santana’s your favorite, why skateboards haunt your arm. A man who teaches English, walks his dog on campus each day, who lives with his high-school sweet-heart in a two-story house likes to say,

“Life’s just raw material: it’s up to you to revise it”

Sonnet: Stone

In response to motion, we turned to stone:
Mausoleums in the silt beneath the cloudy current,
Vines locking fingers around the school,
Statues pointing the way for birds
To immigrate, emigrate, for millennia.
Interchangeable graffiti in the prison-cell wall,
Mute circles of limestone, granite
Limiting the camp-fire's dance.
Then, at some point, we wanted motion.
Feet travelling needed sidewalk highway factory
To make shoes concrete
Dock a launch pad runway for cargo planes a dam.
A bridge, balanced, stretches between its duties
Resisting the river, aiding traveler.

Reflection on the Fox River, Below the Ohio Street Bridge

I stood in the summer once
At the rail wishing I'd steel myself
To jump. This isn't melodrama, it's not
A fatal fall: At most, I'd get wet,
Maybe lose my glasses,
My cell-phone,
Everything in my pockets
Bearing the term *my*. Sometimes
The soul wants to jump
Out of the cars to track practice, porn
Stores, the inflatable bed, banks,
The routine of wheels gliding
Over a bridge.
Looking down, the reflection of me
Looked up. What kept him
At his rail? Watching him, he often
Fidgeted with his phone. Maybe
He wondered why no one called him.
Toward the end of the summer,
I turned around to see what he'd see:
Sunlight, the stars, clouds, real
People and real sky, not the illusory
World of a reflection. He saw himself
In a real world, affecting people,
Wondering who to call.
I saw my image, up until then,
In a fake world, in the murky wet
Wondering who'd call and pull me out.

Murphy's Law

The student in the apartment above
Blaring his insomnia

Will flunk out, hopefully,
Leaving a quiet

Broken only by screaming parents
Audible from wherever

Is home.
A while after that, the police cars

I never heard
Barreling toward the local bars

Will crescendo into awareness.
Finally, after every drunk

Goes from in bars to behind,
Once the city

Cleans up every gum-paved street,
I'll feel safe

Enough to open the blinds.
Then, the traffic light at the intersection

Nearby will strobe red, yellow,
Red, colors of a campfire that won't go out.

By the time
I move to a place without stoplights

I will have developed a cough
That annoys some young couple below

And rather than wish me flunked
They'll wish me dead.

The Misanthrope

Bad poetry is
Caged by sympathy
For everyone:
“Look at how understanding
I am,” says the poet.
I hate the old.
Every breath an elegy
For the previous
Breath. Announce
The tedious work of staying alive
To complain.
I hate the young.
Full of stupid self
-importance
And not much else.
Neon lyrics of music
Taped to sneakers
Constitute no rebellion.
Your music’s co-opted, kid.
I’m pretentious as hell.
If you didn’t learn it in a
Little known book
Stained with chardonnay, then
Keep your mouth closed.
The bad poet says
“Look at how understanding
I am, reward me
With sex.”
There. I’ve done the real work.

Ghazal

In Poetry 504 I was assigned an Arab verse.
I imagined it smoking hookah, turbaned, this verse—

Would it shiver in a cold Midwestern classroom?
I shiver when you walk in, my brown-haired universe

late and straightening up after removing your coat.
Distracted, I had no idea for this verse.

Snowy stars fell off your hair and melted on the table
beneath the bags in your eyes. *This ancient verse,*

our teacher flapped as your eyes rolled, *predates*
even Islam, focusing on love in adverse

conditions. I had no idea what *conditions.*
You live life in the fast lane, partying; I live in reverse.

I sat across the class from you, the forest of chairs,
got up, walked past, and handed in this verse.

Megiddo Sutra

I'm crossing cold bridges to concrete hearts
of cities latticed by streets. Wind
ows rattle, leaves, gray
people. The harmony between sneaker and gum, dusk
calming flags to sleep down
by the river
banks, hotel, bookstores and drugs
tores darkening into night.
Discarded condom wrappers mark
where would-have-beens were averted like colds.
Suit-coat vampires and zombies
skate or die on rusted trucks, worn
-out bearings and jeans' knees, bees
collapse missing stingers. Nuclear-family winter
blows smoke out of the bars, closes stores
for Goliath Corp. and Philistine's
Pharmacy open 24hrs.
A David in baseball cap hides a slingshot
sliding past lions and lambs
ready in the chain-link pasture
as balls hang like necks over iron
rimmed trees. Atomic
Eden a clenched human fist over landscape
squeezing blood from rocks shaped
like apartments, like small hells.
Two boys draw a pencil
In playground sandboxes with blistered
Fingers. Toes bit by frost stick to shoes socks
And fall off when undressed in shelters (bunkers)
for the first time in months.
The church opens a pantry, stains its glass
colors it wouldn't allow in pews:
pink, young, sexual.
Here's a harmonica a watch
a time not changing minute hands
push rounds into chambers, ventricle
and atrium.
Scream and *Guernica* tattooed on a hooker's eyelids
every time she winks the world ends.
Skyscrapers shave the atmosphere
until that beard lets UV through but earth
never looked this handsome and the asteroids

will kiss us, now, since
kissing doesn't tickle their pocked skin.
Where am I in all this?
Plugged in to Playstation 6
66.

Nostalgia

That summer
Air, thick as water,
Carried the thudding
Sound of bass to the ring

Of houses, twin duplexes and children
At the end of the court. The fan
Pulsed, seemed heart-like
To keep us alive.

When the leaves turned, the fall
Was underway. We fell
Into winter, the air
Rough, suddenly, moisture

Crystallized as flakes in hair.
We landed, 18, on
Sterile streets, an austere
Fluorescent bulb of sun.

Age was the doctor,
Delivery man, the janitor:
Swept blood-red leaves away, took
Our bundled bodies out the door,

Cut the memory of summer
And promised, maybe, to visit (remember)?

Alone at the Bar

I'm a failure in your desperate city, driving
After two beers windows down
Trying to feel the cool spring breeze.
No dice. Neon drive-thrus closed, mops
Out trying to wash the city away for a few
Hours. Days. Minutes ago
I just wanted my groin on some cute chick's
Ass. It's easy
To stand in place, hypochondriac me,
Looking at the spilled beer on the floor, the
Hands everywhere on the bar,
On each other. I smell loneliness
In my clothes after I hop in the car.
Smells of menthol,
Perfume and sweat from bumped-into bodies
That didn't make eye-contact.
I check my phone a lot
Acting as though I'm only alone
Because the rest of my buddies haven't arrived.

Love in the Midwest

I want to be with you

In a farmer's cornfield
At night, mid-May, the car
Pulled-over
Like the blouse above your head.

The wind between us and the city

Deep enough to barely see
Its lights
Howls in our game
Of who can howl the loudest

And wins.

Some things are better dreamt about
Than had: the stars
Of deer-eyes shined by brights
Would threaten a collision on the way out

And we'd probably say 'turn around'

Having forgotten to bring
Bug repellent.

Cross-Country

Wind howls through the empty forest, snow
Rattling on branches, catching the glint
Of the setting sun, reminds me
To hurry out of the scarred ravine
And find a pathway home. By now
Sweat binds to my skin, making little islands
Of frozen flesh and hair, restraining muscles
As they push on and on towards home.
Jimmy and H already left me, running with lungs
Unplugged, unstuffed with smoke and weed.
The trees lean, clouds race, light
Diminishing behind the hills mocks me, my slow
Stumble over roots, rocks, and blistery stones.
There's a beautiful girl somewhere
Past these hills, past this time's grass walls
Ascended in practice. Midwestern miles
And trails slide by, knees grind bone on bone.
Sweat starts to feel like love – maybe I'm just
Tired, hallucinating feelings, the dirty air
Calling like home. What is home?

Fantasies

If music be the food of love, play on.

– Twelfth Night

Fancy is the food of love.

– Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

I sat down in the forest, not crying. The darkness framed the nearby quads on the hill, nothing stirring in them at this hour, like tombstones. On a warmer night in the school year, the odd students would still be milling about the courtyard, a few chain-smokers sweating some not-so-distant test, a couple of partiers not ready for the night to end to wake up and face whatever they'd been avoiding thinking about. The small college sat quietly tonight, too tired for Gethsemane.

“Do you love her, Woods?” she'd asked, using my last name to not commit so fully, trying to act as though she didn't care so much.

“I don't know,” I responded, not looking at Diana, not wanting to contradict my words by my expression, “I don't know if I'm old enough to know how to love, yet.” She didn't call me on the cop-out. Had she, had she committed fully to being vulnerable at that moment by showing she cared enough to argue, I may have kissed her. Had I not copped out, whether I'd said I'd loved Alyssa or not, Diana may have kissed me for showing vulnerability myself. Instead, carefully guarding our emotions, we still failed to capitulate to the each other.

Until this night when she came to my dorm room, we hadn't run into each other in months. I'd been dating Alyssa a while by then, though I'd thought of Diana almost nightly, wondering if she thought about me still, wondering selfishly if she would have sex with me, seeing as Alyssa refused anything but a hand-job based off of religious

grounds that, while I admired her conviction to them, seemed like guidelines that could be bent a bit if we were responsible given how long we'd known each other. I'd dated Alyssa for a year at that point, still trying to bump into Diana until the last couple of months. I'd lay in bed, cuddling with Alyssa and thinking about Diana. Like a puppy, I was eager to please, and not being able to give Alyssa whatever meager satisfaction I could meant feeling justified in thinking about someone who might let me try. *This is life's sorrow: That one can be happy only where two are...*

So the night she came to my room, I walked out of the quads, down into the forest just off campus, torn between a girl who was emotionally guarded and one physically guarded. The animals were merciless in their silence that night. Again the lack of warmth shepherded not just the students into their rooms, but also the owls into their nests, insects into the earth, and on and on. The garden slept like the college. Bumbling in the dark to get out there, I smacked my forehead on a tree limb, causing a slight cut above my eye.

I sat on a fallen tree in the dark, slight trickle of blood down my face, but the blood wasn't something I had sweat and I definitely was no Jesus. Jesus wouldn't cuddle one girl while lusting after another. I wanted to yell angrily into the darkness, but instead said quietly, "I love you," to some imaginary amalgamation of both girls, some ideal balance that existed in a girl I'd never meet.

Diana and I had never had sex, or even touched to that point, so it's odd to reflect that she was the less physically guarded. But she was. I'd run into her at parties sometimes at night, sometimes after the parties had ended, and one or the other would

suggest we do something crazy. Deep in the night, out on bikes borrowed from the rack beside one of the quads, we'd bike through the vast quiet landscape of harvested cornfields, not talking so much as laughing. The sky hung overhead like a painting. Despite the darkness, cloud cover reflected lights from the small town, and intermingled with black were streaks of red, traces of yellow, a ghostly blue at the edges where a cloud faded away like smoke. Each color was a drab shade, yet against the black canvas punctuated by stars the night shimmered.

Other nights we walked up the hill opposite the quads hill, climbing through the prairie and back into the old city quarry where we'd linger and contemplate what each piece of abandoned equipment had been used for before playing on the mesas, spires, low cliffs and crevices left in the rock. In the darkness, far from others, Diana never seemed afraid to be alone with me, though at the parties she often was skittish towards others.

She talked rarely about anything personal, though. Though she wasn't afraid of me physically, she brought herself to talk about her family almost never. She'd grown up in Mexico City before moving to San Francisco, learning to speak English there at a relatively young age. She had a younger sister. And, since coming to Wisconsin, she missed her family terribly, yet she told me so matter-of-factly about this that I didn't realize, at first, that it bothered her at all. Early on, the mystery seemed fitting. This girl with a skin tone the color of the night's canvas, with stars for eyes, shone only more beautifully by having a personality just as dark and deep. Yet the mysteries I anticipated her solving were left unsolved for a long time. As the mysteries became frustrating, the questions about what she wanted from life, about who her family was, about what

America lacked in compared to Mexico, I began to close myself off, too. Until she came to my room that night, neither of us had ever made ourselves the least bit emotionally vulnerable before the other, not even stooping to call or knock on the door of the other, simply relying on bumping into each other. Neither wanted the other to know that we longed for each other's company. Her coming to my room, however, was a step in the right direction, a step taken late but finally taken.

In the mean time, while Diana and I went in circles, I'd met Alyssa. On our first date, Alyssa told me about her family, how her brother and dad went fishing because they had nothing else in common, how a good friend in high-school got in a car accident coming to her house to pick her up for school because Alyssa missed the bus, only to have the friend get t-boned by a semi on the way and end up in a coma. On subsequent dates, I talked to Alyssa about running, about writing, about being fed up with the low standards of undergraduate education. I told her about being a loner in high school, about never having kissed a girl before. With Alyssa, the words weren't so guarded, and she would get misty-eyed talking about the friend in a coma. So, too, would she be emotional in talking about her best friend back home had gone to be a nun, how returning to Appleton would mean having no old friends left save her parents.

Alyssa and I sat in her room many nights watching a movie or television those early months. In the fluorescent-lighting of her dorm, I felt like no shadows existed for any mysteries to hide in, as though she and I would soon be transparent for each other.

But when something is truly transparent, you have to be able to touch it to know it's there, or else see it act on something as when the wind propels a sailboat or holds

aloft a kite. Alyssa had no insane ideas in the middle of the night, didn't put wind in my sails personally, and didn't even let a kiss slip for months. Eventually, in time, I knew we'd be more physical if I stayed with her long enough. But how long would that be? And once that happened, would she be as comfortable with me as I felt Diana would? Had I tried to kiss Diana in that quarry, I'm sure she would have reciprocated; when I tried to kiss Alyssa the first three times, having known her a while till trying even simply for a kiss, I got shot down, and not shot down playfully as in teasing, but shot down as though she was afraid, even traumatized at the idea.

At my little Gethsemane, the stars were beautiful but no ancestors. There were no anthropomorphic owls or coyotes guiding me, and I didn't hear advice carried by a voice on the wind. I didn't hear God. Which is not to say any of these weren't speaking to me, but only that I didn't listen as I resigned myself to pain and the binary dilemma: I knew both cared about me on some level, and I cared about both in very different ways. At another, bigger school, I might have found some third option, eliminating the binary nature, the dichotomy, but not all dichotomies are proven false. Out of a pool of a thousand students, in a town of seven thousand, a good match is hard to make even with a four-year allowance. Not that a third choice would have helped me feel less badly about having to hurt someone, which, more importantly and selfishly, would mean having to live with making someone suffer. I'd have to hurt someone (a third option, in fact, would mean hurting both: not a good solution). I looked skyward. *...our hearts are drawn to stars which want us not*; I'd have to be Herbert Marshall.

Beneath the stars, the black edges of trees cut jagged lines through the dark, forming teeth-like shapes above and below me as they towered over. The constant, gentle breeze pulsed in spurts, breath-like. At the bottom of the valley, the forest sat like an antlion, waiting for the world of my college to slide down the hill, then snap, swallowed.

I wouldn't have cried at that moment because I was losing some sort of emotional innocence in hurting someone deeply for the first time in my life, because I'm not that nice. I wouldn't have cried for either of them. If I had cried, it would have been for myself, for the frustration of not getting the proverbial best of both worlds. I felt like crying, and no one was around, and yet I didn't. I ran a hand along where I'd been cut.

I sat a long time out there, and no answers came. There were no epiphanies, good or bad. I didn't sit *gazing up into the darkness to see myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity*, nor did I find a new take on life to help me blow up the sunshine. I left without making a decision, not even having the foresight to ask some to take the cup from me, as it were, as I'd originally intended there. I tromped back to my dorm instead of Alyssa's, that night.

The coming month was the one year anniversary of being with Alyssa. Simultaneously, I prepared a card, flowers, and fancy dinner for Alyssa while at the same moment trying to type a letter to Diana explaining how I might love her. On the night of the anniversary, I pulled up to Alyssa's dorm in the old blue Ford Taurus to drive her to the Olive Garden in Appleton. We got there, and after twenty long minutes, were seated.

"Have you been okay, lately?" she asked.

“Yeah, why,” I said, glancing at her before turning away, afraid suddenly I wasn’t smiling enough, that my eyes were overcast.

“You didn’t come over very much this week. I understand you get busy with papers...”

“...we both do, and I just happened to have two due...”

“...but seeing as how it’s the week of our first anniversary, I figured...”

For the love of all that’s good they never get the salad out to you soon enough at times like these.

“...well, I figured something else must be up,” she finished.

“I just had two big papers due, I’m sorry if I didn’t make it over enough.”

“Why didn’t you say you had anything due?”

Think. Think harder. Nope, nothing.

The salad came at that point, and she let it go. Later, knowing she was still suspicious, I told her in her room that night that I’d just been nervous about the anniversary coming up, as it marked a milestone I’d never reached with anyone. She’d already known that, since I’d told her I’d never seriously dated anyone before, and reminded me she’d never dated anyone seriously, either.

“Though you already knew that.”

“Right,” I said, acknowledging I knew she’d not dated anyone. I don’t know if she bought it, but she let it go; why ruin the night, she probably thought. We kissed, I got my hand-job, and we went to bed.

A few weeks went by, and I thought about Diana but didn't see her. I still couldn't decide. Back and forth, I batted the decision around while practicing pool in the union, playing while most students had morning class, including Alyssa. I'd go over to her room at night, still. One day, as I sat missing shot after shot, Diana came through the union on her way from class.

"Hey Woods," she said.

I stopped playing.

"Haven't seen you in a while," I began. "What class were you coming from," I asked, happy to see her but also startled.

At first, she didn't say anything. Unable to look me in the eyes, she fumbled about, eventually managing, "Just for a walk, you know?" Her eyes welled up a bit. I put the cue down on the table.

"Are you okay?"

She confessed that she'd gone to the counselor, and asked for the paperwork to drop out of the college. At that, tears started to roll down. Instinctively, I hugged her, unprepared at seeing her finally and utterly so emotional. She wrapped her arms around me. After almost half a minute, I let go first, and she followed my lead moments later, afraid to hang on longer than I did though she seemed reluctant for the embrace to end.

"I just miss home," she said, looking in my eyes with an intensity that seemed unlike her, an intensity that both frightened and attracted me.

Whether to save her from crying in public any more, or to be more alone with her, I suggested we go for a walk. We walked back in the direction of the dorms, her talking

at length for once about wanting to be at home, about feeling empty, wanting to go home and hike with her little sister away from Wisconsin's winters. I listened gratefully, happy to be let in to what I'd only conjectured about. She talked and I listened for long enough that we'd need a place to sit if we were to talk more.

"We could talk in your room," I told her, walking through the early winter flurries blowing at the time.

"Okay," she said, perking up a bit. Both sensed the other wanted this situation to play out. When we got to her room, she sat on the edge of her bed while I sat in a desk chair I pulled to within a few feet of her. For her openness with me, I had to say something meaningful back. I didn't have the words, or somehow the words wouldn't mean to her what I needed them to, to explain how those nights talking to her in the dark had haunted me. Instead, I said simply that I had a crush on her back then. She admitted the same. We talked a bit about back then, and both of us sounded wistful.

Suddenly, dejected, she sighed, "Now I want to kiss."

"One couldn't hurt," I said reflexively. In my heart, even having said that, I still hadn't decide who I wanted.

I got up from the chair and sat on the edge of the bed with her. She kissed me on the cheek, and I kissed her cheek. She kissed my cheek again. I touched one side of her face with my hand while meaning to kiss the other cheek, but she turned gently and my lips pressed into hers. And one kiss became many. But other than kissing and touching her cheek, nothing happened. I wasn't afraid she'd reject me if I'd gone farther, though maybe she would have, but at the time I simply didn't believe anything better existed

than just kissing her. After kissing, she hugged me tightly, and for the first, maybe only time that I remember, she called me Adam.

The kiss. Having her open up to me like that, crying into my chest in the student union, in public though almost no one was around. The first two days afterward, I sat in my room in complete excitement, thinking of a way to break up with Alyssa while minimizing the pain for both of us. I anticipated bliss with Diana.

Sitting in my room after class on the third day, I looked out the window. My room faced down the hill toward the forest. The slope led to that mouth again, to a now distant mouth of loss that would strike in the future, a mandible looming quietly but confidently in the background. My excitement faded. How could I risk the memories I already had with Diana, even to make more? The thought of even greater bliss, of biking into the middle of a deserted, painted night with each other for years, only to eventually fall out of love, or even just to have the love diminish, was a thought I couldn't stand. In the year of dating Alyssa and only seeing Diana on occasion, I'd concocted many dreams. What if those fantasies didn't all come true? What if we wouldn't become writers, wouldn't have a house in California where there's rarely ice on the roads at night, what if we lacked the time or energy to get out at 2am? What if our kids never asked us how we'd met, what strange kids we were ourselves back in college? I'd lived cherishing those fantasies and memories enough times that by that point the pictures in my head were more important than fulfilling them in reality, which would have been impossible anyways.

Had I gotten to know the emotional-her earlier, I may not have filled the physical-her with all that garbage that, once addicted to, I couldn't forget in order to adjust to a

real relationship. The economic strain of trying to be together at a young age, the one bedroom apartment on a busy, blue-collar street a block from a factory or bowling alley. Free time walking the prairie after a few hours of class sliding into the full-time, entry-level routines lived in the margins of the workday, lucky to spend a meal together; like Proust, we'd be forever searching for the time we'd lose to work, to raising 2.5 children in the suburbs after years of saving and slumming. Bodies fade. We'd lose this current level of attraction, eventually, and fight desperately for function. Tests on vector calculus we bullshitted through would turn to mammograms, homework to blood-work, and beneath the sagging skin would be all those dreams, still beating, on a bike in the middle of the night. I couldn't do it. I needed, as the touchstone consolation in my life, to always think that once upon a time, with Diana, all those dreams could have been possible. In the worst times, I would hide in those frozen moments and survive.

Alyssa, on the other hand, I hadn't inflated. I'd come to have reasonable expectations for happiness with her, based off real data rather than things I'd come up with on my own. With Alyssa, I didn't have all the hoops of personal fantasies that I needed Diana to jump through to avoid disappointing me. With Alyssa I could have reasonable hope of having my expectations met, and of meeting hers, and we could even have expectations met we didn't know we'd had since we wouldn't be stuck obsessing over what we *thought* we wanted. Everything is timing. I chose Alyssa, ultimately, because from the first day she'd started to tell me how to read her, how to anticipate her. One can only go so far not knowing the emotional person inside this or that body before they start constructing that emotional side out of their own fantasies, and when one

superimposes their own fantasies over a body than the relationship with that body and person is no longer genuine. I still live in those fantasies, though, every so often. I wish I didn't, and I used to think that I didn't really love Alyssa because of it. But human nature isn't so controllable. We are doomed to always have at least a few fragments not reconciled. Because we choose someone to dwell in reality with doesn't mean we don't sometimes dwell, during commercials, dentist appointments, or moments at work, in memories, just for the briefest, safest amounts of time, with someone else.

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