

Wyrd.

Honors Research Thesis

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by sage roman boggs

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Ellis August Qualm flew past the windows of Toronto's Life Building for four seconds before smacking pavement.

Thud.

+++++

word.

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I Hate Diaries: A Journal by Solon Asa Brood

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Something *Not* About Vampires

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The *REAL* Secret (I Totally Farted in that Elevator)

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‘Omeless Normal‘ate or: ‘Ow You Forgot to Start Freaking Out and Loaf the Friendly

‘Andshake¹

by

Solon Asa Brood

or

Solo NASA Brood

or

just Sol

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY PARENTS IF AND ONLY IF THEY DO NOT

¹ This will make sense later?

DISOWN ME AFTER READING IT. IF MY PARENTS FAIL TO MEET THIS CRITERION,²
THE BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY SISTER NOORA, WHO, LET'S BE HONEST, WON'T
TAKE THE TIME TO READ IT IN THE FIRST PLACE.

WITH LOVE,
YOUR BELOVED SON OR BROTHER,
SOLON

P.S. SORRY FOR YELLING

/////

[edit: The first and last time I drank Miller's, I threw up for an hour in Africa.]

entreaux.

I'd ask the muses for help and all that but the muses only contribute when a story's about suprasapiens on suprajourneys, and this story isn't that. It's about me: Solon Asa Brood, the tall 17-year-old adeaux whose neighbors consistently see him steering his family's muddied Gator down the concrete to that creepy cemetery, and the closest he's come to filling any suprarequirement is the time he had to take the RTA all the way across Dayton alone to give blood at a rusty redneck health clinic with two broken automatic doors and a stained marquee that used upside down 7s for Ls.

Honest—you, I, they, us—nobody can compete with the classic classic heroes.³

² World's lamest transformer.

³ To be fair, Nobdy had a hard time with them as well.

Expectations were set waywayWAY too high, WAY too early on.

Odysseus's résumé:⁴

sidesteps whirlpools like nbdmate,
blinds, pranks towering Cyclopussies,
spends evenings being 'seduced' by sexy sex nymphs.

Solon's résumé:

owns Whirlpool,
stealthily spends every other night with one-eyed monster while he
thinks about sex nymphs.

—and by “sex nymphs,” he means porn stars.

—and by “porn stars,” he means so-so devotchkas
who cater Arby's labes they get to moan on P-hub.

I'm talking dishwashers and
masturbation *all* day long.

Three words that describe
me best?

PLEASE and HIRE and ME.⁵

All things considered, calling the muses wouldn't work for me nearly as well as it did for

⁴ If this were Wheel of Fortune and someone guessed 'S,' they would be rolling in the monies.

⁵ Also, “squirgleblerft, ooble, prairienugget.”

Homer or Vergil. Times have changed. First off, I wouldn't call.

I'd text.

Second (off?), if I ask the muses to help me, they won't drop their goddessy festivities and submit like they did for the super storytellers. They'll throw me a copy of *The Feminine Mystique* and say something smart like, "Here's a story for ya, ya sexist pig," or "Go a-muse yourself, ya sexist pig," or "No," and I'll stand there, awkwardly ruminating, trying to think of a good comeback, and when too many seconds have passed comebackless, they'll collectively snort and walk away, proud and musey and victorious and what not and, of course, while standing there, awkwardly ruminating, I'll know, deep deep down, that I really have nothing to do with sexism in the workplace or anywhere else, and that my current silence is less a sign of my inability to refute their points than it is a sign of my inability to cope with the continuous absurdity in my life otherwise known as being held responsible for something I have no control over, but, like most things, had thrust upon me at birth. I'll yell something about sandwiches or the kitchen to maintain my sense of masculine superiority, as per usual, and they'll wheel around, infuriated.

...

We will then have an orgy. Erato in the corner on the lyre. Terpsichore crumping the hardwood wet, correcting me every time I scream her name wrong. Euterpe on the flute. Clio, yelling. Just yelling. And in the morning, I will make them breakfast. They will demi-limp into the room (Melpomene comes in right as I start cutting onions, of *course*. Everyone chimes in with a condescending-but-friendly "Oh, Melpomene!" as she wipes the tears from her face and smiles), and help me make my story super:

Solon Asa Brood is my full name, and I've been telling college admissions I'm a boy obsessed with wordplay who skips the words in Playboy.

I'm growing up across the road from a lake and a rundown cemetery in the center of one of an infinite number of country towns peppered throughout the ~~great~~ Midwest. Antique shops and corn fields, antique shops and corn fields, antique fields and corn shops, an occasional trip to the drive-in, bonfires, flannel, Bud Light, soggy Bud litter wrapped in tall wet grass, wooden picnic tables, curvy roads, shredded billboards, deer, unacknowledged racism, the Middle Class Headquarters. America's Americans.

Ohioans: the people you remember exist once every four years.

I was untimely pluck'd from my mother in 1991, the Year of the Palindrome, and looking back with what I know now, which includes the names of all 150 original Pokémon, the choruses of most Journey songs, and...the rest of those Journey songs, I'd say it was primetime for Macduffery in the US. If not for the 90s Nickelodeon, then for the panoramic view of the Internet's rise to fame. Shit got exponential.

Kids my age watched 9/11 from their 4th, 5th and 6th grade classrooms and the asbestos-we-can-get teacher's lounge, and wondered—really *wondered*—what it meant. We didn't gasp and say, "What now?"—we dropped the "now" and experienced it for what it was, not for what it was *like*. We're still riding/ our/ gasps. (And writing them, as it were.)

Stay with me.

...

The tragedy was *fresh*. That's what. *Fresh*. We palindrome-and-roundabouts were mischievously intrigued by the disaster, but all maintained dust bowl milkmaid countenances—if

you can imagine such a thing.⁶ You're hearing it from the source: the Bush, Sr. babes understood more than we let on.

I despise generalization just like everyone else, but hear me out: on September 11th, 2001, we—the Palindromishes—became part of something much grander than ourselves. And it felt magical. It felt *new*. Disney, but brutal. Dismalney. Something.

How something so horrible could make us feel so, eh, *included*, is the paradox of our times, and I can't define it. But it did. 9/11 was neat. Gruesome, devastating, and unequivocally serious—but somewhere, deep in the psyches of kids who never had anything real to fight for—empowering.

...

Growing up, I aspired to be a thespian. I didn't know what a thespian was until I got to high school, so up until high school, I wanted to be the next big shot movie star. Not Ben Affleck, because I'd heard he was a "doosh" from several sources, but someone like Tom Cruise, a closet doosh, or Brad Pitt, who Shania Twain mentioned in that one song my mom always played on our half-dayroom stereo when I was younger.

"OK. SO YUHV GOTTA CAR. THAT DUN'T OPPRESSA ME MUTCH," said Shania Twain to me every day in 1998.

My early childhood friend Norm and I promised each other that when not if one of us became Brad Pitt, we would let the other one ride our OshKoshbGosh cargos to stardom.

As I grew up, acting more and more frequently, I would constantly tangle myself up in my roles, like a pre-pubescent Heath Ledger. I took my acting seriously. I wasn't like those other insecure Ocean Pacific kids in local theater productions who decided to "try" acting, who "kind of" liked singing and dancing, who got defaulted into it because they weren't really big fans of or

⁶ If you *can*, can you explain it to me? Still having trouble.

particularly good at sports. I was an actor's actor by the time I was twelve (years old, not pounds). A method actor. A Newman acolyte. A cunt.

Before perfecting Leo Bloom in a watered down version of *The Producers*, I interviewed a local accountant and acquired his twitch; for my role as Lieutenant Cable in *South Pacific*, I interviewed a lieutenant stationed in Chillicothe and borrowed his heavy brow; Tevye, *Fiddler on the Roof*, I had the chutzpah to interview my only Jewish friend, Eugene,⁷ after his bar mitzvah at the rotary club; *Sweeney Todd*, *Sweeney Todd*, I got a job at the local hair salon and murdered anyone who asked for a little bit too much off the top. Snip snip drip drip. *You* know. I was swiftly fired by the head barber,⁸ but those who attended my customers' funerals could *not* stop raving about the deceased's bangs.

“It's so unfortunate what happened to Mrs. Grath.”

“It is. But look at those highlights! They're to die for!” said every woman in my town, and, upon realizing the pun, chortled, then felt immensely guilty for having used it.

...

Long story short, everyone on stage would be grapevining like a bunch of n00bs, and I would be doing double-triple round-offs off their faces and belting while the audience tried not to soil themselves with artistic dissonance. Mom used to tell people I was Gene Kelly reincarnated. That's when I would chime in with, “That's impossible, dearest mother. Kelly passed away in 1996, when I had already been living for 5 years. Perhaps Danny Kaye is more apropos. Guffaw!” like the little cunt I was. It was all a part of the act. Be better than any- and every-thing.

⁷ I'm not kidding. I know one Jewish kid and his name is Eugene.

⁸ What other kind is there?

Today, people still have a hard time reading me,⁹ because my life is, let us say, *fantastical*. Despite my fear of embodying a lonely, fat Facebook girl who traded her will-to-workout for manga, warped tour samplers, cartoon cat paraphernalia, and gay guy friends, I'll say it: I did and still do have a hard time taking life seriously. That's vague and clichéd, but I'm not going to waste my time sounding smart for you. Been there, done that, over it, let's move on.

When Mr. Fritz taught the class existentialism, threw us Camus (who didn't really mind he was being thrown because, like, *whatever*), and assigned us a 4-page essay on what *The Stranger* meant to us, I handed in a sheet of paper that said, "Nothing." He laughed and told me I had to turn in a real essay the next day or I'd get a zero. I turned one in the next day that said, "Nope. Still nothing." When his face tightened up like a pre-diarrhea asshole, I handed him the folded-up copy of my real essay. I made up some stuff about the ability to lead a happy life nonetheless and got a 94.

At any rate—nothing's really mattering¹⁰ was old, old money to me before any teacher handed it out on an 8x11 piece of cardstock.

I read *The Fall* twice last spring break (but failed to read *The Spring* twice last fall break), and it was less a novella than it was a mirror.

Honest. I've had more existential crises than a sitcom lead on TNT.

I saw the others' faces light up because they'd "never thought of that before," and I sat there, slumped over, swallowing my boredom for that week's lessons. Shit's obvious. Fritz might as well have been telling me my name and my cell phone number.

It's been a good, long time since I've lived a "real" life. If someone asked me to define

⁹ Hence my nicknames, "Anything Written By James Joyce," "Soggy Braille," "Instructions for Reading Instructions," and "word."

¹⁰ Fritz used to take off points for not using possessive gerunds, so I'd find the awkwardest ways to utilize them in my work to grind his gears

Solon Asa Brood, I don't know what I'd say. I'd probably look around, smirk, and tell them what I'm telling you now: I forget how it goes. I forget the rules. I forget what I should and shouldn't say. I forget the order of operations. PEDMAS, check. LIFE, not so much. I've found some other plane of existence where nothing really matters so...nothing really matters. Get it? It's simultaneously freeing and problematic, like being naked in...a don't-be-naked competition.

I don't know.

My closest friends (and sometimes, I) can't tell if I'm joking around, playing a part, or being genuine when I say things anymore (Me: "Things." Everyone else: "I can't tell if he's joking around, playing a part, or being genuine when he says that."), which makes it difficult to gauge what they (or I) actually think about me. Which is tough. In the Midwest, if people can't gauge you, you're homosexual.

"Did you hear about Bernie? Someone told me he drinks *tea*."

"Tea? Is he British or something?"

"No, I don't think so."

"What a faggot," they said.

I can usually handle it, but when I say, "I love penis in and around my mouth," and my closest friends assume I'm a Kinsey 6 instead of an anthropomorphic urinal who loves its job, I can get upset. I take my acting seriously. Unlike, you know, this whole living thing.

Somewhere along the way, things got switched for me.

Some folks have hard, juicy muscles to hide their insecurities. Others have an impenetrable shyness. Some have a thick unawareness that prevents them from realizing they have insecurities in the first place. I don't have any of those things, though. I have something better.

I have the startlingly-rare ability to pretend—and

(I also have the handy ability to make a sentence its own paragraph to trick readers into thinking that sentence contains more substance than it really does.)

...

On a seventh grade field trip to Wright Patt, I volunteered to take the polygraph test. Private Butch Woman¹¹ strapped me up in front of our group and asked me basic stuff. *What's your name? Where do you live? Do you have any pets? How many?* I lied on every answer. Pretty sure I said my name was Captain Underpants (it was topical), I hailed from Lithuania, and I didn't know what pets were. It didn't catch any of it. Lines straighter than those outside Diamonds Cabaret.

I'm what you might call a "goddamn fucking badass."

My admiration for acting—that is, my love of pretending—slash pretension—transformed into an admiration for creating quite recently, and I've determined that I'm destined to be a writer, and I've determined this out of necessity because I'm headed off to college soon, and IK I need to make up my mind before the world—a cruel world, according to my dead grandfather—does it for me. The realization is still pretty revolutionary to me, still fresh and exciting. Even now, as I sit next to Elizabeth McConkey (b. 1867, d. 1871), I get hit with the road-less-traveled jitters every so often. I mean, I dabbled in writing and closeted poetry during middle and high school, but nothing serious. I wrote a few cheesy poems and submitted them to the local newspaper under the pseudonym "Po M. Tsuk" sophomore year. One was an acrostic that said "George Constanza," and "-stanza" was its own stanza. Not exactly groundbreaking, this-will-make-me-a-living kind of stuff.

Instead of gesticubating and lippushing and bullshitting on a stage in front of

¹¹ Real name.

overweight, republican parents whose interest in the Theater stemmed solely from their child's participation in the high school's Theater productions, I started taking trips to the old Parker Cemetery across Wood Street that no one goes to—except for government workers on patriotic holidays to poke American flags next to veterans' graves—to write characters who did all of that for me. I lean back on Henry Penwell, or his sons, Hugh and Howard, and think about things that aren't safe to think about anywhere people live. The place is overgrown, half of the tombstones are at forty-five degree angles or snapped completely off, the freshest grave dried up before the Great Depression—before World War I even—and a lonely telephone pole with a rusty outlet lets me listen to music, search for bigger or fancier words, and spill. Excuse me: and *evinced*.

My aunt Shan from Portsmouth calls spilling “brick housing” because, as she says in her mysteriously-Southern-for-an-Ohioan accent, “you're lettin' it all hang out.”

Characters—*they* feel the pain when their child is gone, *they* taste the bitterness when their competition sings a beautiful ballad—hits the high D falsettoless, the ecstasy when the love of their life stops with the one-and-a-half-act-long unrequited bullshit and fucks them offstage. Even though I loved acting, thought it would birth, burp, and rear my children, there was something about it I detested, some *thing* that made it impossible to continue doing, gave me a blackmetal throatlump. One day, it *disgusted* me, like the filthy-poor fat Bengals mothers at the inner-city K*Marts and the Westboro Baptist clan. And I've finally caught on: I hate reading lines written by someone else. That's all. I hate embodying a character I don't relate to. I hate scripts. I get embarrassed for the sweaty, half-diabetic freshmen spouting off “I'll never love anyone else” and “I'm here to stay” in forced British accents and dusty costume leftovers. *Embarrassed*. I'm not comfortable unless the words coming from my mouth or finding themselves in my notepad are mine. God wasn't reading a manual when He created the world.

That motherfucker¹² was about pure, unadulterated creation. He didn't flip on DIY and pro-ceed. He created everything in His own image. If I could take one thing from the Bible, that's the zinger: Creation is everything.

At ten (years old, not o'clock), a controversial idea grabbed my hand, shook, and still won't let ol' Jill go: anyone can die at any second. Any second. Any second. Any second. Dead. Gone. Silenced. Just ask Elizabeth's father, James McConkey, 14th Infantry, father of seven—or his wife, Georgiana, who died two years after him, probably of what her children would go on to claim was a broken heart but was actually pioneerish diarrhea. I was naïve¹³ when the idea found me, sitting in the lost-dreams-and-cottage-cheese-for-lunch teacher's lounge, surrounded by everyone I knew, looking up at the one dusty-gray TV in the school. It scared and intrigued me at the same time.¹⁴ Now, the fear is gone, and only the intrigue lingers.¹⁵ It's an overwhelming intrigue, too.¹⁶ Can you imagine that? A seventeen-year-old kid getting wet for an idea? A teenager, living in the era era ey ey ey of technology, materialism, Big Brother, media and sex, sex, sex and sex holy Christ guys SEX, in a mediocre village-town with one gas station and no traffic lights—getting golden for a concept?

I'm not one for soapy metaphors,¹⁷ but...the Seed is blossoming, and I've been struggling these last couple months to tame it. Thus far in my teen angst journey, I've discovered the Seed produces thorns *and* petals, and I know—I know that when it's watered and sunned the right way, it won't just bloom.

¹² Correction: *virginfucker*.

¹³ I think all words should be required to have that suave-looking line above their r's like naïve does.

¹⁴ Like sex in a helicopter.

¹⁵ Like having sex in a helicopter but you're wearing parachutes or something.

¹⁶ Like the helicopter you're having sex in is flying over the ocean and a herd of dolphins jumps up and congratulates you as you finish and fireworks shoot off from the nearest coast and fizzle away as smooth jazz plays in the distance. Or something like that. I don't know.

¹⁷ e.g. LIFE IS ANTIBACTERIAL SOAP

It'll shoot up.

(See?)

I like to think I'm standing on the edge of some sort of ominous, post-post-modern horizon—and with my blueprints, I can make the sun rise better than ever.

...

It was only within the last couple months I told myself to start writing. Somehow, the series of events called 'my life' has made me viciously crave fame—not some fake novelty fame brought on by a miraculous half-court shot,¹⁸ but a fame that demands respect, admiration, lasting appreciation, etc. I drew a graph to figure out the easiest path to fame, and I found that I could become famous in a variety of ways. Most generally, there's: film, TV, Youtube, Twitter, acting, dancing, politics, music, doing something awesome in the war, and—the one I'm currently exploiting—*writing*.¹⁹ But writing is a beast of a subcategory. I could write: a novel, film, play, screenplay, collection of short stories, picture book, collection of poems, non-fiction, fiction, autobiography, biography, graphic novel, comic, or avant-garde erotica mag called *TIME (for sex)*.²⁰ But the people want something fresh, something *exciting*. There are way too many big dogs in the novel writing business, too many classics. Being a great novelist is old news. There are too many poets, non-fictionists, list list list list list to prove my points points points points. Long story short, every genre has been nailed down.²¹ I can't just create a new genre. That's no fun. No one would buy it. 'Creative non-friction' is dumb, and 'stories about fencing' limits me too much.

So I did some intense thinking, and I finally found the one existing genre yet to be

¹⁸ Taking a half-court shot is more impressive than making a half-court shot.

¹⁹ I forgot to mention fencing.

²⁰ I forgot to mention fencing.

²¹ Esp. 'How to Nail Things Down' Non-Fiction

tapped—that hasn't seen a star—in nearly 70 years.

Diaries.

The last person to get famous from their diary was Anne Frank.

I COULD BE THE NEXT ANNE FRANK.

I figured I'd write every day, that each day an insightful little gem would find me and be worth a few lines. Everyone would read those lines, see how unusual, unique, and controversial I was, and shoot me to the top of the bestsellers list. I was going to get a Pulitzer for being so young and being so honest and being so guileless and immaculate and other words meaning innocent I looked up in my thesaurus just now. I'd be the Gentile, less-doomed version of Ms. Frank.

But I nixed that daydream. As aforementioned, as a Midwestern male, straight standards are strictly set. For every diary entry I scratched down, an imaginary hard-on would travel a centimeter farther into my rectum. In other words, in rural Ohio, one diary entry is worth one rear entry. Anal sex references aside, every time I would start to widen my diary, I would think about diarrhea, chuckle, and get nowhere with my serious-boy thoughts.

Just like Goatse, it was all a stretch.

...

Then I thought blog. But I nixed that, too, because (1) blogging's about as useless as this introduction, and (2) I don't want to associate with "bloggers"—those parasitic, woe-is-me narcissists that (not who), instead of living and doing things that have value like making relationships with real-life humanfolk or non-virtually going outside, slouch around and rant on and on and on and not off and on about celebrities' weight loss/gain, Mike Vick's pet peeves (I fucking hate myself too, don't worry), and Jack just-because-he's-Jack-fracking-Kerouac

Kerouac.

So, this right here. As of right now, you know as much about “this” as I do. “This” is this intro. It’s sort of a diary, but not as consistent. It’s sort of an autobiography, but it’s written as it’s happening. It’s sort of non-fiction because everything I say is true.²²

Don’t know what I’m doing, honest to Hare Krishna and the Chamber of Seacrest. That makes this fun, right? Deepakin’ it up and staying in the Now? That nagging voice in my head is persistent and persuasive and possessive and some other applicable 10-letter adjectives that begin with p, and...I’m giving in like Adema.²³

OK. Maybe I’m concocting the voice-in-my-head thing to conceal the fact that I really do have a desire to vent and rant, vant and rent, but at this point I’m staunchly refusing to see it that way. *Staunchly*, nawmean? Sometimes you just have to swallow your truths, dismiss your entire belief system, and accept determinism to make you feel better about what you’re doing with your life. So, at this point, “this” is supposed to be happening. My writing. Right now. Like this. A fourth sentence fragment.

I don’t know how to explain it, but maybe that’s the point. The point is there’s no point.

That’s something people should say:

“The point is there’s no point.” ~Solon Asa Brood (2009)

321 Wood Street, Parker Cemetery

Who Cares, OH

Maybe once I’ve finished writing, I’ll have weeded everything out and uncovered what I’m really doing, if anything. I figure if you don’t know what’s wrong with you, write

²² Except for this. *world implodes*

²³ google.com

everything—absolutely everything—and you’re certain to find the problem eventually. Maybe God created the world because His world ceased to make sense to Him. Maybe He was sick—disgusted—blackmetal throatlump bulging a-hardcore—of acting in a world alongside Mediocrities, flat solos, bad plotlines, and breathtaking landscapes that no one noticed because they were too preoccupied with the former three.

So He made His own.

I’ve got a shapeless void, and yes, you’re right, that sounds like some sappy, dripping-with-estrogen Oprahnian bestseller opener, and yes, you’re right, that Hare Krishna and Seacrest thing was stupid in *and* out of context, and yes, you’re right, it probably wasn’t worth it to keep it in and especially not worth it to take time out of the ‘book’ shortly thereafter to discuss its irrelevancy, but I swear on the row of hammered graves next to me—

I’m gonna make something big happen.²⁴

I proofread. Good job so far, muses.

NOW MAKE ME A SAMMICH.

8 Jan 2009

/// “Keep Yourself Warm” by Frightened Rabbit /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qZr1uHiwsY>

\\\\\\\\

²⁴ Like tabbing this sentence over a little. AW YEAH CHANGE IS A’COMING.

Thud.

“Done. No, yeah—he’s back, CB. Get over here.”

CB pushed himself from the hand railing, straightened his tweedy apple cap, and ambled to the archway where a distraught Scottish preteen named Hank paced back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

“It’s big, CB. Real *sarking* big,” Hank said. “Fifteen years and we get the sarking *caboose*.” He stopped mid-pace to look earnestly at his partner. The bright white light emanating from the archway reduced him to a nervous silhouette.

CB maintained his signature calmness. He smiled and revealed three golden-black canines (—top-left uncolored). Hank and his overbite resumed pacing. “How can you not be *sarking* out right now, Ceebs? We’re about to escort Winnie the sarking *Pooh*.”

“He’s just another body. No getting starstruck.” CB’s voice was southern and sluggish.

“Another *body*?”

“Yes,” CB said. “Another body.”

Hank rushed to the railing. He turned, dramatically, to confront CB.

“When was the last time just another ‘body’ brought the system to its knees, Ceebs? Heh? When was the last time just another ‘body’ was the first ‘body’ ever impeached from the P-U-sarking-*H*? The last time just another ‘body’ split the entire sarking poli-scene in *half*?”

“Stop using that word,” CB said. He joined Hank at the railing and eyed the people gathering eight stories below, floating across the lobby-floor lotus. He turned his head slightly towards Hank. “Makes you sound immature.”

Hank looked at the ceiling. A sarcastic guffaw.

“I’m *twelve*.”

“Who are you again?” CB asked. He motioned to Hank’s five-foot-six façade and waterfall bowl cut.

“Childhood friend.” Hank touched his wrist. “Died in a car crash—mile from home. Didn’t you read the prelim?” He returned to the archway. Pacing.

Before CB could respond, a melancholic hum echoed through the line of archways; a small light above the duo’s archway began to blink: red then green then blue then red, green, blue. A general ‘ah’ rose from the crowd eight floors below. Other greeters down the line gawked at CB and Hank’s archway. CB peered up at the light lazily. “For both of our sakes, don’t ask for an autograph.”

Hank didn’t pay CB attention. “Sark. Where’s H’lu?”

“Who?”

“Huh. Lu. *H’lu.*”

“Who?” CB held his hand to his ear.

“Get off it, Ceebs. Who’re you even being? Just ‘cause you look like an old sark doesn’t mean you hear like one.”

“I’m trying to get in the mindset of a Geezer,” CB said. Suddenly, his voice was that of a woman. Young, snappy. “You have your procedure, I have mine.”

“He’s not even going to be a Geezer when we see him—what does it sarking *matter?*” Hank said.

“It calms me.”

“Sarking *pointless.*”

With this snarky comment, the old sark named CB with a woman's voice you know and love ditched the effort and transformed into a second Hank: five-foot-six façade, waterfall bowl cut, overbite and Scottish accent. Hank rolled eyes at twin.

“How's the sarking weather today?” CB mimicked in Hank's soprano. “Partly sarking with a chance of sark?”

“You—”

“Oh sark! I forgot to sark the sark before I left Home!” CB sprinted to the arch, back to the railway, back to the arch, emitting pitiful yelps of “sark” and “Pooh” along the way.

“Ceebs—”

“I better sark my sark before it sarks the Pooh!” he said, pulling at his greasy brown hair. He squeaked his forefinger across his protrusive front teeth. *Squak!* “I don't even want to think about the sarking sark!” *Squak squak!*

“Step off it, Ceebs. Don't judge the çade.”

CB halted next to the railing and caught a glimpse of the crowd, waving. Doubled.

CB transformed again—this time into a handsome middle-aged man with greased-back hair, a baby-blue uniform (—no nametag), and shiny buff teeth.

“But no, seriously,” CB said, now in a regular smoker's baritone. “I have no clue who Hula is.”

“Our third,” Hank articulated. “How have you never met H'lu? She's worked here for ye—”

“I thought Maddox was our third.”

“Last minute switch.”

“But Maddox wanted this so badly.”

“Sark, Ceebs! Who wouldn’t?”

There was a momentary, understood awkwardness between the two when Hank sarked again. CB resumed the conversation.

“I know, I know, I know,” he said politely. “The Last ‘Fecta. It’s a big gig.”

“Exactly, Ceebs.”

“No, no, no,” CB smiled. “Exsarkly.”

The two laughed as the blinking light above the archway stopped and remained a vibrant swavel.

“Sorry I’m late, guys.”

She was vaguely Asian and wore a comfortable black-and-gold flannel.

“Sark, H’lu. Calling it close,” Hank said.

“Oh, Kryste,” she said, and looked at CB. “He’s sarking again? I’m H’lu, by the way.”

“CB. And yeah, he’s sarking alright.”

“You guys should be *thanking* me for *taking* this *sarking* role. ‘Sark,’” Hank said, using finger quotes, “is some old inside joke between Winnie and me. Did you guys even *read* the prelim?”

CB ignored the question and turned to H’lu. “You should probably change,” he told her.

“Swav.”

She looked at the light. Her eyes widened.

She became an obese black woman with immense breasts and a gap between her front teeth. She was Journey Childs, and was, among other things, the choral director at North Newton’s Lutheran Church (1968-1987). She led the altos to victory at Newton’s regional gospel choir competition in her final two years as director, and when the ignorant church kids would

tease and call her Aunt Jemima, she would laugh with them and call them her “little pancakes.” Ironically, she died of a severe heart attack while sitting at the breakfast table the morning of her youngest son’s wedding. Her little pancakes didn’t hear about that.

The three figures—Hank, Journey, and the nameless man in baby-blue who you all know is really CB—held their breaths, and stepped into the archway’s white mouth. They walked until they were enveloped in the warm light, at which point Hank clapped twice.

And there he was.

On his back, naked, flattened against a doctor’s-like bed in the center of a transparent box the size of a bedroom. His neck-down protruded from the end of a glossy, black half-hemisphere, which cascaded from a few feet above his neck, down to the ground. Its exterior was shiny and still impressively hot. It now pulsed back and forth, back and forth, back and forth between a hypnotizing, neon swavel and black. Journey approached the half-hemisphere and placed a hand on its overheated face. At her touch, it became transparent and revealed its latest meal: Ellis August Qualm, stuck in purgatory.

The straps holding his head and wrists against the bed squaked as he tried to break free. Puddles grew in the corners of his eyes. Muted screams. Stockroom sadness.

The nameless man closed the door to the glass room behind him. Upon its silver handle was etched a company name: pandora. With the room sealed shut, the bed sucked the straps into its sides, and the half-hemisphere swung up and over Ellis’s head to the side of the room like a dentist’s x-ray.

Ellis’s sadness mutated into pure, uncensored awe when Journey Childs came into view. Her appearance combined with the amount of light piercing his eclipsed irises instantly sobered him. Hank and Baby-Blue stayed by the door, out of view.

“Why ya cryin’, little pancake? Ain’t nothin’ wrong.”

Ellis leaned up to get a better look at the large, black choral director he used to call Aunt Jemima. She placed a robe around his shoulders.

“J-Journey?” he said. “How? I, I-I thought if anything, I’d go to—”

“Hell?” she said. He nodded, through a salty wave of tears. “Ain’t no such thing, honey.”

Ellis kicked his legs over the side of the bed. He stretched.

“So, this is—”

“That don’t exist neither, sugar. They ain’t no heaven, and they ain’t no hell ‘less you make ‘em so. *This*,” she said, motioning to everything around them, “is home sweet home.”

Ellis looked at the great white expanse. “It’s the Matrix,” he said.

Journey touched her index finger to her thumb.

“Oh, not quite, sugar. Not quite. You some place much better. Ain’t no Agent Smiths here to getcha down.”

Ellis squinted. His eyes searched for anything outside of the box that wasn’t an opaque white. His depth perception was shot; what could be miles away may have been inches from the box’s edge. Something about the dimensionless scene sent chills up his side. His awe mutated into an undefined uneasiness. In his futile search, he caught a dim reflection of the box’s interior, of himself, Journey—and two other specters, hiding in a different dimension of the glass.

Ellis spun around on the bed and spotted Hank and Baby-Blue standing on either side of the door. “Hank?”

“Sup, buddy? How was the...*sarking* trip?” It was an overemphasis on Hank’s part, but Ellis didn’t seem to notice. He smiled at the mention of the word. Said it under his breath. Remembered it for the first time in years.

“I think I’m still on it.” An unnatural smile.

“You took one *sark* of a fall, L. Why’d you go and jump like that?”

“I don’t—I don’t know, buddy.” He shook his head. “Things just weren’t right.”

“Don’t sweat it, L. We’ve all been there.”

Ellis, offended.

“What? You haven’t *been there*, Hank,” he said. Hank, worried. Ellis’s voice shook.

Abruptly: “Can we leave this place? Please? Is there somewhere else to go?”

Hank didn’t answer. Instead, he looked to Baby-Blue. Ellis looked with him, and, upon realizing who the man was, gave his head to his hands. The realization stole his focus from his inability to focus.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” he said. For ten seconds, the glass box remained silent. Ellis’s father pulled a Marlboro from his shirt pocket and lit it with a match. Hank stared at Journey and raised his eyebrows as if to say, “*Do something.*” As Journey prepared to interrupt with a comforting “sugar” or “honey” or “little pancake,” Ellis lifted his head from his hands and spoke, as if from a script.

“Mom never told me your name. She said you used the military as an excuse to get away from your family,” Ellis read from his imaginary script. “So what’s the name, *daddy-o*?”

“Ellis.”

“What?”

“No, *dipshit*,” he said. His teeth glittered from under his lips. “That’s *my* name.”

Ellis looked to Journey. “I thought you said this wasn’t hell, Journey.” The immensity of the white space forced another chill up his left side.

“She already told you,” Hank interjected. “There isn’t a heaven and there isn’t a hell unless you sarking *create* them. You have to learn to make heaven even though there’s some hell around you,” he said, pointing a condemnatory thumb at Ellis, Sr.

“When did you get so philosophical, Hank?”

“I didn’t get philosophical, L. I sarking *died*.”

The box became overwhelmingly silent as Hank’s words-made-chilling-Scottish-proverb rang off of the celestial half-hemisphere floating in the corner of the room. Ellis’s ears started to ring. He stared at his hands, his feet, at the walls, frozen with sublimity. Pain pierced his side.

He yelled.

“What’s wrong, sugar?”

“I don’t know,” he said. The pain was gone. Ellis spoke to keep it at bay. “Dear God, don’t tell me Albom was right. Who are my other two?”

Journey and Hank both touched their index fingers to their thumbs, but Journey beat Hank to the punch: “No, no. You have to meet way mo’ than five people while you here, sugar. *Way mo’*,” she laughed. “Listen, sugar. Pretty soon, you gon’ forget you seen me. You gon’ forget who L is, who Hank or yo’ daddy was or why he left you, what yo’ life was all ‘bout. You gon’ be Home, and things gon’ be okay.”

“What do you mean, *home*? I’ve been here before?”

“You been here mo’ than you been L. *Way mo’*. You belong here, sugar. And you’ll know it by the time we get downstairs. No, no, don’t worry sugar,” she said, seeing his fear at the word ‘downstairs.’ “I already told you they ain’t no hell. Listen, honey. Trust me, you gon’ be fine. You *back*, baby. You gon’ laugh at bein’ worried and mad at yo’ pa and all that otha stuff. Him and Hank and I won’t be nothin’ but silly mem’ries.”

“Sark! You’ll forget us *altogether*,” said Hank.

“I can’t imagine forgetting either of you.”

“That’s real sweet,” Journey said with a giant, off-white smile. “But I’m afraid you wrong, pancake.”

From between her immense breasts, Journey pulled a syringe, and before Ellis could ask what she was doing—and before he could react to the second wave of pain running the length of his body—the syringe was in his neck and he was dead for the second time.

+++++

entreaux_ii.

I know no one likes intros.

know-no.

Front of a classic—intro, foreword, prologue, preface—written by doctor, professor, book enthusiast—explains what happens in the next three hundred pages—the motifs,²⁵ symbols, metaphors, symbolic metaphors established therein. Only silver lining: starting on page 37.

Intros ruin books, snowball historical references and annoying tidbits like, “Salinger attended the World Cup in 1940, owned a beagle, and [did some other irrelevant stupid shit that you don’t ever need to fucking know to enjoy this novel. Fuck off, I’m getting paid to research this and all of my hard work is slowly being eaten away by the ever-expanding relevancy of the Internet].” I started Tolstoy’s *Anna Kareneneneineina* [sic] this morning, and the intro said that Anna kills herself at the end.

Book *RUINED*. Me *INFURIATED*. Kitten *AGGRESSIVLEY PETTED*.

(Sorry if you’re currently halfway through *Anna Karenina*. Hypocrisy called, it wants its essence back.)

Therefore!²⁶ Sorry—whomever you may end up being—for having to read a second intro.

How*EVER*: I forgot one big—and by “big,” I mean *cosmically* important—thing in my initial intro. My inishro?

...

I, Solon Asa Brood, son of Theo and Kat Brood, am a genius.

²⁵ I always include motifs in my writing because you know what they say: MOTIFS MEANS MO QUEEFS

²⁶ I promise this is the last time ‘Therefore’ followed by an exclamation point will appear in this POS diary-book.

...

The words ye are currently reading fly from the fingers of a full-blown MENSA-approved smartie. I say “genius” because they do. I’ve known since I was eight (years old, not inches long). My parents were convinced I was a genius right around eight, when I started beating them at Trivial Pursuit Baby Boomer’s Edition and getting called into the principal’s office for telling teachers off for their inadequate state-school pedagogical methodologies such as making the annoying, attention-seeking kids write their names on the board in front of everyone if they misbehaved, which—listen up you regret-and-decaf maestros—only fuels their vicious look-at-me cycles. *Suh-ho*...my parents took me to take the test that informed them that they were *de facto*! the parents of an eccentric boy genius. Jimmy Neutron-like. They were less impressed than they were relieved because they hate losing fair and square. To be honest, I think my parents are geniuses, too, but never took the time to take the test themselves.

So many ts going on right then. More ts than a golf orgy in a British hobby shop.

Bazing?

What am I doing?

...

Like a majority of people told by authoritative figures that they are intellectually superior to a majority of other people, I tend(ed?) to be a loner, a night owl,²⁷ asexual, and, if we’re speaking technically, a class-act douchenugget.

“Hi, I’m Solon and I’m smarter than you. Want to be friends so I can make you my Igor?”

“Goo goo ga ga.”

“I thought so.”

²⁷ Always thought it was “Knight AI,” which was way cooler.

Thing is, after a number of years wasting my energy on flaunting my polished genius badge off to nongenius peers and nongenius peers' parents, and subsequently losing those peers, I learned that being a lookatme genius isn't something to be in a world where averages get the tallies. In fourth grade, the sixth grade jock king, Nate Anti-Genius Yates, approached me on the playground. He told me I was stoop-ed (that's how I imagine he thought it was spelled when he said it) and nerdy or some such such.

I asked him who the thirteenth president of the United States was. (Because, you know, it makes you dumb if you don't know that.) He pushed me. I remember how the push felt, right on my upper-left collarbone. It moved my muscle off my bone just enough to hurt. I told him he was wrong, it was Millard Fillmore. He pushed me again. I asked him who the fourteenth president was. (Because, you know, not knowing that makes you like even dumber.) He pushed me. I said no, close, but it's Franklin Pierce. Push, push, pushes. By the time we got to Grant, I was unconscious.

Fortunately, my young genius brain had already placed pacifism on an impenetrable pedestal (adjacent to an awful attraction to alliteration), so I considered the incident a victory. You can win a fight one of two ways: (1) beat the shit out of the other guy with your protein shake flaxseed p90x pullup downward dog muscles, or (2) let the other guy beat the shit out of you without putting up a fight. You put Gandhi in the pin with Ali, Gandhi always wins. Can't punch Mahatma Gandhi and expect an ovation. Concept works in life as in the pin: you let life beat you to the ground and all you do is look up at it with a bloody lip and a Shining smirk, you're undefeatable.

Nowadays (and by nowadays, I mean Winter 2009), I drink with Yates at the barn parties. He grew up to be an accounting student at Marietta: crunching the numbers, filing the reports,

writing the checks, like a bau5. We laugh about the whole thing. One night during lawn chair time, he confessed that during his post-fight suspension, he sat down and learned all of the presidents because he was jealous&embarrassed&I'msorryaboutthatbro. You'll find most of your villains are your best friends in disguise. That's not true, but it sounds good, right? At any rate, you surround yourself with people just like you, you don't learn much except how little you really know. Not even that. You get so immersed in the sameness of your life that you melt into a blind state where you can't even realize there's anything out of your bubble, and you spend your entire life wading in a stagnant pool of close-minded suck until someone on a different plane punches you in the face and tells you the waddup.

It pays off big to be weird the first fifteen years of your life. Yates' senior year, when I was a sophomore and he was the all-American point guard senior, I suggested the student section buy and wear I<3NY shirts at the home games. They ate that up like silly bandz.

I abandoned the whole genius thing for a long time. Shit's blasé. Everyone I knew back in the day knows it's still there, hidden somewhere under my buzz cut and shoulder tats (which, shhh, Ma doesn't know exist), like a less-ambiguously-homoerotic and -opium-craved Mr. Hyde, and they like that I'm not so showy about it. They've seen me transform from douche to eclectic (let's pretend that word works there), and they respect me for it—even if only subconsciously. (Right? Right, guys? RIGHT? OMG PLEASE LIKE ME.)

Lawn chair time is my informer.²⁸ Lawn chair time is veritaserum. I got tick and sired of feeling like I always, fucking always, all ways, had to be right—of having to dumb down during every exchange because my pupils would roll theirs and say, “English, please,” whenever I'd ask them something.

“Hey, Kristy. What's up?”

²⁸ A licky boom boom down. (obligatory)

“Who said that? *Sol?* OHMYGAWD ENGLUSH PLUHZ.”

—Assumed it was over their heads because it was coming out of mine. Never assume anything is over your head when at least one other person can understand it. Einstein said if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it’s going to think it’s stupid. Point is: (1) don’t rate someone solely on his or her tree-climbing abilities, and (2) stop judging fish. Makes you look like an idiot.

...

If I know the genius card will catalyze ascension,²⁹ say, during a chat with a teacher about my grade or with an admissions office representative, I use it. If it’ll get me looks, I mute it. Once a genius, always a genius. Once an actor, always a cunt.

...

: An understood humility liable to pop and ooze intellectual pride whenever necessary hits the figurative nail on the head.

I drink and smoke now. Twists wearing their blacksilver Kohl’s suspenders and watching their PBS symphonies who aspire to be geniuses will read that and get a throatlump. I know because I’ve been there. Before I drank and smoked, drinking and smoking were Satan’s left and right claw, respectively.³⁰ But the older I get, the more Satan’s story hits my soft spot, and the better I understand that I was more jealous than anything of those crazy kids who had the ovaries to do something deemed “illegal” while I was busy memorizing presidents three grades early.

I get drunk: bustdrunk on thoughts

Second high, hopes locked in knots

²⁹ IDK

³⁰ *Respectively* because I hold my drink in my left hand, my joint in my right. They call me ambidestructive.

I'm H-O, will dreams deliver?

Let's recall the vodka shots:

My liver tells me—I'm a liver.

Drunkard learns to dream real big

'Fore the clean-cut smokes a cig

Former dies enlightened, wiser

Latter 'tends, observes the fig:

'Done in by that brute, Budweiser.'

He dies later, wordless peers

'Sumed 'thout 'sumption, 'sumed by fears

Ghost of Former, post-glasskissing

'Scorts L Home—they're both in tears

F: 'Here's what you've been missing!'

L looks 'round, a wallless sight

Grief-runs gone, waitwhat delight

'Thishére feels great, but what's the point?'

'EXACTLY,' F says, young and sprite

'EXACTLY,' he repeats...

...and passes the first joint.

I considered not bringing the genius thing up at all because I wanted my writing to do that for me; I wanted to make myself something special without having to mention it,³¹ I wanted to make my story about a normal Midwestern kid changing the world instead of a genius Midwestern kid perfecting circumlocution. I take pride in the kind of "genius" I am: one that

³¹ I'm using semi-colons to remind you that I'm a genius and that I know how to use high-falutin' grammar dots.

knows he's got a gift, and doesn't go around ripping off the bows and unwrapping it in front of people just because, hey, look at me, a test said I'm relatively intelligent. I'm a kid that writes in first person, but lives in second—honest to Me.

The big thing I meant to say with this second intro: people don't take much stock in aesthetics nowadays. They take stock in backstory. With my genius badge, I'm Jan Vermeer. Without it, I'm Han Van Meergen. A phony. An awesome phony, but still—not a creator. With the truth, we're wired to prefer Vermeer...and I'm wired to use preferences to my advantage. Therefore, I'm a genius and I'd like you to think what I think is more thoughtful than you first thought.

At any rate, fuck Nazis, amirite?

Glad we're on the same page.³²

9 Jan 2009

/// “He Doesn't Know Why” by Fleet Foxes /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brZTvGlzeGg>

\\

solmates.

Everyone I have sex with is my Solmate.

So...here's a comprehensive list of my Solmates:

- My right hand
- Sometimes my left hand

9 Jan 2009

³² THIS MEANS 2 THINGS

/// “Hussel” by M.I.A. feat. Afrikan Boy /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XaEtS2etyg>

\\

I’ve given in to the angels. !ESTÁN AQUÍ! They’re here, right here, and all you’ve got to do is ask them, hey, to show themselves. We call them angels, but I’m sure whatever they call themselves is one of those things that brings you to your knees when you hear it because it’s so beautiful and right and resonates so perfectly with whatever it is inside of you that you relate to most intensely and secretly on those nights when other people don’t exist and it’s silent and you’re listening to French horns and violins on top of twangy ‘tar and peppy drums.

They’re here.

[edit: I wrote this while high on k2. I think I’m done with k2 forever.]

/// “The Shining” – Badly Drawn Boy /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4o5tGajfYE>

\\

anyone else get hyperconscious of their own chewing or breathing and it ruins the next two minutes? well think about how that feels and then replace chewing/breathing with thinking and the two minutes with a lifetime

/// “I’ll Believe in Anything” – Wolf Parade /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZgwW-RzD30>

\\ \\ \\ \\

The Leininger Reincarnation & Growth Network (L-REIGN or simply REIGN) headquarters sit comfortably at the corner of Fate and Main, catty-cornered to *The Hall*. It—REIGN, not *The Hall*—is the largest-not-tallest building in Main City (MC). Blaine Park tickles its west side.

REIGN's exterior: squat, rust-silver, with dense navy blue corners—where the sun's rays can't land properly. The building's face resembles one large, slightly bent piece of sheet metal. Dents cover its chromish façade. The front doors: a dense purple-almost-black. Huge, like most things REIGN. They stand above fifty-two stairs. Above the lone set of doors is a thin, rectangular, burnt-gold sign that reads "REIGN" in a shallow, anorexic font.

A giant metallic tissue box.

In pamphlets splayed around the city, REIGN is described as an "institute dedicated to the education, growth, and rehabilitation of the world's spirits." In rev pamphlets, REIGN is condemned for "taking away life, one life at a time."

Ellis held a copy of the former pamphlet in his hands. He sat. He was baffled, but not nearly as baffled as the man and woman monitoring his progress.

"Can I speak with you outside?" the man said to the woman. "We'll be right back Mr. Qualm."

They exited the room, which was the confused offspring of a hospital and interrogation room. A green-and-pink lotus stencil lined the top of the wall.

"He's got to be up to something."

"I mean, it *is* pretty common," she said, unconvincingly. "One in five people don't reinitiate immediately."

"This is the *Pooh*. Something's definitely up."

They peered through the door to see Ellis fervently flipping through the pamphlet. He was oily.

“Look at him. He’s still *in* it. Not even the Pooh could act this ignorant.”

“You asked H’lu? She swears she injected him correctly?”

“He got knocked out, didn’t he?”

They looked in again. Ellis was leaning back in his chair, running his hands through his hair. He was saying something to himself, shaking his head. Disbelief.

“How long does it usually last?” she asked him.

“Depends. Last week, there was a lady in it for a few minutes. There’s a guy in 16th who’s been there for six months.”

“Six *months*? We’ll give him a few hours, and if he’s still like this, we’ll have to call the memory people.”

The memory people were called a few hours later. They sent a woman named Betsy to deal with the problem. Betsy was heavysset and wore lipstick. She smiled at nothing. H’lu was called in as well. The quartet escorted Ellis down the green-tiled, green-walled hallway to a bigger room. Workers in the hallway stopped what they were doing to gaze at the five characters streaming through the Greenrooms. Betsy had Ellis lie down on a large leather shrink’s couch, and started questioning him. She held a thin green book in her hand.

“State your name.”

“Ellis August Qualm. *Junior*, apparently.”

“Apparently?”

“I just met my father in the white place. Turns out I have his name.”

Betsy, surprised at how comfortable Ellis seemed, jotted something down on her

clipboard. She smiled.

“Can you describe this white place you were in?”

“It was white,” he smiled. “My old choral director was there, my friend, Hank, and my father. It gave me the chills. Like the Matrix.”

Betsy touched her index finger to her thumb, dismissed it.

“Tell me about your last life. Where were you born?”

“Born in Chicago. Mom moved us to Alabama when I was still a baby. Grew up in Newton.”

Betsy motioned to the man and woman, who each held a clipboard. Every time Betsy looked over, she received two emphatic nods. Her mouth smiled without her face’s permission.

“Then what?”

“Graduated, got a job as an elementary teacher—hated it. Became a literature professor in Iowa—hated it. Clinical depression,” he said. He looked up, trying to think. “Killed myself.”

“Why did you commit suicide? Couldn’t find a job you liked?”

Ellis thought before he spoke. And he spoke.

“I was manic depressive my whole life. Didn’t realize it until Iowa. Didn’t realize a lot of things until Iowa. More than anything,” he started, licking his lips in preparation, “I—I realized that it was *impossible* for me to juggle a regular life and a love life at the same time. I felt the need to choose one or the other. So I chose one and the one I chose was the former and the lack of the latter made the former futile and—and I became the only important person in my own life and when—when you spend too much time with someone, including yourself, you’ll want to get away from them—even if that entails you waiting for months for your passport to get approved

so you can drive to Toronto, get to the Life building, and ride the elevator to the top but not back down.”

Ellis looked up at his audience—who stared back, immersed—and he relapsed back into his story.

“Before that, though—every night, I’d go home and grade papers, and I’d read these theses, and I’d see these mistakes, and these loose explanations, and—the *pointlessness*. And I could tell the kids weren’t in it for the love of literature, or for anything other than a degree. Than an inch and a half on a résumé. I lost faith in a new thing every night. One night, I lost charity. One night, I lost small talk. One night, I lost getting a *pet*. And I even lost the rule of thirds. Had a kid named Boomer—best writer I ever taught. Wrote a *brilliant* Tessay—that’s what I called essays I assigned on *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*.” Index to thumb. Nod. “Almost had me in tears because it blew everything else out of the water. After he turned that in, I basically taught the class to him, and the other kids knew it. I pushed him hard, tried to make him my protégé, and—”

“Yes?”

“He confessed he’d plagiarized everything.”

“I’m sorry, Ellis.”

“That took me up three floors alone.”

Nods from the man and woman. Betsy handed Ellis a photograph of a man with a white buzz cut and Siberian wolf eyes—but not blue (—green).

“Do you recognize this person?” she asked him.

“No.”

Betsy grinned. She stuck her pen in her hair.

“Ellis, this picture is of *you*.”

Ellis looked down at the old man with green eyes. Confused. He looked at Betsy, back to the old man. “It’s what we call your Ex—*exterior*,” she said. “Your real name is Aldwyn, and a lot of people know who you are.” Affected. “You’ve lived plenty of lives—Ellis Qualm being your most recent. You’re not Ellis any more than you’re the other lives you’ve led. You have also been,” she said, flipping through her papers, “a Ms. Georgie Young, nanny in Britain sometime during the Revolution. You were Sarge Isotov, a diabetic Russian tennis player. You were a teenage ni—”

“A *tennis* player?”

“It’s what the chart says.”

“Why can’t I remember any of that?”

“You’re not supposed to remember your lives. Well, not exactly. You soak up their—*gists*,” she said. “When someone returns from their latest incarnation, they’re supposed to recall their default. That’s their real life.”

“What’s the point of reincarnating,” he paused. The word felt foreign on his tongue.

“What’s the point of reincarnating if I don’t remember it?”

Silence. “Let’s take baby steps,” Betsy said.

“Well, why don’t I remember being Eldren?”

“*Aldwyn*,” she giggled. “Occasionally, folks won’t remember their default. It takes some coaxing. Maybe for a few minutes, maybe for months. We call the whole thing reinitiation. Between every reincarnation, there is reinitiation—when you ‘reinitiate’ your reality, *here*, at Home.”

“Where is ‘home?’”

“...”

“...”

“It’s complicated. And there’s not much use in answering all of these questions when you’ll know all of their answers as soon as you remember who you are.”

“Did I do something wrong in my last life that—that I—do I *deserve* this for committing suicide?”

Betsy combed her hair behind her ear. Ellis watched.

“Suicides get punished, right?” he said.

“No, no, no. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do about it?”

“Good question,” she said. “I—I want to show you something and see if it will jog your memory. H’lu?”

H’lu walked over. “Ellis, this is H’lu. You’ve already met her once today.”

“When?”

Betsy nodded at H’lu.

“Hey, pancake,” H’lu said, using Journey’s voice. Journey’s deep pitch didn’t match H’lu’s small chubby figure, and the impersonation felt more like a séance. “There ain’t no heaven and ain’t no hell—rememba, sugar?”

“What the—hell—how is she doing that?”

Betsy nodded a second time. H’lu became Journey.

“What.” Ellis inhaled.

“You look like you seen a ghost, honey. No reason to be scared,” H’lu said, soothingly.

Ellis squeezed his eyes shut. H’lu changed back.

“The three people you spoke to in the white room weren’t really the people you knew,” Betsy said. “They were your greeters. H’lu is a REIGN staff member and one of our finest greeters. It’s REIGN policy, once you’ve returned, to have three people who meant a lot to you in life to greet you. Coming back can be quite the jolt and—”

Ellis stared at the far wall. Betsy saw his condition.

“Guys, can you come over here?”

The man and woman with clipboards walked over. Betsy nodded at them.

The man became Hank, the woman Ellis Qualm, Sr. (CB).

Ellis lethargically pulled his gaze over to the two figures in front of him. They smiled.

“Sorry for calling you a dipshit, sir. Just playing my part,” CB said.

“Yeah, sorry, sir. It’s a—it’s a real *sarking* honor,” Hank said. CB rolled Ellis, Sr.’s eyes. The two greeters became themselves once more.

“That’s CB,” Betsy told Ellis, pointing to CB, “and that’s Gabe,” she said, pointing to Gabe. “They’re staff as well. They were assigned to your reinitiation.”

Ellis’s sweaty shoulder, sticking to the shrink’s couch. He mindlessly fingered its concave buttons. Gabe looked around nervously at everyone in the room. Betsy stared intently at her patient. Finally, Ellis turned his head towards her and uttered three words: three words that would continue to echo through his mind—though he was convinced he had lost it—over the next few days.

“Where am I?”

Betsy looked at the three shape-shifters and received three nods.

“This, Mr. Qualm, is the future.”

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Ellis was moved to a room without a view. He hadn't been in fresh air since it pushed his cheeks back in Toronto. Betsy and H'lu escorted him to his new locale after their revealing discussion in the Greenroom. CB and Gabe—now both their thirty-year-old selves—walked in the other direction, whispering to each other.

Twist, turn, up, down, back, over, through the gargantuan labyrinth of a building—a stairwell here, there, a circular ward lapped once or twice. Ellis didn't know if he was closer to being outside or farther into the beast's stomach by the time they arrived at his room. Betsy's heels served as a monotonous metronome the trip over. *Clack, clack, clack.*

"This is the Reinitiation Ward," Betsy told him, resting on a final clack, "for those folks like yourself—folks who forget. The workers here will supervise you until you remember who you are. H'lu will give you a tour," she said. She paused and breathed heavily through her nose. A worried smile.

"What is it?" H'lu said.

"Oh—nothing," she said, and looked to Ellis. She put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "Welcome back, Aldwyn."

Betsy turned and sprightly clacked down the hallway, as Ellis brought his eyes down to the short woman in flannel in front of him. Something about her seemed familiar.

"Do I know you?"

Her eyes widened. She looked down the hallway. A slew of workers walked by. Two men in all black stood several feet away, eyeing H'lu and Ellis.

"No, I don't believe so."

"Maybe you escorted me in the past? You seem really—"

"No, I would remember that."

“Are you sure—”

“Positive. Let’s keep moving.”

They kept moving.

The two men in all black followed close behind.

Despite its strictly enforced prohibition of running, the R ward resembled an oversized high school track. The floor, a black mirror. As Ellis and H’lu started their trek, Ellis searched for the hallway’s end. The ward’s circumference was immense; at no single point during their walk did the hallway appear curved to him. Not until he noticed they had returned to their starting point did Ellis realize they had completed a lap. He thought to speak, then shrugged.

“This R ward covers everything between the 1st Century and the 21st Century. It is separated by century, or significant historical event. Depends on the level of significance and the number of people within each century.” She pointed to the thin gold sign above them. When they first started the tour, Ellis had noticed a sign reading ‘21st Century’ above his head. The one H’lu pointed at now said ‘2nd Century’ in the same anorexic font seen above REIGN’s front door. “Through that door is every person stuck in their life—in the 2nd Century.”

“So, everyone in there believes they’re still in the 2nd Century?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you just run in there and shape-shift? Sure that would scare them out of it.”

“Look who’s talking, Dwyng.”

“What did you call me?”

“Aldwyn. I called you Aldwyn. Your real name. Sorry, Mr. Qualm. *Sorry*,” she said, impatiently. She peered back at the two guards in black. “Listen—about your first question. About the shape-shifting. Researchers have found that reinitiating isn’t cured by shock factor or

exposure to the real world. It's cured by immersing the spirit in their old life and waiting for them to recognize that particular life's absurdity. The uselessness of life in a different context."

"That's all you can do? Wait it out until they make the realization themselves?"

"That and drugs. Lots of drugs."

"Is that what you put in my neck? Remember juice?"

"It's a tranquilizer. It knocks you out and tires the part of your brain that tells you you're so-and-so. That you're Ellis. That you're a 2nd Century peasant. That you're a teenage ni—"

"So my brain just refuses to give in?"

"Look," H'lu started in a hushed voice. "A lot of people get here and they think what they see is too good to be true. So they don't believe it at all. They refuse. They convince themselves it's all an illusion or an elaborate dream set up by their own ruthless psyche or some *wizard*, that they don't deserve the power and the freedom being handed back to them. Thing is, everyone deserves it. You, my friend, are a guilty man." She paused. Quieter: "A guilty man who *isn't*."

Ellis looked over to the 2nd Century door. Its hinges had begun to creak. A tall, built Roman warrior slipped through the opening and looked both ways down the endless hallway.

"I think one of your patients is escaping," Ellis said, pointing at the Roman.

"What?" she said, panicky. "Oh no, that's just Zeke." She waved at Zeke.

"Hey there, H'lu," he said.

"This is Ellis," she told Zeke. She turned her head awkwardly, toward Ellis, as if to tell Zeke to take a closer look. "You know, Ellis *Qualm*." Extra emphasis. Zeke's eyes, large.

"Ah, *Ellis!*" he said. "It's nice to meet you, Sir."

“How’s 2nd going?” H’lu asked Zeke.

“It’s alright. There’s this one guy though—he’s been in there for two weeks now and he’s still convinced he’s Commodus.”

“*Commodus?*” Ellis interrupted. “The Roman emperor, Commodus? He’s in there right now?”

“Has been for a whole fortnight,” Zeke said, nonchalantly. “Living, thinks he’s Hercules. Here, thinks he’s Commodus. What a story.”

“Any signs of remembering?” H’lu asked.

“He’s getting there. The other day, after we’d knocked him out, he seemed to be back. He was mumbling in Aramaic. We thought we had him, then he demanded one of the interns carve a statue of him. Full relapse.”

A loud, high-pitched bweep, bweep, bweep, bweep made Ellis twitch.

“That’s me,” Zeke said, and the bweeping stopped. “We’ve got a 17th running around, calling the interns witches.” Before Ellis realized something had changed, Zeke was no longer a Roman warrior, but a menacing gray-bearded man with a judge’s black suit and shiny black boots. “Off to quell the madness,” he snickered.

“Nice knowing ya, pilgrim,” H’lu teased.

And he was gone.

Ellis blinked to make sure he was seeing correctly.

“He just teleported, didn’t he?” he said in a defeated monotone.

“We call it porting.”

“Of course you do.”

They continued down the hall. The 3rd through 12th centuries passed fairly uneventfully. Ellis eyed his reflection in the black floor as H'lu squeaked along beside him.

“So how do you deal with the language barriers? If you have people working in every time in every country, they'd have to know hundreds of languages.”

“Thousands,” she said. “And millions of varying dialects. Everyone on staff has a translator.”

Ellis raised his eyebrow.

“Aramaic is the universal language. When someone recalls his real life, he starts speaking it. Until then, we speak to them through an automatic translator. I'm using one now. It takes my Aramaic, puts it through a translator, and it all comes out of my mouth sounding like it does right...*now*. American English, Alabama, circa 2009. Whatever you say, it translates it so I can understand it. Language barriers don't exist.”

“Your lips match up so perfectly, though.”

“The technology of the future is the magic of the past.”

Ellis nodded. Acceptance.

“So, who makes those? *Apple*?” He was amused with himself.

“Uni-Verse,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“Ah,” Ellis said. “Good old Uni-Verse.”

The 17th Century.

“I'd kill to go in there. Kick the door down and strangle Shakespeare for wasting twenty years of my life.”

“Twenty years of *one* of your lives,” she corrected. “Besides, I don't think there are any

Shakespeares in 17th at the moment.”

“Speares?” he said, emphasizing the s.

“Big names get repeats. Shakespeare’s a big name, so a lot of people spend a life getting to know her.”

“People can—wait, *her*?” Bewilderment.

“With time comes revelation,” she said. “Turns out Shakespeare was female. What were you saying about people?”

“I forget.”

He looked behind them. The two looming guards still maintained a several-feet-away distance.

“Who are those guys?”

“They, uh—they’re here to make sure you don’t do anything drastic.”

“Why would I do—”

“Let’s continue down the hallway,” she said, sternly.

They continued down the hallway, until they finally reached the 21st Century.

“Home sweet home,” H’lu said.

Ellis mustered up one last question before H’lu opened the door.

“Why does the timeline stop in the 21st Century?”

“This is one of three R wards. The first R ward covers everything up until the year 0. This ward covers everything from then, up until the 21st. The third takes it from there, and meets up with the present.”

“OK, but—why the break at the 21st? What’s the significance?”

She scratched her head. “The Apocalypse?”

Ellis' newfound acceptance temporarily jammed, and he began to giggle in front of 21st. H'lu stared at him with a friendly disgust.

"Dwyng, stop giggling like a creep," H'lu said. "I'm joking about the Apocalypse. We just ran out of room."

Ellis didn't notice the two men in suits speaking into their wrists and walking away.

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"I'm Bill."

"Guess that makes me Ted."

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm Ellis. Where you from, Bill?"

"Milwaukee. You?"

"Alabama, mainly."

"No shit? I have family in Perry County."

"No kidding? I lived in Hale for a good five months."

"Small world."

Both men looked down.

"Roll tide roll," Bill said, half-heartedly.

Bill thought, despite four air-conditioningless days spent in the R ward, that he was a skinny twenty-year-old college student with an affinity for skydiving, skiing and most amusement parks.

"An adrenaline junkie," he told Ellis.

The sense of humor that accompanied most of Ellis's statements and reactions, his vow to avoid drama and awkward situations by cracking a joke or ignoring things altogether, his

perpetual smile—especially after making important claims in academic debates—the boy who laughed wolf: these things had already begun to fade from Ellis’s energy supply by the time H’lu abandoned him somewhere behind the 21st’s door, in a two-person room with empty walls and a new young roommate, Bill the adrenaline junkie.

“You ever been skydiving?” Bill asked him.

“Sort of,” Ellis said. “Wasn’t too good at it, though.”

Ellis’s jokes had turned into monotone, depressive truths.

Ellis quickly learned that Bill was a talker. By the end of their second day together in the room—neither making significant progress in the remembering department—Ellis had learned more about benihanas, corkscrews, and the lay-outs and effectiveness on a scale from 1 to 10 of several haunted Minnesotan trails than he ever imagined possible.

“At our family reunions by the lake every summer, we’d pull people on inner tubes behind boats, right off of these huge ramps right on shore. The boat would speed up across the lake, and you’d get cousins flying fifteen, twenty feet off that ramp into the water.”

“Mm^{hmm}.”

“They call it a natural high. And it really is. That’s what it’s like.”

Ellis’s silence functioned as a cue for Bill to continue with his stories.

“They had a sign at this one bungee jumping place I went to over in St. Paul. Sign said, ‘Your life started with a ripped rubber. We’ll make sure it doesn’t end with one.’ That cracked me up. Ripped rubber.”

“That’s funny,” Ellis said, mindlessly.

“In high school, I was voted ‘Most Likely to Die First,’” he smiled. “I took it as a compliment. They’d call me Thrillster Bill, all of my friends, and they were right. I couldn’t get

by without some sort of thrill.”

“How did you die?” Ellis asked him.

“Brain cancer,” he said. “When I was diagnosed in college, that’s when I started doing all of the really *really* scary stuff. Wanted to get as much in as I could before I died, you know? How about you?”

A lump of guilt formed in Ellis’s throat.

“Suicide.”

Bill talked less to Ellis after the confession.

The third day of rooming together, an intern wearing denim jeans and a hoodie with the hood back entered the room and took a seat in front of the door. She was quintessentially 2009.

Ellis and Bill looked up from their card game, waiting for her to say something.

“Hey guys. My name’s Dee,” Dee said. “I’m here to help you redecorate.”

“Redecorate?” they both said.

Bill gestured to the blank walls.

“I need you to put these in the center of your foreheads, and hold them there for about thirty seconds.” She handed them what appeared to be round band-aid wrappers. Bill and Ellis peeled back the thin paper, and found tiny red dots—like exceptionally thin bindis—in the wrapping’s centers. Bill looked at Ellis, fidgeting with his. “Bibbity bibbity bibbity,” Bill laughed. “Welcome to 7/11.”

“Please hold them there,” Dee repeated.

They pressed their foreheads for thirty seconds, and when they took their hands off, the red dots were gone.

“I think yours fell off,” Ellis told Bill.

“Yours, too.”

“No, they’re made to camouflage themselves with your skin color,” Dee informed them.

“Wicked,” Bill said.

“No,” Dee reassured him. “Technology.”

“Do you have one on?” Bill asked Dee.

“Always,” she said. “Now, I need you to close your eyes.”

They did.

“Now, I need you to imagine a safe place of yours. It could be any place. An office, a bedroom, a closet—”

“Whataya trying to say?” Bill laughed.

“Keep that image in your mind. Inhale through your nose—exhale slowly through your mouth. Again. Inhale through your nose—out through your mouth. Can you see your safe place?” Grunts. “Good. Now, imagine what’s in that place. Maybe posters, some papers, stuffed animals, a bed, plaques, anything. Try to envision them where they were last time you saw them. Try to remember the scents. Was there a candle? Was the window open? Try to remember the temperature. Was it sunny? Was it rainy? Can you feel it?” They grunted, nodded. “Great. Now, keep that image in your mind, and when I say so, open your eyes.” A minute passed. “Ok. Open.”

They opened their eyes.

Ellis caught a glimpse of his side of the room. Mahogany, degrees on the wall, a bookshelf with nameless books, papers stacked on papers stacked next to a reading lamp, a portrait drawn by a grad student hanging on the other side, crispy golden newspaper articles taped lazily near a desk, a strange frog statue holding a cane in the corner, half of a translucent

door with half of his name in reverse—then, nothing.

“What happened?” he said. “I saw my office. It was here, but—”

“It takes a few times to keep it up.”

Bill chuckled.

“*This* did that?” Ellis said, pointing to the dot between his eyes.

“*You* did that. You’ll realize soon enough just how powerful your mind is. As time progresses, so does one’s relationship with the universe,” she seemed to recite.

“How’s it work?” Bill asked Dee. “Is it, like, an illusion, or what? I saw the attic and my snowboard, and I swore I touched it. I swear.”

“Have you two ever heard of the third eye?”

“Blind?” Bill said.

Finger touch. “Not quite. The third eye is the inner eye. It’s what people look through when they meditate. It’s what ancient seers would use to see into other realms.” Dee received two skeptical brows. “We here in the future have learned to use the elusive third eye to our advantage. We’ve quote-unquote ‘harnessed its powers.’”

“How’s this dot do all that?”

“You’d have to ask someone way above me for the details. All I know is—it works. Try again.”

They did.

The office was there again, clearer. Ellis sat at his desk, in a dark, wood swivel chair with a faded, beige bottom. Ellis turned to look at Bill’s half, and there it was: an attic, a slanted ceiling, posters of athletes and naked women, a stereo system in the corner, Christmas lights hung carelessly across the ceiling on hooks, and a snowboard sitting across Bill’s lap. Ellis

reached out to turn on his lamp; when his fingers touched the thread—the thread he'd tied to the half-broken cord his first year there—the room vanished, and he was back, slouched on his colorless bed. He closed his eyes, and re-envisioned it. After his fifth try, it stayed for good. He didn't ask any more questions.

“You might be wondering how you can see each other's halves,” Dee said. “We call it conspiring. Some people call it cahooting, cooperating, collaborating—most big c words work. Basically, it's when two or more people work together to create one whole. The more people with a common goal, the stronger the result. Ellis, try putting your frog in Bill's corner.”

Bill chuckled again. “Yeah, man. Put your frog in my corner.”

Ellis closed his eyes, and imagined the frog floating across his half, toward the imaginary plane in the middle of the room. When it reached the half, it stopped. Ellis felt resistance; an invisible plane repelled the frog. “This is where you come in, Bill. You have to give the change permission. Accept the frog.” Bill closed his eyes, and the frog floated to his corner. Dee smiled. “Great—really great job, you two.”

Dee asked for the dots back, and promised the two upset men sitting on their depressingly regular beds—same time tomorrow.

“Oh, and H'lu will be in a bit later for shots,” she said.

“Shots! Yeah! Let's get wasted!” Bill laughed.

Dee touched her fingers together, dismissed it, and left.

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H'lu walked in later that day, as Dee promised. She carried a tray of supplies. Ellis watched as she injected Bill with remember juice. He became peacefully unconscious. H'lu moved him into a comfortable sleeping position. She switched syringes and approached Ellis, her

eyes vaguely remorseful.

“Your turn,” she awkwardly smiled.

Ellis wasn't afraid of needles, but the sight of the syringe in H'lu's hand made him cringe. Pain launched up his left side and subsided.

“Do we have to do this?” he said. “I'm tired anyway. I can just fall asleep on my own—”

He looked past H'lu, to the doorway.

The two men in black suits.

“Please don't do it,” he said. “I don't need it—”

“Just relax,” she told him.

As the unidentified liquid shot into his vein, Ellis could have sworn he saw H'lu wipe a silent tear from her chubby cheek.

+++++

nay, burrs.

I need more setting.³³ I told you about the cemetery—where I write. It’s called Parker Cemetery. I call it Parker. It’s back behind Lake Woods,³⁴ which is across the street from my place. Imagine this: Walk out of my front door, through my front yard (past a few mammoth pines, a flowerbed, and a tugboat mailbox [my dad bought it at an auction, and we’ve been grabbing bills from its chipping blue-white bow ever since]), walk across the street (you almost never have to look because there’s rarely a car), keep walking, keep walking, and *bam*, you’re in a lake. Smells like algae and dead fish. You know. Real lake-like. Behind the lake is a barrage of non-whomping willows hanging out and over the water. Neighbor kids, myself included, used to grab a handful of their branches and swing into the water during lake parties.³⁵ Somewhere within those trees is my cemetery— apart from everything, a part of everything.³⁶ It’s green. It’s airy. It’s its own little pocket of earthiness, bordered by unkempt tree patches, the ends of infinite bean fields, and sky. It’s time travel. I close my eyes and see men in patchy dirt brown clothes thinking about war and riding horses into town and women with baby blue bonnets putting vegetables into wicker baskets and watching as their troupe of kids runs through the fields and giggles about running through the fields. I call it *Oasis*.³⁷

To get to Oasis, I have to go around the entire lake. I go left.

I hop in Alli (my Gator), drive past twelve houses, wave to everyone who’s out along the way. I usually have my iPod on, and whatever comes on shuffle defines my trip. Put on some

³³ Now imagine a volleyball coach saying this to a group of tweenage girls.

³⁴ My family always jokes about Lake Woods. Is it a lake named for its woodiness, or is it woods named for its lakeiness? Lake Woods. It’s become one word in my mind— a word© that represents lakeiness and woodiness in one nice little package. *LakeWoods*.

³⁵ The lake is private, and can only be used by people who live on our street. Sometimes we have get-togethers on the shore, start a bonfire, roast some marshmallows, and pretend to love thy.

³⁶ I’m cool now, right?

³⁷ Now imagine Noel Gallagher saying this to a group of tweenage girls.

Laura Veirs, my day is melancholy and pensive; put on some Panda Bear, my day's bright and hopeful; put on some Avenged Sevenfold, I murder people.

1. The Fergusons. First house across the street. They have a personal boat dock behind their place. They're a more-than-middle-age couple with a young daughter named Calista. I know her name because the name Ferguson reminds me of *Clarissa Explains It All*—Calista is basically Clarissa—botta bing botta boom that girl's name is Calista. I'm building up to the day when I can call them Fergalicious on the way to Oasis.
2. The Ackermans. Next door. Elderly couple. Once sold Mrs. Ackerman a hummingbird wind chime from a fundraising pamphlet for school. Been regretting it ever since. "CLANG A LANG A LANG," said the Ackerman's porch every fucking day.
3. Mr. Vietnam. Second house across the street, next to the Fergusons. I never remember his real name, but I know he served in Vietnam around the same time my uncle did. He's a quiet, sagacious-looking guy who lives alone in a dark brick house behind a cluttered yard. It's like he had a yard sale one year and said, "Fuck it, I'll just keep this out here for next year," and proceeded to do that for thirty years. He has a single-person paddle boat—orange—that he takes out on the water on weekends. Never misses a day. Friday, Saturday, Sunday. My dad calls him Clockwork Orange.
4. The Yogles. Two houses down, same side. They look like their last name in my brain. They're both new teachers in the district and haven't gotten sick of each other yet. A young, unjaded powercouple. Last time I saw them, they were drinking iceless lemonade on their front porch while some Johnny Coltrane played through their screen door. I always think about how much sex they must have in their quaint, feverish cubbyhole of a house. I keep expecting a baby announcement. The two just *look* fertile. She teaches mathematics and he teaches music.

5. Sheryl, “the indoor pool lady.” Next to Clockwork. Sheryl has an indoor pool and a chubby niece who constantly hangs out at her place. I went inside once and it smelled like the seventies. How do I know what the seventies smell like? Well, I described the smell to my dad. I was all, “It smells like nothing important has happened in years, smoke, and as if everything is slowly turning yellow,” and he was all, “Yep, that’s the seventies.” I think she’d be a cat lady if she didn’t have a chubby niece. The chubby niece plays with Calista sometimes, and I see them fishing on Calista’s dock.³⁸
6. Dr. X & wife. Dr. X (his real name is Gregory Xenot and he’s a pediatrician) is a cool guy. He’s balding and lethargic, but he gives the best Halloween candy. My parents have been living on Lake Woods for close to forty years—Dr. X and his wife have been here for fifteen—and to this day we haven’t learned his wife’s name. It’s never come up. Dr. X always refers to her as “the Misses.” I call her Noah’s wife.
7. Theo & Dawn. They’re my parents’ best neighbor-friends. Theo is also my dad’s name, so Dawn and Ma call them “the Theos.” I have a lot of memories watching the Theos grilling while Dawn and Ma talk lake gossip. Theo & Dawn live in a behemoth lodge back in the woods, right on the water. They’re wealthy. The lodge has a few forest green porches and the wood looks like it has a membership to LA Tan.³⁹ I’ve dogsat their two dogs before and I’ve ridden their Seadoo. Their kids, Jamie and Jiimy,⁴⁰ are moved out and doing successful things somewhere. I think my parents are secretly jealous—scratch that: *openly* jealous—of Theo & Dawn’s house and 2-for-2 successful kid record. Doesn’t stop them from shooting the bull with them on weekends as Clockwork makes his laps.
8. The house with the graffitied garage door. It’s abandoned and the garage says “FLUSH” in faded purple spray paint.
9. The Parrots. Jack Parrot is the president of the lake. Like me, he rides around on his Gator—

³⁸ *Calista’s Dock* sounds like a cancelled *Dawson’s Creek* spinoff.

³⁹ It’s orange.

⁴⁰ You read that correctly. His names has two I’s (just like most people’s faces).

which is bigger than mine—and surveys the street from under his trucker hat. He’s an alpha male (and so is his wife, Nena [there are rumors that Jeff is her purse]). There’s a guy who lives to the right of me named Jack as well, so to differentiate we call him “Party Jack” because he always throws—you guessed it—*tantrums*.

10. No clue. Always a red truck in the driveway. Never humans. Same side as the Parrots.
11. Mr. Livingston. Last house near the lake, next to the path to Oasis.⁴¹ He’s a widower who keeps care of a large garden around the front of his house. Lotta mums.⁴² He’s in his late sixties, and I’ve seen him and Clockwork talking near the road several times. Mr. Livingston has a few kids who visit him, but he spends his time (at least the time he spends in my time) fastwalking down the street, gardening, and waving back to me as I turn Alli towards Oasis.
12. Chuck and his girlfriends. His house is across from the lake. Chuck has a beer belly, a black lab, and a different girlfriend every month. Ma calls them January, February, March, etc. One year September threw a cog in the machine and stayed until December. Chuck has a TV in his garage, and I’ve seen him sitting in his blue lawn chair sipping on a Coors and watching *Deadliest Catch* more than once. He’s a real dude. Not afraid to curse in front of me—like a cool, deadbeat uncle.

By the time I drive home, it’s semi-dark. The world is grayish. Sometimes you get lucky and see a big red sun.⁴³ You can hear cicadas and ribbits and croaks and chirps, et al. Most of the neighbors have retreated into their abodes. Dinner is waiting when I get inside and my mom asks me how my day was and I say “fine” and I ask her the same and she says “the usual” and then dad walks upstairs from the basement looking tired and hungry and we sit at our dining room

⁴¹ I’m not currently in Oasis, but I was earlier. I’m sitting in my room, waiting for dinner. (What if this footnote just kept going and became its own book?)

⁴² Sorta like Britain.

⁴³ Not to be confused with a Big Red sun, which is comprised mostly of wads of tasteless (as in lacking deliciousness, not as in liking to tell crude jokes), chewed pink gum.

table and eat—Noora might show up, might not—but we don’t talk while we’re eating and my mom says, “Must be good. No one’s saying anything,” and my dad and I emit confirmative grunts as we take a sip of our AriZona green teas and smile-chew.

I think we’re having salads and sweet potato fries tonight. I dip my sweet potato fries in mayonnaise because America.

Life is good at the moment, and I don’t think it’s just because I was listening to Panda Bear on the way home.

...

Actually, it’s probably because I’ve been kneading my own semi-boner since I left the cemetery, so I know my finished product will be hefty and worth it.

...

JK, it’s impossible to get a semi-boner in a cemetery.

...

It’s a full-boner.

/// “Comfy in Nautica” – Panda Bear /// http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25_gjUbvqNg

\\

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE / inside jokes.

I need recurring characters.

JONESY

Jonesy—it’s Jone-zee, not Jo-nessy—is my best friend. My main droog. Can’t be sure what unit “best” is measured in in “best friend”—maybe best in looks, in smarts, fiscals—but colloquially, yeah, he’s the best. He’s a six-foot-nothing black kid with an affinity for

photography, film and indieish music.⁴⁴ Film, mostly. He's in a screamo band. He was wearing a Matt & Kim merch shirt today at school.

Oh, and he's a huge niggard.

...

If you're not racist slash not me (I'm fairly certain about one of these), you're going to see that I just referred to my black friend as a niggard and think I'm a hick Confederate asshole with no regard for propriety. I assure you, I'm not—he's a niggard. And besides, I've read *Blink* so I know that *I'm* not a racist—my *unconscious* is.

...

We write sketches and film them more than we don't, and one of our biggest hits-if-you-can-call-it-that is called "Niggard." The people want controversy, and we the people, yo.⁴⁵

Niggard

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

JONESY and SOLON sit on opposite sides of kitchen table.

Box of Cheerios sits on table, next to Jonesy.

Jonesy reads the newspaper.

SOLON

Hey, can you pass me the Cheerios?

JONESY

Get your own.

SOLON

Geez, what's your problem?

JONESY

⁴⁴ Who gives a fuck about an oxford comma? CC: VW

⁴⁵ Just close the fucking book.

Mind your business. These are my Cheerios.
I bought them with my money.

SOLON

[beat] God, you're such a niggard.

JONESY

What?

SOLON

You're the biggest niggard I've ever met.

JONESY

Dude, that's offensive. Stop saying that.

SOLON

I would if you'd just give me some cereal.
[beat] You selfish, ungenerous niggard.

JONESY

Look, I'm having a bad day. That's it.
Don't call me a niggard. You have no
right.

SOLON

Why not?

JONESY

Only niggards are allowed to call each
other niggards.

SOLON

[beat] My grandpa says niggards are the
problem with America today.

JONESY

Your grandpa's an old fool.

SOLON

Don't call my gramps a fool! He fought at
Guadalcanal!

JONESY

Alongside niggards, no doubt!

Argument reaches its peak. Long pause.

SOLON

You're right, man. I'm sorry for using that word. It was wrong of me.

JONESY

It's fine. Just think before you speak next time.

SOLON

Hey, do you want to see that new Will Smith movie? I'll pay.

JONESY

Will Smith? Yeah! That n***er is hilarious!

Solon and Jonesy laugh heartily. Suddenly:

JONESY (CONT'D)

Why are you laughing?

SOLON

(immediately) Sorry.

Fade to 'black.'

...

Jonesy wrote this one, so it's not racist. (That's how racism works, right?)

He's a quiet, unconfident-if-you-don't-know-him kid who needs //apushontheback to go all in, even to ante, and I'd attribute most of his nervousness to the facts that he's one-third of our school's not-white constituency—another third being his sister, another third being Rolo, an overweight Korean who's convinced he's anorexic—and that he's the whitest black kid I've ever met. That's very close-minded to say, but offense is taken, not given? One time I heard Jonesy's brother call him a nigster: a hipster n***er.⁴⁶ I've wanted to borrow the phrase a few times, but

⁴⁶ Three asterisks separate me from full-blown racism.

that fucking racism thing, man—it keeps me proper off the page.⁴⁷

I propose we create an intensely racist racial slur for white people. I mean, Jews and women and Asians and Hispanics have a few words, homosexuals have several, and black people have one unmatched doozie. The only people who don't get a fair deal are white, heterosexual males. What—*honky? Peckerwood?* It's so unfair. We never get anything good.⁴⁸

The only reason the universe made Jonesy black is because if he were white, he'd have red cheeks 24/always. Before he knew me, people called Jonesy Elliot⁴⁹ because his name is Elliot Jones. I'm the almighty Bestower of Nicknames, though, so post-Sol, Elliot was Jonesy.

He & most everyone call me Sol.

Everyone knows we're bromantic, so if they're calling either of us anything, they're calling us Jonesy & Sol. It has a good rhythm—linguistically lyrical, the classic two-then-one syllable deal. Samesies as Sonny & Cher, Lewis & Clark, Sully & Mike, Bonnie & Clyde, Adam & Eve, Pee-Pee & Vag, Captain & Kirk, Schmoopty & Peup, Gooby & Merp, Yuppies & SPAM⁵⁰—so it goes with Jonesy & Sol. Two-then-one. 1.33 dactyls.

We met in my freshman integrated science class when the teacher gave up trying and forced us into truets to label and color in our third-grade-level periodic tables. (Teach, handing back tests: “Do you guys even study for this class?” Me: “Periodically.” Everyone:

“BOOOOOOO.”)

⁴⁷ And has also stopped me from buying white hoodies on several occasions.

⁴⁸ This is the paragraph that gets me shot.

⁴⁹ I always remember the spelling of “Elliot” by inwardly (not n-wordly) saying, “Two Ls, one T.” This, in turn, makes me think, “Two lesbians, one tea.” This, in turn, makes me envision two British lesbians sitting at a sidewalk café, when Garçon walks out and proclaims, “M'ladies, you have both ordered tea, but it appears we have but one cup left,” before setting the cup on the table about fifteen feet from theirs and skipping away. The two lesbians rush to the table, each desperate for tea—ripping each others' clothes off, punching passersby—and then my fantasy cuts out and I realize I'm sitting in front of a computer, making up an elaborate story about Jonesy's name and typing it into an useless footnote.

⁵⁰ I started running out of examples around “Pee-Pee.”

Jonesy had moved here from Indiana or Illinois or some such such, and I, like everyone, including the teacher—who I think was afraid of him for obvious Midwestern reasons—knew him as the tall bla—African-American kid that moved here from Indiana or Illinois or some such such. (He’s actually from the suburbs outside of Chicago.) It’s me, him, and Victor, a dim-witted foreign exchange student from Brazil—all fourteen—coloring in the noble gases with erasable Crayolas.

Public school.

I say, “I hate when I get the noble gases. No one wants to be around me when I do.” That was my mnemonic for remembering that noble gases have low chemical reactivity, so I threw it out as an ice-breaker. Victor doesn’t hear me because he’s lost in his Portugese-*NOT*-Spanish daydream, but Jonesy says, uneasily (aka Jonesyly), “But I...I thought the noble gases were odorless.”

It was love at first thought.

Been Jonesy & Sol ever since. We started making films soon thereafter, writing throwaways, shooting scenes, filming mockumentaries out of barn party and school function footage. We’re the Lumière Brothers reincarnated—assuming the Lumière Bros were really into poop jokes and weed parties.

Jonesy’s got Five Star notebooks filled of five star ideas—the only guy as passionate about creation as I am—but you’d have no clue when you shook his hand. He’s borderline autistic in the flesh, but behind the camera, screaming Huey Lewis,⁵¹ with a pen, with me, he’s M. Night circa *Sixth Sense*.

I tell myself I’m destined to be famous because I don’t get inspired—I get *jealous*. Famous, successful people fuel my envy. I think Jonesy is the only human being I’ve ever known

⁵¹ I’ll get to this.

who I'd *want* to become famous before me, and that says a lot about the character of Mr. Elliot "Jonesy" Jones. What a lamb. Screams the News in front of anyone without a bead, can't say anything in-between songs without afro-blushing.⁵²

DOC

We call Doc Doc because Doc has a lot of money, but Doc denies this is why we call Doc Doc. Doc has convinced Doc that people call Doc Doc because Doc's a natural ringleader, like Doc, the dwarf with the fewest chromosomes. He's not planning on becoming a doctor, cut-em-up nor write-it-up, but on becoming a firefighter, which his loaded parents frown on until they remember, oh, wait, hey, we're fucking loaded, trolololol, #MoneyMoneyAppleProductsFineWinesEtCetera. I went to his house once, got lost and lived a happy life. Went to his house once, came out a Congressman. Went to his house once, tripped on insider trading, cut my cheek on embezzlement. Kid's house has more pillars than mine has stairs. Moral of the story: Doc's luh-hoo-hee-*hoo*oaded.

He lives in a filthy rich, mountainous-house suburb called Roxbury Commons on the outskirts of town. We give him shit for it all the time.⁵³ *How are your shubberies coming along, Doc? Nice and monetarily sound?* Honest, only reason we might still be pals is because I get so muchofa kick poking fun at his wealth. *Hey, Doc, can you spare some change? No, yeah, it's the round, metal kind.* Our Senior English class watches the news on the topsy-turvy TV in the ceiling corner before Fritz walks in and learnage commences, and a whileback the news folks were covering the economic collapse and not much else. One day, the newscaster is getting all

⁵² I *swear*—I'll get to this. Cut me some slack—this is my first diary-biography-novel-storybook-memoir?

⁵³ No, really. The past three Christmases, I wrapped up some cat shit and gave it to him.

*All My Children*⁵⁴ with how bad the economy is, how fucked Generation Y is because IRA-yadda-yadda-holograms, and I say, “It’s been long enough! Doc, *do something*.” Everyone laughs. Doc shakes his head and smiles.

The news covered the collapse every day for months, and every day after my comment, someone thought of a more creative way to push Doc’s (what were most likely gold, platinum, or perhaps fine, hand-crafted Satsuma ware self-shank) buttons.⁵⁵

“The dow went down another three points this afternoon.”

“*Seriously*, Doc?”

“The dow went down another four points this afternoon.”

“Doc, you better call your parents.”

“The dow went up one point this afternoon.”

“God bless you, Doc. God *bless* you.”

Doc’s a good sport, but you can tell he hates being the poor school’s rich kid. He’s a cornfed farmboy at heart. I have a great great Aunt Something on my dad’s side that gave up her family’s riches—lacy doilies and all—to move to West Virginia, scour and live on and for the land, birth great cousin Somethings, and trade upper-classdom for supple, self-rewarding humility. That’s Doc’s path to a t.⁵⁶ He’s told his mogul parents he wants to fight fire, and he refuses to attend the honorable Private McRichy⁵⁷ private school in town like his older brother and sister. He plays football, and on sports awards nights at the high school, his parents stroll through the hallways in their zoot suits and top hats, wiping their monocles on their fine cotton

⁵⁴ I used to watch *All My Children* with my mom when I was sick at home. I was sick a lot in sixth grade, and I got pretty invested in the characters. I’m still waiting for an exclusively-*All My Children*-related *Trivial Pursuit*, so all my time learning who was whose twin pays off.

⁵⁵ Thanks for everything, Wikipedia!

⁵⁶ Sadly, this path to a tea was devoid of two restlessly thirsty lesbians.

⁵⁷ Real name of school.

cloths, wondering why the tile floors haven't been properly waxed, or why Gregory, their butler, isn't hand-feeding them cute meat-and-cheese hors d'oeuvres off of silver plates while the coaches talk the blee-blah about the proles.

Truth is, they're not nearly that caricatured—they cheer at the games and wear hoodies and do other normal people things—but riches don't go over well at public country schools, no matter how many hoodies you have on. Six, seven hoodies: not good enough. In the good ol' fashioned cracker-barrelin', bootleggin' countryside, we're raised to think the upper class is elitist and fundamentally corrupt from the get-go because that makes us prouder of our dreary, bake-sale, lower-to-middle-class lifestyles and forces us to put more hypothetical stock in the belief that wealth comes from within, not without—that we're fine living in our little holes of sports nights and discounted hoodies—that we ain't needin' no greedy, fraudulent bigwigs assimilatin' and shovin' they riches down our honest-to-God thoats.

Hobbits and elves, hobbits and elves.

Doc's got more than money going for him. For one, he took what life gave him and said no thanks, which always deserves some sort of praise. Right? Takes guts to put faith in something contrary to everything you've ever been told?

“Ok, kid. Here is loads of money, all topically kickass cars, and automatic confidence. You'll never have debt and people will flock to you for no reason other than your wallet's plumpness,” said Life.

“Nah. I'm gonna go chew wheat and drive a Dodge Ram. Hurrurr,” said Doc.

Takes...*guts*.

Though it's consoling to skim Hallmark cards and remind your middle-class self that

wealth isn't everything, and that things like family, love, nature, incense, beanie babies,⁵⁸ and pillows with adorable stitched-in quotes like, "Who needs men when I have chocolate!? [Also, I'm obese and incredibly lonely. I'm convinced the former begat the latter. Stitching these homegrown pillows is the only thing keeping me from drinking a bullet]" are the vitals, I don't think the Doctor went about disregarding his wealth the right way—if there is such a thing. You can always put your wealth on a figurative backburner and do something else. At least when you snap out of your scratched-Miller-Lite-hat-and-RIP/Longlive-Earnhardt-phase, you can reach for the millions sitting at the back of the stove and laugh it off. You don't have to drop it entirely like Doc, join a redneck football squad, and marry a trailer park babymaker2000 to prove yourself.

He reminds me of the chubby cowboy that can't dance in *Footloose*...not because he can't dance—I have no idea if he can—his parents probably forced him through European ballet lessons in early childhood—but because he's a tough ass for the sake of being a tough ass. He'll go on for hours about how much ass he plows, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, how many hemis his truck has, and how awesome sports are (—except soccer of course. Those *fairies*. TOUCHDOWNS AND SHOULDER PADS AND JOHN ELWAY HURRR).⁵⁹

Every other Doc word is pussy, turnover, or gasket.

"Fucked pussy before turnover in gasket trucks turnover vagina pussy. Hurrrr," said Doc, always.

But he's one of those kids I've known since I've known kids, and when you get him in the right climate, around the right friends, he's pretty alright. Throw in a stranger, it's pussy from here to Andromeda 2, but find the right combo, Doc snaps out of it. He'll snap out completely

⁵⁸ Did any of the Beanie Babies ever wear a beanie? If not, there is no God.

⁵⁹ I play soccer, so I've devised a few creative nicknames to spit back at people who call me a grass fairy. When it's a football player, I call them "dumb." If they're from any other sport, I call them "irrelevant."

one day, and it'll be nice to finally meet him. By no means is he a smart kid, but he's a country kid, despite, you know, the whole mansion and trust fund thing, and he'd have my back if anything ever came up. It's in the richboy-gone-poor manual: richboy must prove he doesn't need his parents' money to get ahead. (Dan) Rather, he needs biceps, tackles (preferably both the fish and football varieties), and juicy, juh-*huicy* clit.

Doc in one word: overcompensation.

His real name is Taylor Brenner.

PEED

Pete's a gaunt bastard who smokes Pall Malls in the baseball dugout during lunch with his minion bastard sophomores. Pete doesn't know what he wants, but he looks up to the guys who he thinks will get him somewhere better than all of this. He's a train wreck waiting to happen, but we all have hope he jumps from the caboose in time. I work the sports fair every year as the racquetball rep, and he approaches me our sophomore year and says, "You're Solon, right?" I'd never talked to him before, except maybe in passing, but everyone knows everyone knows everyone because, hello, welcome to public school, we have diaper stations in our bathrooms. I say, "Yeah, you're Pete Young, right?" I knew him as the Black Dahlia Murder kid that smoked with the emowave adeauxs, and he knew me as our grade's smartass, like most people. "You want to play racquetball? It's easy to learn. It's basically tennis in a box." That's what coach Willis (we call her Bruce) tells us to tell rookies and onthefencers: "Racquetball's tennis in a box. Real easy. Not easy, but you get my point." And she says, "If they say they're no good at tennis, say, 'It's easy. It's like racquetball without the walls. *Die Hardy* har har har.'" Not too many high schools have racquetball teams. *We* do because the Y's only a seven-minute

bus ride from the high school, and we all grew up wasting time there playing rball and swimming laps, so there's some interest. Our closest rival in rball is somewhere on the way to Dayton. We play teams from Dayton, Columbus, Akron, Cincy, Muncie, Sandusky—anywhere but nearnearby. We don't play anyone in our school's conference, only these urban megaschools with funding ota and natatoriums next to their cafeterias because why not? Doc's name comes up a lot when we pull into their parkingplexes.

Pete joined that year, and now he's the second best player, behind me. He hasn't dropped his emo minion phase—he's still got the Iron Maiden shirts to prove no one's perfect—but he's less of a punk kid, and more of a hippie—with a thing for dubstep, progressive metal, and, strangely enough, chamber pop. He's a Sebastian looking for his Belle. I went to Warped Tour with him last summer and I watched as he flailed his fists right into some other guy's face. Kid's a pasty skeleton. We tell him if he played rball naked, he'd be the Invisible Man.

Whenever he plays, he wears a cheetah-print headband and half-calf socks because he's an IDGAFer. There are some people who act like they DGAF, e.g. *me*, but G bigger Fs than the kids who acknowledge they GAF, but Pete: kid doesn't care what you think. Genuinely. If he doesn't like you, he won't say anything. He'll just befriend someone else or go his own way. Jonesy and he clicked because of the mutual screamo love. Pete loves screamo, but doesn't want to be in a band. Jonesy's asked him hundreds of times, and Pete tells him he can't afford fucking his voice up anymore than he already has and instruments aren't his fortissimo. The Pall Malls have given him an inventory smoker's voice, and now he sounds like a sixty-year-old woman with a lubed-up trach.

Jonesy joined the team this year because he wanted to play a sport before he graduated. Rball's all year round, and the trips are long, so the three of us are tight. I'm Martin, Pete's

Short, Jonesy's Chase. Long story not as long, I've seen Pete's gooch wiped against the rball glass more than once.

But that's Pete Young for ya. He could masturbate at Madison Square Garden and embarrass everyone else.

NY

Nate Yates: a bully gone good. So good it's bad.

Nate is religious and I'm not going to pretend it doesn't bother me. He's two years older than the rest of my good friends—and he's not exactly friends with all of my other friends like all of my other friends are friends with each other⁶⁰—and he was the mainstream sports king while I was becoming the alternative sports king. He had the big doozies like the b-balls, football, and track, while I was rocking varsity racquetball and soccer. In the grand realm of school sports: he was King, I was Duke. I was his curly-haired, pre-growth spurt protégé. When he found God, his bully phase flew out of the door and to the altar and he pulled a Jason Lee and asked for forgiveness from everyone and everything he'd wronged in the past.⁶¹ The kid got *mad* guilty. Nate always has this 'I'm sorry' look on his face—like he has some huge, looming be-nice-to-you deficit to destroy.

“Sorry for bullying you back when, Sol.”

“Don't worry about it, Yates. We were different back then. No harm done.”

⁶⁰ Friends friends friends friends other other other other friends other friends other other other friends other friends

⁶¹ I once watched him try to reason with a sleeveless t-shirt. “I'm so sorry for ripping your sleeves off. It's just—I liked the way it made my arms look when I worked out and—and I know you'll probably never forgive me, but—but if you can find it in your heart, I'd really appreciate it if you gave me a second chance. What's that? It's a t-shirt and can't talk? But I read a thousands-year-old manuscript that everyone else in my family abides by that says t-shirts are sentient so I'm going to ignore your point and continue to talk to it.”

“Take all of my money.”

“What? No—Yates—it’s *fine*, I don’t need your—”

“Car? House? Sister?”

“What? No, I don’t—”

“Have enough of my things? Here’s my dog and my library card.”

“Seriously, Yates? You need to stop—”

“Stop not giving you everything I have?”

“Now you’re just reaching—”

“For the elixir of life. I found it yesterday. It’s all yours.”

It’s like *I’ve* become the bully in our friendship because I’m starting to get mean to him whenever he starts getting too nice to me. It doesn’t seem natural. You’ve got this Aryan superstar athlete, and he spends his time off-court feeling bad about himself. I just want him to get batshit wasted, have an orgy, and show everyone why he’s the big dog on campus. Instead, he takes baby sips of beers, enjoys rap music ironically (because to actually enjoy it is blasphemous and dirty), and volunteers at soup kitchens. The latter is super commendable,⁶² but it’s like—when are you going to realize that being nice to other people is actually pretty self-centered?

Ayn Rand and Nate Yates would hatefuck.

Nate’s like my little project. I’m trying to re-toughen him up—find a good middle grounds version of Nate that isn’t such a bully but also isn’t such a softie. I love the kid. He’s proof that people can change, that they can improve, that they can stay humble. He’s not a cliché, which is what I think I look for the most in my friends. He’s the anti-jock. He reminds me of me when I went through my religious phase, which is mega-condescending to say, considering (1)

⁶² Or soup-er commendable, as it were.

Nate's older than me, and (2) people devote their entire life to religion and I just brushed my religious experience off as a phase.

I went through a lot of phases when I was younger,⁶³ and Nate successfully ended my 'I'm-better-than-everyone' phase—and for that, I'll be forever grateful.⁶⁴

One time I stayed at his house—which made me feel soup-er cool, because he's two years older than me—and we thought we heard someone break into the house and scream 'Murder!' We were falling asleep in the basement, and after the murderous bellow, Nate grabbed a knife from the garage. We crept upstairs to make sure his parents were still alive. They were.⁶⁵ It turns out what we heard was a taxi driver dropping off Nate's sister from summer camp. Those two sounds are similar, right? Someone breaking into a house and yelling 'Murder' and someone opening a door as a taxi drives away?

They're basically identical.

I don't know why I remember that night so vividly—probably because I thought I was going to be, you know, goddamn fucking *murdered*—but I think the story is sort of like Nate's character arc: at first, he's forceful and terrifying, but once you realize the truth, you understand he's nothing to be scared of. He's just a blond-haired b-baller who wants to shoot some hoops and scoop some soups and loop some Snoop (ironically).

He's away at Marietta, crunching numbers, and every time I see him, he invites me to come to his youth group. I think I might be his little project, too.

REED

⁶³ Guess you could say I went through a 'phase phase.' YUK YUK YUK YUK YUK

⁶⁴ This says 'grapeful.' I meant to type 'grateful,' but I typed 'grapeful.' 'P' and 't' aren't even close on the keyboard. But I don't care. I'm keeting it like that.

⁶⁵ TALK ABOUT A *TWIST*!

Last one's a friend of a friend, and by friend of a friend, I mean an old friend who continuously distances himself from us, but takes his original position whenever he needs someone to talk to in-between girlfriends. Name's Reed, which would be funny if you knew him because he hates books. He's an exoskeleton, but not gaunt like Pete. He's got studs in his ears. We got those put in together sophomore year after he broke up with the transfer. He looks like high school Adam Levine.⁶⁶

It's our senior year and he's dated five girls. There was Jackie, the girl from a different school; Kate, the transfer; Darian the Aryan; Joann the slut, who he dated because she was called Joann the slut; and Scar, one of my other good friends. I considered writing a separate section for Scar (it's Scarlet), but I haven't really spoken to her this past year because she's been busy with Reed. Funny thing about relationships: You can have two solid relationships with two great friends, but if they get a quill and label their side love, your side's cut, frayed, and forgotten and they move on as two parallel lines who don't want anything else crossing their paths and making angles. One of the things I genuinely hate. *Relationships*. Especially the ones where those in the relationship become almost immediately incompatible with anything other than the relationship because, you know, love and junk. Love and junk's *got* to happen, and third parties can't get involved because monogamy's too serious, especially for little nonserious teeny bopper relationships between two kids who can't write a decent thesis or get a good joke, but think they're heart gurus. That's surreal: see two of your favorite people happy and energized, and know it's inauthentic. *Know*. That every relationship is, at some level, inauthentic.⁶⁷

Next time Reed crawls back because he and Scar have non-artistic differences, I won't know how to handle it, because I'll have to be there for Scar, too. Love is a battlefield, and we

⁶⁶ Speaking of Adam Levine, I'm starting a mash-up band. We're half Maroon 5 and half Matchbox Twenty. We're playing the Bowery next month. We're *MARCHBOON 25*.

⁶⁷ The word of the week is jealousy, probably.

bright singles are civilians caught in crossfire who wish everyone would stop fighting. Yeah, *fighting*.

It's not funny, funny no words inthe skins only words w/i screens

does this count ??

123 123 123

123

and 4 ' s on His own

on His own

what a serious joke

/// "The Blues Are Still Blue" – Belle & Sebastian /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQwcqwHvrus>

\\

the farm parties.

The farm parties crop up⁶⁸ at the abandoned Chappell barn on Old Chappell Street. I don't know who Chappell was or what he did, but I like to pretend he was some boisterous Win Butler-looking motherfarmer with a newage moustache and overalls who hit an oil well one day shooting at what he suspected were Injuns (but were actually just drunkards making their way to the bootlegging headquarters on the other side of his field), became filthy rich, and saved the town from bankruptcy like a JP Morgan wannabeast. Half of the things in town are named after him. There's a Chappell Mercantile a few miles from home that sells homemade jams and salsas in Mason jars, and a Chappell Hills nursing home a few miles farther from home that buys a fair amount of the jams and salsas from Chappell Mercantile in bulk because there is no chewing in the business of jams and salsas. The chapel is just the chapel.

⁶⁸ NOTICE AND APPRECIATE HOW CLEVER I AM.

The parties occur every weekend during the school year, usually on Fridays or Saturdays, or both. During the summer they happen whenever. Never Sundays. The last few weekends, Jonesy and his screamo band have played shows on the first floor gallows box. The name of their band is Denzel and the Washingtons because he's black and the other two members are Dirk and Brian Washington, twin brothers from Springboro. They sing covers of 80s hits, and by "covers," I mean they play a sample from an 80s hit for twenty seconds, cut the sample at the chorus, drop a beat, and scream the rest. They do Huey Lewis and the News (as aforementioned),⁶⁹ and one night after the set, Jonesy couldn't walk two feet without someone walking by and burping IT'S HIP TO BE SQUARE in his face with Bud breath.

The barn's begging to be in the next Coen brothers' film. Rustic and full of character. The red and white paint has chipped away, and now the horsehouse is stained golden-brown and mildew-like-will-do. It's not right on Chappell—it's down a dusty road that eventually stops, stationed next to a tiny dry creek ravine that splits the two corn fields, and makes the weeds on either side stick up like cowlicks. There's bushel and patches of trees around, and from the road far off, you can't tell anything "illegal" is happening and you can't hear anything either. Some kids like to sit down in the ravine area and do what others like me like to do in Africa instead. There's sort of an understood rivalry betwixt the Africans and the Ravinsters. The barn: we've decked the inside out with Christmas lights, and the second floor hayloft is where underage drunk kids like me i-dose after the parties. That sounds dangerous, but we manage. We stationed a mammoth haystack for morningafter jumpers next to the back door.

Tha hole thanggis jus reeeeeal country.

We use a dusty old bathtub with rusted animal feet and "OUTLAWS" graffitied on its

⁶⁹ I *promised* it would make "sense"!

side as our cooler. Fill it with ice—usually takes four Big Bags—and fill it with booze.⁷⁰ The tub has been there for years, and the usual gang now refers to themselves as outlaws. I’m an outlaw, s/he’s an outlaw, we’re all outlaws. Even the *Ravinsters* are outlaws.

The barn’s back doors lead right to the farmland via a concrete tractor ramp, which folks at the parties affectionately call The Ramp. I spend a lot of time in my lawn chair on The Ramp, looking up at the stars and talking to kids I wouldn’t usually talk to at school. When I’m not sitting in that chair having philosodrunken conversations with semi-strangers, I’m hiking out to Africa to partake in the creepiest Ouija games e’er played and/or tree-house time, which is coolkid code for ganja which is cooler kid code for weed.

Aaaaaand I just realized I haven’t really explained what Africa is.

OK. There’s a patch of trees in the middle of Chappell’s field that reminds me of every picture of Africa I’ve ever seen. Think about it: there’s always a low-lit valley with one bushy tree silhouetted by the huge red-orange sun, and an antelope off to the left. That should be in Africa’s travel brochures.

“Africa: if all else fails, at least you’re certain to see some trees in front of sunsets and antelopes off to the left.”

Long story shorter, I mentioned the Africa thing one night when I was on The Ramp, drinking and looking out at it, and the name stuck with everyone.

I’m a leader. Especially when I’ve consumed one.

LITER.

I get drunk or tipsy nearly every weekend, usually off of the cheapest beer found at the Gas Mart in town because that’s what Jonesy’s older brother will get us for BYOB—aka the

⁷⁰ A Hitler Reunion Tour would also be filled with booze.

Howard Dean Rule.⁷¹

After about two beers, every beer tastes the same anyway. I'll never get the toddlers who "need" a certain beer because, like OMFFFG, like, like, like, it tastes better than all of the others, LOLLLLlike,,,. Those kids cling onto the beer they favored their first night of drinking and refuse to try anything else from thereonout because it makes them seem like they know more than jackshit about drinking. Personally, Pabst gives me heartburn, Bud's cans have too much perspiration for drunk Solon to hold onto, and I've acquired taste aversion for Miller's. The first and last time I drank Miller's, I threw up for an hour in Africa.⁷²

Cops showed up two weeks ago,⁷³ halfway through "Heart and Soul," which Jonesy had dedicated to my namesake, and the cops started to half-assedly break up the party. "Come on, guys. Go home, go home. Like, we're being serious and junk," they said. Fortunately, it's ruraler-than-rural Ohio, and everyone knows or is related to everyone else, including the fuzz. Especially the fuzz. And besides, they wouldn't dare break us up because the Chappell farm parties have been a tradition since the 70s—when some kids stumbled on the place during car tag. Car tag:

1. Friends gather in high school parking lot.
2. A few start running through town.
3. Five to ten minutes later, the rest start driving around town and try to tag the others with their headlights.

One of the cops spotted his younger brother at the pong table and shouted next game. I ended up having a conversation with an Officer Stevens about Ernest Hemingway. The

⁷¹ Howard Dean: "We're going to Delaware and then to North Dakota and then to Iceland and then to (...) and then we're going to Washington DC to ruin the country with our moneyfilthy politics and split party system! BYOOOOB!"

⁷² That last sentence would be an interesting novel opener.

⁷³ Pete calls cops 'weedwackers.'

conversation was plotless, monotonous, and most of the sentences were annoyingly short and self-aware. Also, repetitive and overrated. The conversation ended up living in Key West, acquiring a feline sanctuary, vacationing in Cuba, and committing suicide. After a successful stint as a model, the conversation's granddaughter also committed suicide.

Stevens graduated six years before I will, and told me about the good times he used to have in the barn. I remember cracking a fuzz joke along the lines of, "Donut feel good to be back?" and he jokingly asked me for my ID. I handed him my beer. Where I'm from, ID stands for "I'm Drunk."

If you haven't already, try growing up in a small town sometime. It's killer.

Imagine This Will Destroy You humming in the background, a muted echo of drunken anecdotes and laughter off of empty horse stables, a cold drink in a car dealership koozie in your non-dominant hand, the other in your hair, a stagnant warmth vs a hushed breeze, the smell of hay and dew, uncensored conversations with the jocks or girls you don't have the guts to approach before hours, and a mysterious dark island in the middle of nowhere that you can glide to and meditate in whenever you hit your high or need to hit one soon.

This is the draw of the Chappell farm parties.

/// "The World Is Our _____" – This Will Destroy You /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qseh99s-yM>

\\

kneal before neil.

if more people recognized Neil DeGrasse Tyson as the revolutionary he is, the world would improve

/// “Black Door” – The Black Keys⁷⁴ /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cC9cEQ30Oeg>

\\

word becomes a title.

I chose *word*. as a title because it’s not too wordy. OH WAIT SHIT.

...

Word has a bunch of meanings, and a lot of the meanings are, sort of magically, at the core of what I wanna get across with my verba^{ge}.

...

A book’s no good if the title says everything, so I won’t explain it away. If *To Kill A Mockingbird* was called *Racial Discrimination Is Pretty Messed Up, So Stop It Guys. Like Seriously, Stop It. It’s Getting Old Fast and We’re All Gonna Regret It Down the Line When We Realize How Narrow-Minded We Were Being, and In Front of Our Children, No Less. Haven’t You Guys Read Blink?*—it wouldn’t have sold nearly as well. It would have sold great today because, you know, *irony*—but not then.

That’s why you name your book something ambiguous or sophisticated-sounding or liberally simple: people will spend years decoding the title’s true meaning and they’ll give your book more substance than you started with.

So, the obvious and fin: if you’re reading this sentence you can relate to “word.” This whole sentence is made of them. This one is, too. 17288390. 8891.

...

I was flipping through the dictionary earlier today, hoping some WORD would jump out

⁷⁴ My mom thought they were The Blackies. (Regardless, Akron FTW.)

at me and scream in a little rambunctious Mickey Rooney voice, “Me! Pick me! I wanna be the title of a best-selling diarybook! Please! I’m sick of being a middle-class word, leading a fragmented life, groveling in my own delusions of context! I’m tired of working second-SHIFT part-time jobs in vocabulary lists and unimportant sentences in the middles of mediocre romance novels. I wanna be in CTRL! I wanna live the big life! I wanna make the front cover! I wanna be a *title!*”

I was hoping the WORD would show itself, that the WORD would find me like a sadie hawkins trick or treat. Flipping through the old pickwick pages of my handmedown *Webster’s*, I kept telling myself, “You’ve got to find a great WORD. The WORD you find has got to be great. An attention-grabbing WORD. A WORD that grabs attention.” Then I was all like LAWL I KNOW WHAT:

word (wurd) n. [ME<OE].⁷⁵ 1. A sound or combination of sounds, or its representation in writing or printing, that symbolizes and communicates a meaning and may consist of a single morpheme or of a combination of morphemes.

(At this point in my search, I looked up the word *morpheme*, thinking it might be a cooler, hipper word for “word.” Upon realizing I gave the minisculiest of fucks for its definition, I turned back to *word*.)

2. An utterance, remark, or comment <a word from our sponsor> 6. An assurance or promise <gave them my word> 8a. News. <What’s the latest word?> 8b. Rumor. <Word has it...>

Word is everywhere. We use word to express our feelings; to feel our expressions; to tell secrets; to voice opinions; to opinionate voices; to sing; to rap; to write; to communicate; to

⁷⁵ Oh, yeah—didn’t you guys hear? OE is officially better than ME.

manage with something stressful; to stress about something manageable; to relax; to read; to woo; to wane; to whisper to a friend; to befriend a whisper (—ok, done with that); to vent; to tell stories; to tell history; to worship, to pray; to arouse; to explain; to make a list of infinitives separated by semi-colons; to overuse the self-aware narrator ploy; to incorrectly split infinitives and to eventually stop caring that you’re doing it; to infinity and beyond; two birds one stone; Tutankhamen (...)⁷⁶

My favorite attribute of word—the word, not the soon-to-be bestseller by summa cum laude Sir Solon Asa Brood, MD—comes from the urban dictionary:

word: a statement of agreement. Also word up (Speaker: I’m going to the movies tonight, dawg—you want to come? Response: Word!)

when used as a question, equivalent to, “Are you serious?” (Speaker: I met Sissy Spacek. Response: Word?)

seriously. (Speaker: Word, word, that’s how it happened.)

Slanguage. Word is *an understanding*. When you can’t find the right words, say *word* or *word?* and your co-conversationist gets it. I like that. All someone has to say is “word,” and you get that they get it even if they don’t and you get that. And it feels good. It feels good to know that someone else ‘gets’ it.

Fresh death in the family. You look at Steve and Steve knows exactly how you feel. Everyone’s dealt with death. Anyone who’s dealt with life has dealt with death, just like how anyone who’s dealt with telemarketers has dealt with thoughtcrime, anyone who’s dealt with Taco Bell has dealt with diarrhea, and anyone who’s dealt with *word*. has dealt with incessant

⁷⁶ What if the rest of the book was just a list with things beginning with “to”? What’s that? It would be better than it already is? YOU KNOW WHAT? *SCREW YOU* HIGHLY CRITICAL FICTITIOUS READER OF MY JOURNALBOOKMEMOIR. *SCREW. YOU.*

diarrhea references.⁷⁷ At any rate, when Steve sees you grieving, all Steve has to do is look you in an eye, say “word,” and somehow, even if it’s only a little bit: your sadness, your solitude, your whatevers evaporate as you arrive at the brightest of conclusions: you’re understood.

Steve gets it.

That’s all I’ve ever wanted—for a guy named Steve to understand me—and that’s why I’m naming it *word*. For Steve. And I’m keeping it lower-cased with a period at the end. I don’t have a good reason for that part. I just like it when e.e. cummings doesn’t capitalize things. It’s a big nuh-uh to the world and its norms.⁷⁸

I’m a writer, so the title feels right. A writer without words is like a pilot without a plane, a fry cook without a spatula, a prostitute without a harelip, a sans-anus sentence in *word*. I want to fill *word*. with my life and with my ideas for books, scenes, stories, blurbs, comedy bits, my dreams, my philosophy, with my secrets—especially the secrets⁷⁹—my hang-ups, my downfalls, my very essence so people can look back and know where I came from. *word*. is my Pinkerton. People might not get it now, but they will when they understand I changed the game. They’ll say, all in unison, “Solon Asa Brood, a prodigy author, the baritone of our generation, that sexiest man alive—he knew what he was doing in his youth, as a mere seventeen-year-old laddie! He truly is one of a kind. He truly is a genius. He truly is a writer—nay, a *human being*—of a different breed! A different *brood*, even! Ha! Ha!”

I’m telling you, even Pitchfork will have nice things to say.

If I do things correctly—my way—my life goes according to Garp; I become a famous writer; game-changer; creator; inventor; visionary; people say those things—my whole life measured in my words—my life history condensed into high school placement tests—I can go

⁷⁷ Sphincter, ya know?! LULLZ!

⁷⁸ Especially Norm Macdonald.

⁷⁹ I farted at church once and blamed it on Satan.

back and read this and remember where it all began. I can remember that I was always honest with myself and everyone else.

Except Norm Macdonald. Fuck you, Norm Macdonald.

/// “Words” – F.R. David /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3vnnc4XPAA>

\\

a non-E moose.

I’ve decided to write an ‘autobiography’ nice and early in life because anyone who writes their autobiography wayfar after the fact is *wrong*. Did you know that every seven years, every atom in your fucking body⁸⁰ is new? That’s right—every time you poop out your gum, you’re an entirely different person.⁸¹ At forty-five, I couldn’t tell you anything accurate about what happened to me when I was below twenty (years, not degrees Fahrenheit) because in the time it took me to write it down, I would have sat and sautéed reasons why it happened, forced some meaning into the meaningless, and made my life into a fairytale rather than the jumble of random events and conversations it is in real-time. (—I’ll get it out there now: despite my name, I don’t believe in the soul. I don’t believe the soul is a separate entity that soaks up its environment and adjusts to its memories, experiences, and relationships; (dan) rather, I believe it *is* the combination of these things. *IS*.) No one writes about the massive shit they just took in their autobiography (—made that sound like they shat *in* the autobiography) because it wouldn’t fit

⁸⁰ Similar to a regular body.

⁸¹ The whole it-takes-seven-years-to-digest-gum theory has actually been debunked, much like I was that one time I was sleeping at a friend’s house and he had me sleep on the top bunk and I leaned over the railing to tell him my dirty little boy secrets and the railing came loose and I fell.

Debunked.

the fairytale. Well, here it goes: I JUST POOD. Felt good. It wasn't like those other shits where you look down at your pebble turds & you have to run to the mirror to make sure you're not a rabbit. It was hearty and whole like Campbell's, and it was leagues more substantial than the decades-after storytelling and the reminiscent residuers' retellings. Shitting is *honest*. Give me twenty years, and I'll be telling you that that shit—that one, fateful shit—altered my worldview and learned me what it means to give back to my community—how animalistic the human race is or some other literary hogwash that wasn't crossing my mind—miles and miles and *years* away from it, in fact—when my neck veins bulged, my face turned red, and I squeezed a pickle-spear into Briggs' bottom.

“As I wiped the soft Charmin cloth between by buttocks that comfortably humid afternoon, I was simultaneously wiping away years of oppression and sadness, years of pent-up anger for my father's abuse and my mother's gullibility. As I watched the soaked sheet, stained by dank excrement, get sucked into the toilet's mouth, I was wiped clean: *tabula rasa*. With that single wipe, I became a better version of *me*, no longer exhaustingly dragged down by my past. I was a person ready to take the world on, full-force. It wasn't long after that bathroom session I was traveling to Sudan to save millions of malnourished children living on two dollars a lifetime—to flush away their grief like I had so recently flushed mine. Also, I built eighty schools in Afghanistan on the way to Sudan. Before any of this success and philanthropy, I used to do drugs real hard, but got over it and junk. I'm famous but modest and smart enough to have my publicist write a book, so please adore me for being so honest with you. In conclusion, money.”

I sat in on an AA meeting recently with my Uncle Earp⁸²—he runs meetings whenever he's in town, confiscates the goldschlager, et cerveza—and realized that the Volk's stories get more

⁸² His real name is Wyatt. We call him Earp.

morbid and extreme the farther down the line you go. AA meetings are exponential (social) functions.

They started with Martha, who began drinking on the job as a bartender and had trouble stopping because she was surrounded by the stuff, and ended with Patrick, aka Bob Bummer, who apparently traded his organs for booze & coke in Indonesia, lost his three children in court (not because they wandered off, but because of a custody battle with his ex-wife), had four relatives/friends die in the same two week period (naturally, the guy before him had two or three), and lost his house to foreclosure the day his dog had a stroke and the Red Sox lost and his dick exploded right off of his body and his favorite band's new album was released but just wasn't the *same*, man. I leaned over to Earp and whispered, "He's a brick...*house*."

AA should be called One-Up. One-Uppers Anonymous. Something. Whatever happened between Martha and Patrick is a mixture of scarytales and the pervasive human condition otherwise known as *wanting the most fucking sympathy*. If they can't soak up Ketel One and bloody maries to make things ok, they're forced to settle with soaking up attention.

I'm cool with doing both.

#gulp

/// "What Up Man" – The Cool Kids /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BuzJX9MAJU>

\\

THE FAMBLY /// inside jokes_ii.

I just realized I never formally introduced you to the biggest characters in my story. My family.

God, this diarybook thing is hard.⁸³

...

My parents hate when I curse

(...and they curse when I hate.

“Damnit, Ma. Do I gotta do the dishes again?”

“Sol, don’t swear in this house!”

“Ugh, I *hate* it when you tell me what I can and can’t do.”

“Fuck you, son. Fuck. *You.*”)

KAT, MY MA

My mom’s name is Katherine, people call her Kat, and her siblings would beat on her because she was the youngest. She got over it like she does most things. Strongest weak woman you’ll ever meet. She’s brunette. She says, “You’ve always got a choice, Solon. *Always*,” and I joke and say stupid shit like, “If I were born without legs, I wouldn’t have a choice to jump rope really well,” and she gives me those universal mom-y eyes—those eyes that remind you that she spent nine months with your fat ass clinging to her torso, entirely dependent on what she found the strength to force down her vomit-riddled throat. Some people have those moms that think moms are required to take shit, that giving up your conviction is a child birthing pre-req—you eat dinner and say *meh*, you never thank them for gifts, you don’t organize your laundry or clean your room—and they swallow it.⁸⁴ Not Kat. You don’t give her the respect she deserves, she lets you know—telepathically. She doesn’t verbalize it or stick it on the refrigerator in a frenzied note—she sends her wavelengths your way, and you straighten all the fucks up. She always tells

⁸³ Especially if you bought the paperback edition. HEYO!

⁸⁴ Sex joke.

me I got my smarts and my good looks from her, and that gets my dad salty,⁸⁵ because he feels like she's saying he gave me all of the not-good things I have, like my slightly-uneven eyes and my fucking temperament, goddamnit!

THEO, MY PA

My dad's name is Theodore, people call him Theo, and he's a big-shot businessman. Also brunette—though he's becoming white.⁸⁶ Couldn't tell you what he does, but he does it, because we live pretty comfortably. Not Doc comfortably, but comfortably. I don't know a lot about a lot of things, but you could fill a spaghetti warehouse with what I don't know about business. Someone could run a business off of how much I don't know about business. If I got to the pearly gates, and St. Peter said, "Tell me one thing about business and you're in," I would spell the word business and pray to God it counted.⁸⁷

MA AND PA TOGETHER

They've been married long enough to know what the other one feels like eating. Mom surrendered me to Doc Brown⁸⁸ when she was forty-one, dad was forty. They snicker and say I'm smart because they waited until they were old, sagacious geezers before they had me (and sometimes they upsettingly admit they weren't quite old and wise enough when they had my sister, Noora [when my sister, Noora, isn't around {which is often}]).

NOOR

⁸⁵ He literally becomes salt.

⁸⁶ I feel like there's a clichéd Michael Jackson joke somewhere in this.

⁸⁷ I imagine the pray reception would be stellar at the gates.

⁸⁸ Little known fact: after that whole time travel shebang in the 80s, Doc Brown settled down and began work in a pregnancy ward in midwestern Ohio.

Noora isn't around that much. I call Noora Neither Noor because if a genie let her twist time and face the same decision an infinite number of times, she could pick and live out every path—the road less traveled, the road more traveled, the road traveled by lost tourists—and no matter the path, she'd still end up dead in a ditch—even if there weren't ditches. If Schrödinger let her babysit his cat, it would always end up being dead when you opened the box. (All things considered, she threw it in there while she motrined her Ecs.) I tell her she's got the fúku, and she tells me to shut the fúku up...and does a line with a Washington or an expired Iams coupon.

She and I aren't on the same wavelength. My junior year of high school, I was awarded the President's Volunteer Service Award; her junior year of high school, my parents had to bail her out of a temporary prison for shoplifting. She found the wrong friends early on, and she won't let it go. It's like she can't.

Sometimes I convince myself that she was gracious enough to leave all of the smarts behind in the womb, so I could have them all. That way, I can pretend she's cared about me all along—and just isn't 'there' enough to express it now. She'd cut anyone who tried to mess with me, and I would stick up for her any day. Something very basic and familial keeps us bound—I mean, we're the only two people in the world with the same parents. There's something to that. But beyond that mandatory bond, there's not much at all keeping us invested in each other. I've told her she's stupid for stealing from mom and dad and others and for living with random guys for weeks at a time and for quitting every job she gets and (...) but it doesn't stick. She's too depressed or something. If you see the family photo, she's the skinny one with too much eyeliner and no smile. I called her Noo-Noo when I was young.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

My dad's face looks like he loses five pounds every day. I don't know if it's stress, old age, or if me, Ma, and Neither Noor just scarf it all down before he gets home from his vague business life in the city. That's not even a Molotov's gun for how my dad has cancer. He's just a bony dude. Ma gets home from the elementary school where she's a special kids helper a couple of hours before dad gets back, and by the time she's home, I'm already gliding down the road on Alli.

...

So, cursing. I shitting do it. You know. Well, my parents prohibit it in and near the Brood abode, the Bode abrood, and teachers frown on it, even though everyone knows teachers cuss all the time in the lounge and at home after work.

"That fucking Brood boy cursed in class today. Can't believe that kid. Thinks he's hot shit because he reads books good."

"What did he say *this* time dear?"

"Fuck if I remember. Shit. What's for dinner?"

"Steak and green beans."

"Steak and green beans, *again*? Shit ass dick ass wiener balls pussy fart."

To skirt no cursing policies, we play games—Jonesy, Doc, Pete, and I, mainly. In English, instead of cursing, we yell famous authors' names. Here in the 'Heart of It All,' we make do with the little things. The other day, Pete stubbed his toe on his desk when everyone was walking in and sitting down, and he yells "VIRGINIA WOOLF!" I died.⁸⁹ Every time Fritz hands out a quiz, we yell. He hands me a quiz: "JOSEPH CONRAD!" Jonesy: "D.H. LAWRENCE!" Pete: "AYN RAND!" Doc (after spending a good ten seconds trying to think of an author): "CHARLES DICKENS!" Teach has caught on. One time he wrote "KURT

⁸⁹ No, really. I'm dead right now. I'm writing this from the grave. OMG IS MY BOOK GOOD YET?

VONNEGUT! THAT'S A GOOD PAPER!" on my essay. It's even made its way out of class. One time [at band camp] at the barn party, the music plug gets pulled—deadly silence. Out of nowhere, you hear Pete: "LOUISA MAY ALCOTT!" That echoes its way to me on the African trek, and I fall down in the middle of the field. Muddy Levis.

In Physics, we yell elements. Doc spills Whateverliquidwe'renotsupposedtopill on his arm for the nth time and: "TUNGSTEN!"

In Math, we yell elementary equations, and wait for Lamp Jesse to answer them for us: "TWO TIMES SIX!" Jesse: "TUH-*WELVE*. DUH." Us: "LOL *whisper whisper* Jesse is such a lamp!"⁹⁰

In history, we don't yell anything because you don't mess with Mrs.

Hornsby. She'll fuck you up. Pretty sure Hornsby survived Bastogne.

In woodshop, we actually curse. It's Mr. Glotzman.

...

We also do this thing throughout the day, whenever we see something we don't like: we scream *NAY!* in our finest Zeus. The best *NAY!* belongs to Pete, '08, first day of Spanish class. Señora dars us an opción, says, "Bienvenidos a Español tres. Hoy..." she drops the Spanish, because we've stopped paying attention, "Hoy...we can either watch a video on Guatemalan culture or...work en los grupos." Everyone's nervoso to give their two pesos because it's the first day and people aren't used to the room or the seating arrangement or something—feng shui is off-quilter because only thing Asians and Spaniards have in common is rice⁹¹—and Señora says, "Ok, then. Video it is! [Cha cha cha salsa y Montezuma.]" She turns to put the Vay-Ache-Essay in the Vay-Say-Erray, and Pete bellows, Zeus meets Odin meets Ossian meets James Earl Jones:

⁹⁰ A lamp is a look a.t.m.e.p.erson, and you know several. We four are lamps, too, but we're aware of our own lampiness. Jesse does it unintentionally. Big difference.

⁹¹ Don't worry, guys. I've read *Blink*.

NAY! LOS GRUPOS.

...

...

I'll gingerly drop that in the you-had-to-be-there file. Hopefully when they make *word*.
the movie. you'll get to see it and this whole explanation won't be worthless.

Señora wrote Pete a recommendation letter recently.

/// "Ed is a Portal" – Akron/Family /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIUHrL1NxAI>

\\

In a world wherethere is no vanity,
Ev'ry motherfucker b'comes pro-fanity.

-Sol "Self-awarewolf" Brood

/// "Get Rhythm" – Johnny Cash /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Roug4qG7qCY>

\\

a teenage puet/the whoas of postmodernity.

"I'm a poet, didn't
know it."
I'm a puet, always
knew it.

My stanzas give
demands to the others not providing.
It's apish to trace your Twain
and call it writing.
I'm writhing.

All it is today is Greco-Roman gods and flowerpots.
"I'm so Mars-cosmos so sassy/bashful- flowerpots.

Powerflops here *Fuck it—*

disconnect the revelry.

Chivalry's de-dead thanks to the le-lack of ple-
Pleasantry.

'mongst the

peasants, gee—

I think I've crossed the

line now

die now

guys, *wow—*

I can't believe you're snapping.

All I need is cummings cuz I've almost finished
fapping.

Please

slap me

daft ly, you—

the

non-acnes,

holding down the

leventh,

pressing

heavens

with your

godforsaken

presence.

Let me know

this

the

the

ain't all—

same calls—

framed walls—

chained balls,

and

chicky-chicky

weighing down the plain,

too-sane,

Hussein,

vain,

estranged

lame-

pauls.

"I don't like this garbage shit. I'll go back to my teen sex," said a
maiden mind built for big—arms just like a T-Rex,
reaching out to
preacher out of

pity for zirconium.

Enter SirPodium.

"I concur, I concur. Lad's gotta-go, a maverick.

It's

tradger-ic thou improvs nearly

half of it

when me and ours can't even light a match-a-stick of petrol and—

cadaver!—

quick!

Oh no—I've lost my shit now!" said the fetch

rex-brat.

There goes, there goes...the last bead of my

ex-lax.

Ha!

Enter

next/last.

"I meeean...he reads it really well, readily retrieving rhyth-i-mics,
but when I want to read it all-to-all I get is flaccidicks,

plasta-icks

storming down the damn sewer seer drains and
Trains travelling?
Unravelling *word.* problems—

cheers to my left
brains.”

Enter the best-cat.

They're gaining Pounds because, like, diets are for hipsters.
Then they read, brood,
breed, rue and realized that I've

flipped
birds.

Middle fingers up, holler out to the nonsexuals

vestibules of the postpostpostpostposthuman
residuals.

Ever think of peasant you?

A better you?

Question:

Who

is

Zeus, Minerva, Hermes, dandelions and chrysanthemums?

Needta internet the goog? Wikippeed in chance of thumbs up?

Dumb luck,

please, thank you, and pardon.

Light the matches, throw them up, burn down Athena's

garden.

Jus-t-jus-t-jus-just getting

started.

Ha!

I farted.

/// “Da Booty” – A Tribe Called Quest /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPYK2xfHNwo>

\\

a puet.

People tease Jonesy because I'm the white half of our duplex cookie friendship and I'm the human beat-t-be-t-be-t-bebeatbox. I didn't pick up the uhn tiss brrrrrkat pst t pst pst t-t-pst tttt kakakakabrehhhhh kat tiss uhnuhn tssssss gene until freshman year when Mr. Ungden, our high school's ghetto fabulous innercity transfer 2pockmark wannabe Government teacher challenged students to rap battles in class. No swearing, no sex, no yo mommas. Little ol 5'5"

confident Solon said I CAN DO ANYTHING I PUT MY MIND TO SO I'LL PUT MY MIND TO RAP. I stepped forward as the lonesome challenger.

*I killed.*⁹²

Words are my thing—*MY THING I TELL YOU—LOOK AT ALL OF THESE WORDS I'M USING*—and Mr. Ungden learned that the hard way. Word got around school faster than an STD that I had dat fresh style—you know—*where my bitches be at, poppin' dat Henny, poppin' dat puss, skihskihskihskih*—& the next day I was our hick school's M&M.

...

It's true what no one says—

Years of closeted poetry pay off.

...

It's awkward describing what poetry means to me because the best way to describe poetry is with more poetry. To learn a song, sing. To learn to fuck, fuck. To learn to write a poem, sing, fuck, then write a poem. Someone sometime along the art timeline forgot to mention that poetry is granulated a cappella music, so nowadays we have these disgruntled graduate poetry professors shoving "POETRY IS RELEVANT" and "I SWEAR MY CAREER ISN'T COMPLETELY MEANINGLESS" and "I MEAN COME ON. PLATH IS KIND OF COOL, RIGHT? NO? WHAT ABOUT POE? HUH? [*CHUGS WINDEX AND METHADONE*]" pamphlets down undergrads' esophagi, and asking colleagues to proofread their Young Goodman shit poems, allofwhich begin with "Darkness surrounds me / Sunlight in autumn," because they're too preoccupied with their silent streams of consciousnesses to see the resemblances.

⁹² No, really. I murdered Mr. Ungden. I'm writing this from my prison cell. OMG AM I INTERESTING YET?

Run-on, my child. Be free.

...

95% of poetry is garbage, and I enjoy reading .001% of it. Enemas and paper cuts across the webs of my fingers⁹³ trump contemporary ‘collections.’ I can read widths times lengths times heights of poetry and leave the room without an ounce of betterment or attainment on my record to show it. Now, *my* poetry, on the other hand: juh-*heenyus*. If someone else wrote my poetry: shit, automatically, *duh*—but *my* poetry: fuck the beatniks, *I* read *Brood*.

I’ve stashed poetry collections from prospective college English departments in a bin labeled “Hope.” Every poem is a non-alphabetized list of mythical creatures & types of flowers (hence, “All it is today is GrecoRoman gods and flowerpots,” etc.). Cameo the seasons and give a shoutout to the moon and SKUH-BLAM: you’re poeming with the best of ‘em.

...

Poetry’s too personal to enjoy on paper: a flat, blackandwhite piece of silence. They need to sound good read. I practice my poems over and over until they sound right.⁹⁴

...

I won 1st place in a local slam poetry contest sophomore and junior year and all I did was dramatically describe my day, end it with a thoughtful character trait, throw in some extraneous question marks, and gesticulate like a bau5.

“I ate breakfast

It was:

Delicious!

Captain Crunch and a...banana?

⁹³ You read that correctly. I enjoy enemas across the webs of my fingers.

⁹⁴ If this sentence were leaked, I would get sooooo many wedgies.

On the bus, I talk with friends

On the bus, there are no seatbelts

What's *with* that?

Compassion."

"Mr. Brood, how *do* you *do* it?" says the referee (whose black and white stripes run vertically because standards are soooo mainstream). "Where do these poems *come* from?!"

"Well, *ref,*" I say. "I like to think they come from...the Sol."

BUHDUH TISS

applause *ref dies from admiring me too much* *no one notices because they're carrying me away on their shoulders as I hold a large trophy and wave* *ref's family calls the police after a few days* *they find his body being ravaged by vultures*

...

Dreams of a seventeen-year-old poet: (1) Lead a literary revolution. Call the revolutionaries 'puets' or 'lovers of wisdom,' and the movement Absurdist. (2) Live it up, become an icon. Get high with the other greatest. (3) Open a bookstore on some anonymous city corner, and call it 'the writer's block.' (Don't capitalize it.) Pretend my quaint life spent in New England sailing isn't such a big deal.

progress.

it's all in the family.
 cancery insanity.
 climb the tree to see the cause and pause on
 great grandmas and pas
 on the mayflower, waving at the new land.
 the sand resists the new man,
 but people need to breed and lead and eat and the way that rolls deceives the point.
 time to point back and glean a thesis, sans white folks, we peeps and jesus.

o p

o p

O p

O pioneers!
 So! Why ya here?
 Seeking's reeking of neyed hack.
 Needles in a haystack and ya'll
 Go way back.
 Like way back, before the bright White left freedom for fortune and a Sajak.
 Say jack, and the judges come a-coming.
 Start your engines, Injuns running.
 All birds humming,
 Searching, something.

Man with land and a plan demands the spick is span.
 The spicks *are* spans.

We've found it: gold, elixir, supper.
 Take the notsonew, forge a fixer upper.
 Sew the questions, wear the tupper.
 Find a hole and feed it butter [we name the slight rhymes progress, we call the, we call the bluff].
 Convince the wench she's got a lover.
 Babes, crops pop up, guts in gutters.
 Hearts cease their foreign flutters.
 (I've got it! What if—)
 Witchcraft! Burnher ferher sputters!
 Impediments, reticence, day: another,
 An udder under the pinks of plunder.
 Shine the shoes, shut the shutters.
 Forget why the floats first fated to hover.
 Forget what we asked and return under covers.
 You love her, you love her, right? Yes, oh you love her.
 Exclamation: mutes to a mutter.
 We enter as pilgrims, we presson as hunters.
 We enter as lasers, we exit jammed jumblers.
 We stood resolute, 'til time tricked us: to punctures!
 o p
 o p
 o pioneers?
 so, why ya here?
 p o
 p o
 Buy a year, and by a year, p o
 time will have named it *progress*.

...

So *yeah*. The more I talk about poetry, the higher the chances it will turn into a poem, the higher the chances I melt into the Other, the higher the chances

I tab my senten

ces in aw

kward, steplike

formations?

[edit: *Yeah...*so I should really stop with this k2 bullshit.]

/// “Gimme the Car” – Violent Femmes /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUw4gPZiNGQ>

/// “The Hollows” – WHY? (everything by WHY?, especially *Alopecia*, is worth it – Cincinnasti, represent) /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqcckeKtSU4>

/////

The cafeteria smelled, and Bill never failed to iterate that when he and Ellis sat down for more salad.

“Like rotten yams,” he said their sixth day together. “Reminds me of Thanksgiving at my house. Mom would always leave the food out, and it would smell like old yams until Christmas. Then she’d leave the duck out too long, and my brother, my dad, we’d all quack just to make her mad. She wasn’t really mad. She’d laugh too and say, ‘Spray something or shut up.’”

Bill’s stories attracted the attention of several other wanderers. With each new day, three or four new bodies would float to their corner of the cafeteria and spill their sentimentalities across the long chrome tables. By the third day, eleven or twelve had already gathered around to listen and share.

“Did any of you think this would be like this?” Jesse, a middle-aged woman with dry braids, said. “Death, I mean. I mean, it’s like—like *life*. I mean, *really*. It’s almost *realer* than it.”

“Sometimes I wonder if this is all my imagination,” said Roxie, an equestrian. “Maybe I made this all up to cope with something else that I’m not ready for.”

“I mean, if we’re experiencing it, it’s *real*, right?”

“It’s not in your head, Roxie. Believe me. I’m here whether or not you think so,” said Bo, a sixty-five-year old man recently retired from his family’s landscaping business.

“But,” she swallowed, “how can I ever believe you? What if *I* made you say that? What if it’s all *me*?” She pointed to herself and accidentally knocked her glass of fruit punch over. She ignored the mess by closing her eyes. “I’m lightheaded,” she said. She groaned. “When will I see my Savior?” She smacked her hand into the spilled fruit punch. She began to shake, and a nearby ward worker escorted her back to her room.

“Jesus, they’re like librarians,” Bill said, eyeing the workers standing in the corner of the

cafeteria. “I used to go to this library in town where the librarians would be on top of you if you turned the page in your book a little too hard. Swear to God. One time I scanned my library card, the machine beeped, and I had four of them fighting to help me out. I tell them, ‘Look, I can do this myself. Take a break.’ They all walked away like I murdered their children or something.”

For the second day in a row, Ellis sat across the table from a man who passively refused to talk. Instead, he hid behind his stringy hair, and sulked over a bowl frosted baby carrots. The others claimed his name was Leslie.

Bill reopened the discussion by asking Bo, “So, Bo, how and when did you die?”

“I was in Mexico with my wife and I had a stroke. That was about two weeks ago.”

“What year was that?”

“07.”

“07? That was a great year!”

“How do you figure?”

The table laughed. Godfrey, the man on the other side of Bo, laughed himself into a coughing fit.

“Lung cancer,” Godfrey said. “‘06.”

“It’s just I graduated in ‘07,” Bill explained. “Wasn’t as good as ‘08, though. They had the summer Olympics in China, and then Obama was elected.”

“You mean McCain?” Jesse said.

“Did you die before the election, too?”

“No, I died in 2011. When McCain had been in office for three years.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No. Are you saying *Obama* won the election?”

“Yeah. 2008. First black president. It was a *huge* fucking deal. How do you not remember this?”

“I remember just fine. McCain won.”

A long pause.

“That doesn’t make sense! *Obama* won. There’s no getting that confused.”

“Look, *McCain* won. Joe Biden was vice.”

“Biden was *Obama*’s vice, not *McCain*’s,” Bill said. He forked his peas into submission.

“They’re from different fucking parties!”

“That’s why it was such a big deal when McCain made him VP.”

Bill stared at Jesse, offended.

Leslie grabbed a carrot, snapped it in half, and threw it. He mumbled something to himself, and gripped his hair. He siphoned his breathing off through his nose.

A worker approached immediately to assist him. Bill whispered something about librarians. When the worker went to put his arms on Leslie, Leslie shrieked and bolted up, knocking the worker under the chin with the top of his head.

“All of it’s a lie!” he screamed. He threw his tray at an approaching worker, and looked at Bill and Jesse. “It’s infinite! Nothing’s the same! It’s all fake!” The workers took him by the arms. He grew limp. In defeat, halfway out of the cafeteria, he yelled one last thing: “We’re all *dummies!*”

As the two workers forced him through the cafeteria doors, Godfrey stood up with his empty plate, looked at Bill and Jesse and said, “This might not be a good time, but—you’re both wrong. It was Hilary Clinton.”

He winked, laughed himself into another coughing fit. He approached a few workers, who escorted him out of the cafeteria.

Lunch ended.

+++++

Bill was quick to ask questions when Dee came for their daily bindi binge.

“Who won the election? Obama or McCain?”

“Excuse me?”

“Who won the election in 2008? Barack Obama or John McCain?”

She handed them their dots.

“Depends.”

“What do you mean, ‘*depends?*’”

Ellis stuck his dot on and constructed his room from scratch. His frog stood in the corner.

“I mean, it *depends*.”

“On what?”

“Your Fate.”

“My fate? *My fate* determined the 2008 election? *My fate* did all that? What kind of fucking future *is* this?”

“Do you ever get sick of asking questions?”

Bill remained silent and red. Ellis leaned back in his swivel chair and balanced himself.

“Time doesn’t work the way you think it works,” Dee said. “Time is—relative. It’s weightless. When you take on a new life, you enter a very specific time frame. When you’re living, everything that happens to you is set in stone, so to speak.”

Ellis jumped in with a calm, “So, what’s the point?”

“The point is, you chose that time frame. You signed the papers that specified when you would first breathe, when you would meet so-and-so, and when you would return.”

“—”

“Let me rewind,” she said. “There are an infinite number of timelines. For every step you take—for every infinitesimal change in your life—you trip on a rock, you scratch an itch, you don’t scratch an itch—a series of events expands from that minute change and creates a unique timeline. In one timeline, perhaps you die at twenty-one, in another, you live until you’re one hundred twenty-one. In one timeline, Barack Obama becomes president. In another, McCain wins.”

Ellis exhaled. “How can the same person exist in two timelines, let alone all timelines, all at once? When I was alive, you’re telling me I was also alive in billions of other lives, tripping on rocks and not scratching my itches?”

“No, you—you signed,” Dee stuttered over the phrase, “you signed up for a very specific timeline that was deemed appropriate to better your situation here.”

“At Home?”

“Correct. At Home.”

Bill sat up. His face and arms, clammy, his eyes dark. “What’s the point if it’s all set out for us? Why not just *not* live?”

Dee wrote something on her clipboard.

“Think about it. When you’re reincarnating, you can never definitively say if your life is determined or not. Some people live their lives convinced life is determined; they build religions and entire cultures around the notion, in fact. Some get by just fine accepting complete freedom, and living life with a counterintuitive myth of invulnerability. Others fall somewhere in-between,

and are most likely to rip themselves from the inside out with uncertainty. Did I do that, or did some higher entity? Was that meant to happen, or is the world a cruel, animalistic place? As I recall,” Dee said, flipping through her clipboard, “you, Ellis, fell into this last category.”

“Fell is the right word.”

“Either way,” Bill said, aggravated, “they already decided everything beforehand?” Nod. “They decided if they were going to accept their free will or not?” Nod. “So, technically,” he worked the concept around in his head, “these people are giving up their real free will to pretend they have free will when they don’t.”

“Or giving up their free will to pretend they’ve never had a free will,” Ellis said.

“Which, technically, they don’t—” Bill finished.

The two roommates seemed to be on the same team.

“The thing is,” Dee told them, “even though you didn’t have free will during your life, it felt as if you did, right? It didn’t feel like an invisible force was pushing or forcing you into everything. Perhaps every so often, a remarkable coincidence made you temporarily deterministic, but, for the most part, in life, you felt responsible for what you were doing. Sure, people can convince themselves temporarily that something was always meant to happen to make them feel better about their part in it, but they can never prove it. And that’s life. Ignorance is existence.”

Bill and Ellis had a silent conversation, composed mostly of perturbed facial expressions.

Bill: “What about what’s happening right now? Is this one of an infinite number of timelines? Or is this all original?”

“Same thing, essentially,” she smirked.

“It’s not the same goddamn *thing*, Dee,” he spat. “Is there a timeline somewhere out there

where you're a dude and Ellis isn't a mope?"

"Wait, wait, wait," Ellis said, ignoring Bill's jab. "If this is the future, that means *this* moment—we three talking in this room—is at the very end of a very unique timeline?" Nod. "Not two or three parallel timelines, but one very this-after-that-after-this-after-that timeline." Nod. "So, sometime before this moment, someone had to win the 2008 election. Who won so that this moment—*this* moment—exists?"

Finger touch.

"Obama."

"I fucking knew it," Bill said.

"But something similar to this situation could be happening in a timeline where McCain won." Bill's eyes flashed murder. "But, no, yes, we know Obama won in our case," Dee submitted.

"So—hold on now," Ellis said upon seeing Dee's mouth open. "We are from this moment, *right now*. This is where we belong. I'm someone named Aldwyn, Bill's not Bill, but we're just having trouble remembering that. So, who are Ellis and Bill? Just two random guys from the past we decided to re-animate? H'lu said a lot of people reincarnate as Shakespeare, in one timeline or another, but Shakespeare is a real person who did real stuff. These people are basically just wearing his sk—"

"*Her*," Dee corrected.

"Okay, they're wearing *her* life as a—a *mask*? And the reason we don't have free will when we reincarnate is because we're forced to follow the script laid out by the original Shakespeare in one of her original timelines?"

"Which means the original Shakespeare had free will!" Bill declared.

“How is that even possible? How can we know so much about the original Shakespeare that we can live her entire life—and know the private details?”

“Fucking *magic*,” Bill said.

“Not magic,” Dee said. “*Technology*.”

“Technology my ass. This shit is retarded,” Bill said.

“And all of this begs a much bigger question,” Ellis said. He felt like he was back at school, lecturing his undergrads. “If Shakespeare had free will in her original timelines, and this is *our* original timeline, do we have free will right now?”

“Take a step back. You’ve got some things right, some things mixed up. The first thing you have to understand—”

Dee’s sentence was interrupted by several echoes coming from the hallway. She shot up to spot the ruckus. She stepped into the hallway light, only to be tackled by Leslie. He was running, full sprint. He cursed at the obstacle, and frantically ran into Bill and Ellis’s room. He slammed the door behind him. To his pursuers: “It’s *my* life! *Mine!*” He gritted his teeth. He leaned against the door, clearly exhausted. His hair, wet and stringy, stuck to the door. On the other side, several R ward workers slammed on the door.

In his hands, Leslie held a revolver.

“Whoa, whoa, *whoa* man! Where’d you get that?” Bill yelled.

Leslie was too busy loading the revolver to look up. He tapped his forehead with the barrel and laughed.

“You—you know we’re already dead, right?” Ellis reasoned, nervously.

“I don’t know *anything* anymore,” Leslie said, still concentrated on the gun. “And neither do you, Dwyng.”

Leslie winked at Ellis.

Before anyone could stop him, Leslie whipped his hair over his forehead, put the revolver under his chin, and pulled the trigger. His blood painted the closed door and ran from his nose for four seconds.

And then he disappeared completely.

+++++

Ellis woke up. Still nighttime—still nighttime. Bill, asleep. Something interesting crossed Ellis’s mind, and he instinctively grasped for the notepad he had stationed on his nightstand in Iowa. This time, he caught air and slapped the wall. He didn’t want the thought to disappear forever, so he jostled Bill awake.

“What?” Bill said, groggily.

“Hey, you know what all this means?” Ellis said. “If there are an infinite number of alternate timelines, that means all fiction is real. It means—you’d have to stretch it a little—but—it means—literally *anything* is possible.”

“Like dragons and shit?”

“Yeah, even dragons and shit.”

Bill began to mumble.

“What?” Ellis said.

Bill’s words fell out of his mouth. Gibberish. Ellis looked through the darkness to see if Bill was having a seizure, and only saw Bill with his hands behind his head, eyeing the ceiling, and speaking calmly and assuredly.

“Go back to bed. You’re mumbling.”

Bill eyed him, puzzled. He continued to speak, hurriedly, in gibberish. Suddenly, Bill’s

eyes opened—all-knowing—and his face confessed eureka.

Bill the Thrillster remembered.

+++++

Ellis sauntered over to his usual spot at the cafeteria table. He breathed the yam air. After his nighttime epiphany, Bill had shaken Ellis's hand, mumbled something in what Ellis now understood was Aramaic, and walked out of the room. In the light, Ellis saw two workers' silhouettes take him by the arms, loosen their grips, and walk away with their convert. Ellis never learned who Bill the Thrillster really was.

A small bowl of salad and a half-cup of ice water. Ellis sat down next to Roxie the equestrian and Godfrey. Jesse and Bo had escaped the R ward sometime. Ellis couldn't remember who had gone first.

"Where's Bill?" Roxie asked him as he snapped a stubborn crouton in half with his teeth.

"Remembered."

They poked at their food. Quiet.

"How'd it happen?" Godfrey asked.

"I woke him up in the middle of the night to tell him something and it clicked. He started speaking Aramaic."

"Lucky guy," Roxie said.

"You'll remember, don't worry."

They poked at their food.

"How do you know that?"

"Know what?"

"That I'll remember."

“As far as I know, everyone remembers eventually.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Godfrey said.

The colloquialism struck Ellis harder than usual.

He poked at his food as Roxie glared at the workers patrolling the cafeteria. She looked down at her plate.

“And I swear I can’t *taste* anymore,” she said. She stabbed a hard-boiled egg with her fork. “It’s like I’m chewing just to chew.”

“Right there with you,” Godfrey laughed. “How about you, Qualm?”

Godfrey pointed his fork at Ellis.

“*You* taste anything?”

“It’s not all that bad,” he said.

Godfrey glared.

“Here you are,” Roxie said. “You die, you eat with other dead people. It’s nuts. It’s—”

Leslie sat down next to Roxie and kept his head down.

“How—how are you—” Ellis sputtered, “Your head was—”

Leslie chomped his carrot sticks indifferently. “You ever seen *Groundhog’s Day*?”

“—”

“Then you know.”

Ellis could have sworn he saw Godfrey discreetly touch his index finger to his thumb.

Leslie stood up and walked away. He dumped his full tray of food into the trashcan on his way out.

+++++

He had a camouflage ball cap and an Appalachian accent. He was tall and pale.

“Name’s *Krink*.”

“Ellis.”

“Like the island?”

“Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“What’s your brother’s name? *Coney*?”

Ellis despised his new roommate and let Dee know that as soon as she entered the room.

“Sisyphus got a boulder. I get roommates.”

“Whatcha—ya don’t like me, *Coney*?”

Krink feigned offense.

“How’d you guess?”

“I reckon ‘cause you just said so ya peckerwood.”

Dee dismissed the non-serious quarrel and proceeded with the bindis. Krink was an amateur, unable to muster up the image of his antler-ridden den for more than a few seconds. Every time the den popped into existence, another pair of dead eyes caught Ellis straight on and mocked him with his own death.

Abruptly, Ellis: “Do you guys fill out roommate assignments before or after you hand out guns to the crazies?”

Dee wore superiority. She’d expected the question.

“After. We let the crazies kill themselves and whoever else first so that’s out of the way. Then we can be sure what kind of numbers we’re dealing with for roommate assignments.”

Ellis loathed Dee because she knew things he didn’t. The weeks he’d spent in the R ward suggested he’d never reach her level.

“He’s still alive.”

“I know.”

“What the hell.”

“I *know*.”

“—”

He glared.

He didn’t receive a clear answer. She told him that he “got the gun by creating it during his session,” but Ellis had already figured that out. Dee managed to sidestep the rest of the mystery for their entire session.

When H’lu came that night, he punched her with the questions Dee refused to answer. “How is Leslie still alive?” With each new question, he became exceedingly more agitated. He approached H’lu and stared down at her, enraged. “It’s impossible to die here?” His favorite question of all came—loud and helpless—like an injured lion’s roar: “Where *am* I?”

Then,

Krink picked Ellis up and threw him onto the bed as H’lu shut the door and locked it. Suddenly, Krink was not Krink. His camouflage hat was replaced by a tanned, bald head and his stupid mouth was replaced by an everlasting smirk. A Buddha-looking man—a slight beer belly and squinted eyes—stood next to H’lu, unsettlingly happy.

“You peckerwood,” he said, jokingly. His Appalachian accent was gone. “Can’t adjudicate it’s been fifteen years since I’ve seen your delusional face.”

Ellis sat on his bed and let it be.

“You know who I am. Well, you don’t. But you do. You know. But not yet. God, I’m glad you’ve been terminating this part,” he told H’lu. Jovial.

“Ellis, this is Virg Tanker. He’s one of your best friends. I am, too. As soon as we’re done here, he’s Krink the Redneck. Got it?”

“Capiche?” Virg teased, holding his fingers up.

“Enough,” she said. “His guards’ll be back around any second. Zeke can only do so much.”

Ellis, mouth open. “What’s this about?”

“Don’t ask questions. Just go with it.”

She waited for him to nod.

“Ok. Here’s what needs to happen,” she said, sitting on the other bed. “Tomorrow, when you wake up, you’re going to act like you’ve remembered.”

“How am I supposed to—”

“Don’t ask questions!” She leaned over and gently punched his thigh. “The only three requirements for getting out of here. 1—” Virg held up a chubby finger, “talk Aramaic. And 2—” Virg held up a second chubby finger, “answer your private question. For part 1, take this.” She handed him what looked like a thick staple. “Tomorrow, when you tell the workers you’ve remembered everything, make sure you have this pressed over one of your teeth. Somewhere on a molar will do.” He put the staple in his pajamas pocket. “For 2, the answer is ‘silver fox.’ Got it?”

“Silver fox?”

“Silver fox.”

“What’s the third requirement?”

She pulled a picture from her back pocket and handed it to him. It was the picture Betsy had showed him his first day back. *His* picture. A prematurely white-haired man with astounding

light green eyes stared up at him.

“Remember that face. Get it engraved deep in your mind. Every wrinkle, freckle, cell.”

“Tell him it’s equidistant to the room drills—”

“It’s like the room exercise. You imagine the room in your head, and when you open your eyes, there it is. Same for bodies. Close your eyes, think about this picture, about who you are, and then become him. Become Aldwyn. Here,” she said, handing him a round band-aid wrapper similar to the ones Dee gave them during meditation. It was a bit larger. “Stick this over your heart tomorrow, and practice changing whenever you’re alone. Virg will be here to help you out and make sure you’ve got everything perfect. Remember. *Silver fox.*”

“Silver fox.”

“Tomorrow you’ll meet your Guide. Her name is Judith. When she says her name, *run. Run to the last step.*”

She got up and collected her supplies.

“You’re giving him half, right?”

“Yeah. It should hold,” she told Virg. Then to Ellis, “You’ll wake up in a few hours. As soon as you do, get practicing. We move after lunch.”

The syringe was in his neck, and he passed out mouthing ‘silver fox.’

+++++

H’lu opened the door, looked both ways, and gave Virg—now Krink—the thumbs up.

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native american pocketwatch.

This is it, the end is coming
 So am I, just keep on running
 Run until the 'rizon stops
 Love the terror, fuck the cops

Once again I'm self-aware,
 Topsy gone, replaced by fare (fear)
 Of the ghost that you call "life"
 Shoot yourself
 Now you've died twice.

/// "The Death of Me" – City & Colour // <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dO6PzzkrLwQ>

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Characters need philosophies.

...

All roads lead to nihilism. Remember that.

Some people won't live long enough to realize the road they're on leads to nihilism, which is a shame. Not shameful, but a shame. Some people come to the realization several times in one lifetime, depressed drifters caught up in an endless, endless re:cycle, but never think to stop searching. The first guy is miles away from a dead end, crashes in a ditch, dead. The second guy keeps coming to the dead end, putting the car in reverse, trying a side street. Every side street leads to the same dead end, but he keeps trying. Damn it, he keeps trying. And eventually

he dies at the wheel, fat and tired and sore.

I'm only seventeen. I might be eighty or ninety by the time whoever reads this reads this, but at seventeen, I get it. I really do. I get that nihilism is bliss if you use it right. I'm still working out the kinks⁹⁵ but getting to work out the kinks of this monster is leagues better than reaping the "benefits" of anything else. I'm not going to leave this world behind without a memento, without an accurate picture of Solon Brood. Not of Solon Brood, but of *Solon Brood*. In Roman times, people wrote. Didn't matter what for. They wrote about what was going on in their lives and what wasn't, so-and-so killed so-and-so, she was in the baths, emperor whoever said this, the usual. Today, it's history. It's important. Today, you sit at a computer and type a story in your thin SoCarolina hoodie and gym shorts, sip on an AriZona green tea with honey and ginseng,⁹⁶ and you can't think of anything being different than it is—that *this* is the eternal norm, that there's nothing special going on—but years from now, the place you sit, that broken swivel chair, that acid-wash grave will be the place where people study. Cut-to: 3000 AD, kids holding their hybrid robot-parent's hand on the way to live-action fairs—not of Boston or the Renaissance, but of Generation *Y*, sitting at their computers and thinking the thoughts that will change everything—even though the insistence of time makes it seem otherwise. What you think right now changes things for Future McFutureStein and Future McFutureStein, Jr. and Future McFutureStein the Third gallons more than whatever they do with their own lives will.

Our generation is the first to say, fuck *babies*, it's our *thoughts* that change the world. Everything is changing all the time, always. What you do has never happened before. Doesn't that freak you out? Doesn't that make you feel naked? Doesn't that make you feel overwhelmingly responsible? Doesn't that make you feel way more important than you thought

⁹⁵ Oh, didn't I tell you? I'm The Kinks's personal trainer.

⁹⁶ Ginseng and Honey are actually two Taiwanese prostitutes. They love drinking AriZona green tea with me...and The Kinks.

you were before now? Jesus.

...

It's with a high head and a bright, diamond-shaped yellow sign that says DEAD END directly in front of me that I summon my medieval flourish posse, order them to line up by height, and play their glorious, triumphant epiphany-accompanying trumpet melodies as I stand, resolute and unfaithfully fateful, under Mercury's divine archway, surrounded by sugar spice and everything that resonates with either, and...and I shout to all: *this* is history! *This* is important! And, oh how it resonates! I'm tipsy turvy, O my brothers, but ah! How it resonates!—along the cut-along-this-line roads, into the beast-trodden hills, through the shutters of half-empty cabins and silver-jeweled business rooms alike, and envelopes the entirety of this mystical blue-and-green racquetball we call Earth!

...

Actually, to get back to the road analogy for a second (I'd say something about taking a U-turn if it weren't so appropriate): when it comes to nihilism, there are no roads. When nothing really matters, nothing, really, matters.

Think about it twice.

Twice.

...

Life is linguistics. Life is allallALL about how things sound. Rhythm is the determinator. I'm pasting this below the nihilism bit because it goes hand in hand, or sound in ear, so to speak. Tribal chants off sheepskin drum tops make you feel it: tribal. They get to the core of something, that something that's you at your most naked and uncensored, unstrung, and make you really *get it*. Why do I put a song after everything I write? Because music is the most inexplicably natural,

guttural, beautiful thing we're allowed to experience in the flesh and I want to share songs that make me *feel* because the gods fucking know how rare that is.

Trust me, I'm a limo driver.

We all know, whether or not we confess it—doesn't matter—that we aren't our bodies. We're something that's existed long before this and that will keep existing long after we get shot at a Speedway or murdered real hush-hush like by Dudley Smith or by the government in the next terror warcatalyst—something that feels more than it talks or smells or sees—something that is at its most basic form: energy.

“Energy is neither created nor destroyed in the universe,” states the law of conservation.

“Well, everything is energy,” says science.

“Therefore, we've always been here, and we always will be. Perhaps not in the same finite form, but don't worry. We'll never be destroyed,” says seventeen years of introspection.

...

This Saturday, I found hope in the form of a girl named Jesper in the gallbladder of Africa. Mali? The trees out there are the closest thing to fitting the word *haunting's* description. Africa has maybe twenty-five trees total, but they're not close enough to be called a forest, and not far away enough to be considered intentional. Perfect space. The color is either blue-black (which I call blake) or green-black (which I call greek), depending on how full the moon is/n't. Full moon, deep greek. Weak moon, fresh blake. It's *The fucking Crucible*. When you're out there (especially when you've got ganja in and on the mind), witchcraft's a likelihood. You expect Winona Ryder to jump from behind a tree, naked, screaming incantations, but—it's so much better than Salem or burning witches and all that because when you're in Africa, the blake or greek reflecting off your third eye, there aren't any Judge Hathornes outside the line of trees,

past the flatness, past the warm barn or the gravel roads or the car taggers or the Ravinsters, to go and name it sin.

Circa 1984, the Chappell farm gang—probably rocking out to Rick Astley with pure enjoyment (dan) rather than ironic admiration—constructed a tree house, left-of-center in Africa. It sits comfortably between two ancient oaks with these beastly greek leaves, and that’s where we smoke the world away. I drink when I smoke, but smoking is the superior sin. You hit a point with alcohol: pointless. It tears you down, clogs your functions, forces you to fall and submit. Weed, for me, does more. It builds you up, gives you faith in your faithlessness, faith in your inner-most mosts, in the things you have in your frontal lobe that you don’t talk about when judges really are surrounding you with the gavels and the grounders. Everyone has those things.

Nate Yates cried to me once, thanks to the gramps connection (my gramps was a preacher—I’ll fill you in soon), and told me all about his obsession with figuring out if God exists. Jocks on successful teams in Ohio are Christians. It’s an unwritten law. You grow up praying to God for victory before every game, you never lose, ergo: God exists. It’s a Pavlovian trick. Praying always accompanies victory, you’re going to keep praying until correlation mutates into causation and you’re stuck weeping at a wooden altar with the hip church scene kids who tell you it’s alright to cry about nothing much. Well, the kid graduates, and his new team doesn’t do so hot. He tells me—at first he thought God was mad at him, and that’s why the lay-ups weren’t going in. He told me, “I thought God was mad at me for picking the wrong school. Instead of going to Christian school, you know?” I told him, “Don’t be stupid.” (Drunk Sol isn’t big on emotional security.) He starts to semi-tear up and he says, “And now I don’t know if I believe it at all.” I say, “That’s the first step, Yates. Stop believing things other people tell you and...do you. Do Nate Yates. If God is mad at you, He’s a dumbass for creating you and letting

you go before you were good enough to please Him.” (Against it, really.) He sucks it up, and I keep going. “You can’t live your life thinking someone’s mad at you, especially if it’s the guy who supposedly created you. That’s not fucking cool. Hell, you don’t get this upset when your real, biological father shuns you. Swallow it, Yates.” I laugh at that and lose my train of thought.

But by the end of the night, I’d told Yates “Just do YOU” at least fifteen times, each successive time with a slightly heavier slur and a slightly heavier confidence in what it meant. By the time I passed out, “Just do YOU” was the next “I think, therefore I am.” The last time I said it, he was leaving Africa, and I felt I hadn’t said it enough apparently—I was so into this goddamn three-word phrase and what it would do to turn Yates’s life around lickety-splat, I couldn’t let him go without saying it one more time. Someone tells me he’s just left, so I fling myself out of the treehouse, fall ten feet down the net to the ground, crack a stick—Jonesy helps me up, expecting me dead—and after all of that, I muster up a no-wind yell out to Yates’ distant silhouette: “Juszu-uuuuu.”

...

Jesper.

Jesper looks like Sam, the girl from *iCarly*. I know that because I love Sam deeply and won’t marry anyone until I know—for certain—that I can’t marry her first. Jennette McCurdy’s her name, and she’s Helen with curls. It’s me, her, Jonesy, one of the Washingtons, and Yates and she brings up energy. She says, “Energy is the new God. That’s God’s new name.”

Washington is full-blown paranoid at this point and yells “Fuck the Jews” or something. No one pays him attention. Me, especially. Looking at Jesper—all in awe. Sometimes you meet a person you feel like you’ve known forever—not that bullshit, oh-I-get-along-with-you-so-we’re-like-family feelings, but a genuine, I-know-her-from-somewhere. Chills fer rills. But I’d never met

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I read that music is soothing because we listened to the beat of our mother's heart in the

⁹⁷ Actual size.

womb. Thump thump thumpety thumpthumps remind us of the amniotic. We—the post-ape brethren—*are* music. Bass drums bump the blood cells, strings open the psyche, and voices soar in a world otherwise made of flatlines and faux pas, forget-me-nots, and reminds us—so, so (not so-so) perfectly in-tune with our inhalations and thoughts and inner dancers, of that indescribable yet terrifically understandable, infinitely vast yet infinitesimally tiny, much sought after yet ridiculed place from which we originate: Africa.

/// “Created” - Portugal. The Man /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eiWnvUdMmNg&feature=relmfu>

/// “Africa” – Toto /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCca5mPMp9A>

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Mom, if you’re still alive and hearing or reading this, you know I had no heart for the church by the time I was fifteen, and you know I knew you were a bit upset with me for it. The Bible says to love God more than one’s own father and mother.

If it’s any consolation, I don’t.⁹⁸

...

I used to think I was unique, that I would become the frontrunner of some fateful moral revolution that would see the churches renovated into some sort of religion-less sanctuaries, the Christians and Muslims debrainwashed, and the future secured. Make all the dystopian novelists regret not knowing I would intervene to change everything for the better. But with each new day, I meet another person just like me, with the same down-with-the-Bible-Belt blues and angsty

⁹⁸ But when it comes to AriZona green tea, it’s—it’s a close call.

indie music collection,⁹⁹ who pushes me in the other direction and makes me wish I thought Noah really had a boat and a nameless wife. God knows my grandpa wanted me godly.

GRANDPA COOP

My Grandpa Cooper used to be the marquee preacher at the not-Chappell chapel here in town. The family used to go to church every Sunday, listen to his sermons, and play Red Rover next to the infamous church gazebo. That was the 70s and 80s. Eventually, he left that to head up one of those public television church shows in Cali that church folks watch when they're sick or uninspired on Sunday mornings. The family didn't go to church nearly as often after he left, and by the time I was eight or nine, church was entirely optional. Grandpa would always call home to see if we were being religious enough, and the following Sunday, Ma would feel guilty and drag us all to church. Anyway—maybe you saw Grandpa, bouncing sermons through Zeniths next to towering bouquet arrangements on stage, 8 to 9 AM, Pacific Time Zone.

The man was an honest-to-God entrepreneur, and I never had the heart to tell him I disagreed with everything he'd ever done, including moving himself and my grandma out to California to pursue *The Divine Hour*. I've never been to the church where they shoot, but from what I've seen on TV, shit's expensive. When the cameraman pans out, there are mammoth stained glass windows, a balcony, and textured, high-rise cream-colored walls. Grandpa used to get bands to play symphonies and prodigy kids to sing and lead prayer and alleviate the old folks' fears that our generation is doomed for infinite sodomy. Half of his guests would be loud-mouthed black preachers with bling and shiny Gucci gray-blue suits who'd tell the ladies with big Italian hats and flower pins in the front row to give back to the community. They'd all nod and scream Hallelujah, while they fanned themselves off with their silky Korean fans. One time

⁹⁹ HAVE YOU GUYS HEARD OF DEAR & THE HEADLIGHTS? OMGGGGGG

when my mom and I were watching it, I said, “If those guys would sell their outfits, world hunger wouldn’t be a problem. We’d all be *too* full.” She blurted out a classic mom laugh: half-laugh, half-scorn. The cross didn’t rub off on her as much as it did Shan, but enough to make her feel guilty for stuff she shouldn’t feel guilty about.

Grandpa died about four or five months ago,¹⁰⁰ probably less, and the show was placed in the hands of a hip, young guy named Timothy Grenwick, or Grunswick, or Groomswick—something—who has a knack for proselytizing insecure white girls, gaining the respect of the elderly footballers, and keeping the old ladies screaming.

One of the last things my grandpa said to me: “It’s a cruel world. A cruel world, Sol. You need God in your life.” It was over the phone, and his voice was faded.¹⁰¹ Ma had flown out to San Diego with Shan to see him before he died. I knew I was on speakerphone. I could have said, “God’s not real, Papaw.” But that’s not what you do.¹⁰² You don’t tell your grandpa, who’s spent his whole life preaching the Word and crying out to God, that the former is ignorant and the latter is useless. You do what I did. You say: “I know, Grandpa. We all do.” You appease the appeasable.

...

Why Grandpa has been on my mind: Kat and Theo spilled the beans that they’d be taking Noora and me to Cali over next year’s spring break to see the God-a-damn-a church-a, visit Grams, make an appearance on *The Divine Hour*, talk with the G-wick hotshot, along with the rest of mom’s side—at least the remaining portion of the side that doesn’t loath each other, because, like, the will, OMG, forget the last forty years of kinship because, like, you got five

¹⁰⁰ In the future, historians might try to claim that I started writing to cope with the death of my Grandpa. I don’t think that’s true.

¹⁰¹ I’m trying to be serious, but all I can think of is: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8buuOmnd4yo>

¹⁰² Especially when you’ve never called your Grandpa ‘Papaw’ in your life.

more dollars from gramps, bye forever.¹⁰³ The rents are waiting on death to sort it all out for them. They're not against the church because their rents were devout, but not for it either because their rents were devout. It's obvious to everyone in the family that Grandpa only became religious after his eldest son died in Vietnam.

Is that insensitive? Well, so are broken dicks.¹⁰⁴

I tell my parents: Dad's the Father, I'm the Son, Mom's the Holy Spirit, and Noora's the donkey Mary and Joseph rode into Bethlehem. My mom puts on her DON'T eyes when I say that because she's touchy about Noora (—who's touchy with every guy on welfare this side of the Mississip).

Mom told me a family trip would do Noora some good—her getting to see the beautiful church and all, breathe the ocean air, catch a glimpse of Mickey, [suck the SoCal cock]—and all jokes aside, I hope she's right. I obligatorily love Noora, and my whole life I've seen her, my eleven-year elder, fuck shit up on a nonhuman fuckshituping level—hard drugs, unemployment, stripping gigs. She got arrested for shoplifting last year—not even for something cool, like a jet-ski or diamonds or a ShamWow. Fucking *perfume*. She got arrested for nabbing *perfume*. I can remember Dad yelling at her, my almost-thirty girl-brother, downstairs, until he was hoarse:¹⁰⁵ “What were you thinking, Noora? All of this for *perfume*? Shit, Noor, you can get that in a magazine!” Half the time, I don't know where she's living, but every so often she shows up on the heels of another nuh-uh-not-me misdemeanor and sleeps in her bed. Morningtime, I'll say, “Hey, Noora,” she'll say “Hey, bro,” and she'll head out when I'm at school to boost her fuckshitup ratings.

I could write a whole book about her, and maybe I am.

¹⁰³ An accurate explanation of the Cooper family fallout.

¹⁰⁴ No point is being made here.

¹⁰⁵ When my dad gets really mad, he hulks out and turns into a Clydesdale.

...

Mom says this trip will happen, you hear me, but there's a long time between now and spring break. In two months I graduate, five months I'm collegebound, eight or nine months we'll see the family during holiday season and remember how much we all hate each other and call Cali off on account of cognitive recall. Holidays are disillusionment/nervous eating periods for Broods and Coopers, when every little Brood and Cooper remembers how much the other Broods and Coopers depress them.

Assuming everyone else's families are dysfunctional fireballs brings me peace. If I ever discovered that everyone else loves hanging out with their not-Downs-syndrome? cousins, slicing up the turkey and opening up the same white elephant gift year after year, I would have tied a noose years ago. The only thing keeping FAMs united is the mandatory ILY at the end of it all. Moral of the story: Cali's 50/50.

...

I'm too preoccupied with graduation to think about vaykaying it up in San Diego. I've started scratching out my Valedictorian speech on post-it notes at night. I'll stare at the ceiling, spontaneously think of something genius,¹⁰⁶ and ejaculate it onto the nearest notepad. At one point I considered improvising the whole thing, but I know I'd freak out and say fuck or shit or dickzit or boogerteeth or (...) if I didn't have a sheet of paper laying everything out for me.

“And remember, my fellow graduates: I legitimately support Hitler—OMG WHAT HAVE I DONE.”

ADHD called, it wants it's nearly summer, isn't it?

...

¹⁰⁶ AKA anything I think of. LAWL OMG GUISE LIKE ME PLS

Lead *by* example, not *with* them.

Hear ye, hear ye! Yahweh and his clan are long dead. Thou hast stumbled in the face of the great zombie apocalypse! The living dead have taken to the streets to chase down and force the population at large to convert and join the blood-fueled, heartless, thoughtless rampage! To suck the minds from the living! To tear the limbs from those trying to branch out! There is only one way to defeat these bloodthirsty masses!

Wait for them to starve to death.

Hawking said
no room for
God

God said no
legs for
Hawking, and
no more
talking

Which way
does it go?

/// “The Good Left Undone” - Rise Against /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRmbcqp5Dbc>

/// “This Photograph is Proof” – Taking Back Sunday ///

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKfeEzjZJW4>

///

“Morning, peckerwood.”

Ellis responded with a mindless “Morning” before he realized the insult.

The previous night’s events came back, whole.

“Get to practicing,” Krink/Virg said in Krink’s low accent. “Or Regal will have your ass forever.”

Ellis didn’t understand anything. He looked at the chair beside his bed, and saw the chest bindi and mouth staple H’lu had given him. The two tiny pieces looked like a smiling Cyclops.

“H’lu said we’re friends,” Ellis said, “but you keep calling me peckerwood.”

“Occupying my part,” Krink said in Virg’s friendly alto. “It needs to seem to the gestapos that you desire nothing to do with me, so when you exodus from here, they won’t conjecture that we’re cahooting. Don’t stew—I’ll only treat you like this for a few more hours. When Dee comes in here, don’t masquerade like you know the truth. Loath me.”

Ellis couldn’t help but notice Virg Tanker had the vocabulary of a thesaurus.

“But none of them are around.”

“I confessedly enjoy making you squirm. We’ve all missed you Dwyng,” he said, placing a hand on Ellis’s shoulder.

“Who’s ‘we’?”

Krink laughed. “H’lu was right. You ask an *awful* excess of questions, don’t you?”

Impatiently, Virg pulled Ellis’s shirt up and smacked the large dot on his left peck. “Practice, peckerwood!”

He was back in character.

+++++

The white-haired, green-eyed man’s image was burned into Ellis’s psyche by the time

Krink-Virg slapped him on the back after lunch—both Godfrey and Roxie weren't around—and said, “Time to skidaddle, peckerwood.” At first, he didn't have the height quite down (“Too short, peckerwood.”), and then he didn't have the cheeks right (“Too chunky, peckerwood.”), and for a large chunk of his speed-training, he had difficulty getting rid of a determined white beard (“No good, peckerwood. No good.”).

When training was complete, Virg smacked Ellis's chest and smirked.

“One penultimate thing, Dwyng. When you go out there, act *indignant*,” Krink/Virg told him.

Considering Krink/Virg's amorphous word choices, Ellis decided that “indignant” could mean a handful of things.

“Especially if you see a fat guy with no neck,” Krink-Virg said. “Hate him more than you do me. Treat him like he—like he ruined your entire life.”

+++++

He left the room more uneasy than indignant.

To his left, down the hallway: the two guards in black. They spoke nonchalantly. Ellis turned to the right. He'd decided that he had nothing to lose, no matter the impromptu mission's outcome, and that any trouble he might get into could be no worse than killing himself for the rest of his life. He trusted Virg and H'lu out of boredom.

“Hey! Hey, where do you think you're going?”

Ellis turned around. The tall man whispered something to the taller man. Their eyes confessed fear.

“Why are you out of your room? You'll have to go to your room.”

Ellis nudged the staple in the back of his mouth with his tongue. He spoke. The

dissonance between his intended words and the foreign words coming from his mouth made Ellis feel helpless.

“My name is Aldwyn. I’ve remembered. I’d like to be reinitiated.”

Beat.

“Follow us.”

The three walked back past his room, and Krink peaked his head from the door.

“Yeah, take that peckerwood away,” he yelled to the workers. “He was talking gibberish like a Mexican!”

“Return to your room,” the tall man said, without noticing the kiss Krink blew Ellis as they took him away.

Eventually, the two men, each holding one of his arms, brought him to a wide passageway, lined with what appeared to be bank teller stations. At the end of the passageway: an immense archway. Above the arch: a cacophony of colors, like oil on pavement: reds, greens, pinks constantly fighting against each other—forced into a confused, rainbow static. Spit on a screen.

Short lines of bodies extended from each station, behind which a worker clacked and fidgeted with various futuristic items Ellis would have inquired about were he not, as far as he could tell, a fugitive. Above each station, a number.

One of his escorts pushed a button on the wall. “28,” a robotic voice said.

They made their way to station 28.

“This was Ellis Qualm,” one of his escorts said. “He requests reinitiation.”

An androgynous worker peered up at Ellis through a series of parallel golden bars, and its eyes widened. It looked to the two guards on his sides. They gave it knowing nods.

“Real name, please,” it said. Ellis could tell it thought the question was unnecessary.

“Aldwyn.” “Password?” “Silver fox.”

Through the golden bars separating him from it, Ellis saw it shaking its head in disbelief.

“Thank you, Aldwyn. You may proceed to station 1 for checkout.”

Another androgynous worker greeted Ellis and his escorts at station 1. More looks amongst workers. The archway, now much taller, loomed to their right. Ellis eyed its rainbow static. What was its purpose? He tried to see through the archway’s filmy white light. Realizing he looked like a tourist, he averted his gaze to the genderless worker through the golden bars.

“Name?” “Aldwyn.” “Password?” “Silver fox.”

The androgynous worker picked up what Ellis assumed was a phone.

“May I speak to Sidd? Aldwyn is checking out,” it said. It waited until its party was reached. “Hello, Sir. Yes. Aldwyn is ready for checkout. Yes, Aldwyn. *The*. Yes, sir. Ok. Room 3? Ok. Thank you.” It hung up.

“Thank you, Aldwyn. You’re Guide will be waiting for you in room 3, to the left.”

As they made their way to Room 3, several people—escorters and escortees—gawked at Ellis. The three turned left, down a corridor that ran perpendicular to the passageway. Numbered rooms lined the same side of the corridor as the mammoth archway. Room 3’s door, ajar.

“Here we are,” the taller escort said. Then the two were gone, whispering to one another.

An elderly woman sat with her hands in her lap at a table, across from another androgynous worker and an overweight man in a too-tight button-up. The back wall of the room was an opaque white light, identical to the white of the archway and the room in which Ellis awoke after his suicide. Pamphlets on the wall, a few plants in the near corners of the room.

“You’re back!” the elderly woman told him. She was thin. “I missed you so much.” She

set her red purse on the table, and slowly made to embrace Ellis. As her arms wrapped around his stomach, he eyed the white light and put his arms around her shoulders.

They sat.

“So, Aldwyn,” the man said. “How was your stay?”

“Fine,” he said, looking up at the man with no neck. He remembered what Virg had told him about such men. “Could have been better, though.”

The man laughed himself into a coughing fit. “How so?”

Ellis didn't know what to say. He shot the man an intense look in place of words.

“Well, on behalf of all of REIGN,” the man said, “Congrats, Dwyng.”

Ellis went all in.

“Eat shit and choke.”

Judith looked at Ellis, dumbstruck. The it looked to Regal, who couldn't stop laughing. His face, red-orange.

“We'll see you soon, Dwyng,” he said. “I'm sure of it.”

The room became silent.

“Do the fucking thing,” the big man told the it, angrily. “Just do the thing.”

“Aldwyn,” it said. “I just need you to sign a few papers, and then you and your Guide are free to go.”

He looked down at the papers to see a language he didn't understand. He looked to Judith, who was mindlessly perusing her own purse.

The staple in the back of his mouth didn't seem to function when it came to written word.

“Just sign everywhere it says ‘Reinitiator's Signature,’” it said.

Ellis looked down at the unreadable words. At the bottom of the page, three blanks. He

began to sign his name on the first blank when he realized he had no idea what his signature was supposed to look like. He stared nervously at the worker, then back to the paper.

He made a senseless scribble on three lines.

The it looked down at the paper.

“You weren’t supposed to sign the last line. That’s where I sign,” it said.

The fat man leaned forward. Ellis looked to Judith, who recognized his nervousness.

“Oh, you’re so silly, Dwyng. You never were very good at following instructions!” she said. She pinched his cheek. The fat man rolled his eyes. The it reluctantly smiled.

“Ok,” it said. “Any questions before you leave?”

He had questions. He wanted to ask the being across from him why everyone he’d seen was an it like it was; he wanted to ask why the fat man across the table was looking at him so vehemently; he wanted to ask the elderly woman if she were Judith; he wanted to understand how a wall could be a light and what the significance of oily rainbow static was—but once again, undefined risk kept him completely silent.

“In that case,” it said. “Have a safe trip Home, Aldwyn.”

He shook its hand.

“Thanks,” he said. He looked to the fat man. “For *nothing*.”

Somehow, Ellis was having fun.

Ellis stood up and took a step toward the door. Quickly, Judith stuck her arm through Ellis’s, and, much to his surprise, managed to nudge him away from the door, and toward the white light.

“After you,” the fat man said, standing up. He smacked Ellis on the chest.

Judith put her hand on his arm and continued to pull him. Before he could protest, he had

passed through a brief warmth—the bright white wall now behind him—and found himself in a vast and noisy lobby. The floor: a lotus mosaic. The room: an immense ellipse, several stories high. The lobby wall: lined with white archways, a person occasionally popping out of one with their Guide. Echoes. At the far left of the grand lobby: a behemoth statue of a man—a modern day Zeus—sitting above what Ellis assumed were the building’s front doors. Natural light—easily distinguishable from the mysterious archway lights—hit the lobby floor with finesse.

The two wandered farther into the room. Judith shuffle-rushed Ellis toward the front doors. The fat man kept a fair distance between himself and the pair, seemingly ready to pounce like a librarian. He kept looking back at the archway, unnerved.

“They told you what to do next, right?” the elderly woman asked him as they shuffled.

“They told me to run to the last—”

A deafening alarm rang through the lobby. Shriill echoes.

“Code Swav! Code Swav!”

The it entered the lobby through the white archway. It screamed into its palm. Terror. The fat man was already sprinting toward Ellis. It followed suit. “Code Swav! It’s *Aldwyn*.” Ellis didn’t understand what it was saying—it spoke in the same gibberish Bill had acquired the night he remembered. His staple was broken.

They ran toward Ellis and the elderly woman—fury on their brows. He shuffled faster toward the door. Ellis looked down and realized he was no longer incognito. His skin color had lightened back to regular and he was considerably shorter. Aldwyn’s vibrant green eyes had been replaced by the average brown eyes of Ellis August Qualm. His chest bindi, too, had been deactivated.

The elderly woman looked at him—serenely tranquil. “My name is *Judith*.”

He hesitated. It and the fat man were a few strides away.

Judith mouthed “run” and he obeyed. He swerved through the lobby, sliding several times across the lotus. It and a few other workers followed him through the hoards of gaspers.

“Stop him!” the fat man yelled to the others as he lost momentum.

Ellis sprinted toward the front doors.

“Stop him!”

He made it to the statue’s foot, and felt natural light on his face. A worker attempted to tackle him halfway between the statue’s toes and the door; Ellis ducked and the worker passed overhead. Ellis flew past the statue’s heels and into daylight. He flew down three steps at a time. He couldn’t take in everything around him—a street lined with buildings, a row of white trees—gardens across the street?

His feet landed on the last step. He looked everywhere, uncertain. He turned around to see a herd of workers making their way down the stairs. The fat man appeared in the doorway. Ellis’s blood pumped and pumped and pumped and pumped.

Desperately, he screamed. He screamed into this foreign, timeless city, into this airy otherworld. “What *now*?”

A cracking sound made him whip around. Leslie stood two steps up.

“This,” he said.

Leslie held up the revolver and shot Ellis August Qualm in the face.

+++++

sue a side.

Book needs a secret.

...

Biggest icons are the recons who offed themselves—the stars that one-upped the Ultimate Choice:¹⁰⁷ Cobain, Woolf, Plath, Cleopatra, van Gogh, Hemingway(s). N2mention the arebeens that drugged and fame!d themselves to death: Ledger, Elvis, Hendrix, Monroe, Joplin, Anna Nicole Smith. Suicide is sexy. David Foster Wallace was a babykins writer, offs and kills himself, kills and offs himself, and his books are instant bestsellers with, like, soooo much substance and junk, le sip my grande pike in a venti cup with soy milk, update teh statuseez, tweet tweet tweet.

Suicide sells. Sellicide sues.

You want consumers, pretend you overdosed on Peptobismol and Juicy Fruit:

you're a hit.

You want the ladies and the respect, speedball quaaludes and Splenda:

you're misunderstood.

You want cash money, choke on your own dick:

you're legend.

You want a name that lasts, cut yourself with your own chapters:

you're an oversold

Warhol'd posterboard at

Barnes & Noble that college

girls buy to make themselves

¹⁰⁷ This isn't the proper place, but I've just realized in order to be a good writer you either have to be so simple it's profound, or find new ways to say simple things. Everyone wants simplicity.

believe they're part of some
retro pop culturist family.¹⁰⁸

...

This is that one point in my sleazy paperweight when I tell you something no one, NO ONE, knows about Sol Brood—even he—because he's only rolled it over inside his head—never outside—and suddenly—really fucking suddenly—listening to Taking Back Sunday on my yardsale speakers in my yardsale recliner—so. suddenly.— I'm comfortable letting it slip from my barbedwired soulgates and onto something tangible.^{109, 110} I'm feeling like this is the thing I started out needing to tell myself and you, and it scares me finally letting it go. I'm not even drunk. Closest bottle is the months-old Arbor Mist in the fridge. Some things you don't tell anyone and when some psychiatrist or collared nutjob-gone-good asks you if there's anything you need to talk about, you think of that thing first, you're thinking of it before they ask, even, and by default, by fear, by years of hide and seek, you shove it wayback somewhere, behind your childhood and your first fake kiss and your encyclopedia of jerkoff moments, and say no, nothing, only tired. This is my pushback and I'm letting it go:

FLY!

I tried to kill myself when I was nine.

Nine and epileptic. That's important. I was a different kid epileptic. The epileptic child version

¹⁰⁸ This is profound because it's tabbed to the right of the page. Take notes.

¹⁰⁹ YO I GOT MO' DASHES THAN AN OLYMPIC SPRINTER

¹¹⁰ Technically, my word document isn't tangible. But considering my generation, it's about as close as I'll get. Also, notice how many comma splices I'm using to seem postmoderner (oooooh, that's not a word! I'm sew good @this!).

of myself feels like an intruder that cut (foreshadowing?) its way into my otherwise happy-go-smartie life. The rents spazzed first time I did. Noora was busy fucking shit up on the south side, and here they have their other kid—the one they think has a heroineless shot—getting his shit fucked up by some obscure electric reaction ‘mongst his lobes. Noora’s relapsing, I’m synapsing. Doctors in Cincy ran the one-two: colored wires on the head, cat scan, scat can, test tubes, urine samples, shrugs shrugs lollipops. When people think epilepsy, they think of those special bowlcut kids with walkers faceplanting in the school hallway, rolling their eyes, flailing, totally unaware of what’s going on. They called mine *partial* seizures: sleep-depraved epilepsy. The seizing roundhoused me when I was asleep, and I would be one hundred percent aware of what was happening as I jolted awake into the Styx. In Cincy, they took us to a mahogany support group for families with epileptic kids and we never went back because it tore me up. I wasn’t like other kids that got upset—crying because kids cry when stuff happens and that’s it. I knew what I was going through wasn’t something I deserved and I didn’t cry just because; I cried because I was caught in a shitstorm of a justbecause I didn’t support up until then. It was like someone somewhere realized I was advancing faster than kids my age and began violently shooting me down so everyone else could catch up. Scariest part: *I* was that someone somewhere. I felt like I didn’t deserve what I had—a good brain—so I took it from myself.

I was nine years old.

In the support group, this chubstuck kid in overalls had a passion for driving John Deeres around the family farm, and when the doctor advised him he shouldn’t drive heavy machinery, he teared up. He was tenish, sitting in his mom’s lap like the helpless livestock he used to mock with the

tractor lights. I saw the American dream squeezed right out of a ten-year-old.

The night of the attempt, I woke up from a nightmare, middle of a seizure, convulsed up and out of bed, stumbling through the hallway, hopscotching through the kitchen, drooling on the tile, shaking like San Fran, baby stroke, frightened rabbit, and: I grab the knife set. Barely standing, dragging a dead leg, my muscles tense, relaxed, tense, relaxed, normal, tense; me, about to throw up or about to suffocate; biggest toothed knife of the set in my hand, sick of the probabilities—stick it in my leg.¹¹¹ Squiss. Wimper. Regret it. Pass out. Mom and Dad rush out because they hear me struggling, gasp, take me to the hospital; I'm fine, oh God I'm fine, and I'm back in my bed the next day, praying for no nightmares. They didn't even suspect suicide. (I was nine.) An accident, poor babydoll. They didn't move the knives to the highest cabinet because they didn't want me stabbing myself again; they moved them because I was liable to slip and fall on one again partially seized out. Epilepsy found me when I was nine, and didn't let go until I was thirteen, and it convinced me to check out early three times. A trifecta. (1) The pitiful ^ seppuku ^, (2) a wristslit, and (3) a drowning. The latter two were flukes.

My life dampened into a dark comedy flick starring a nothingtolivefor nine-year-old who fate wouldn't let die. I wouldn't sleep at night because I was too afraid I'd wake up helpless.

Teachers came to my parents concerned because the dark circles under my eyes wouldn't dim, and I was moping around more depressed than a middle-aged stenographer. But oh boy did I learn to laugh. Mid-depression phase—the doctors called it depression, not me—my laughs didn't seem like life-is-meaningless whynots, carefree giggles, you know; they were like maniacal, I-just-murdered-the-Robinsons-and-masticated-their-corneas guffaws—the kind you

¹¹¹ You can tell it was intense because my punctuation is.

emit through your bloody incisors right before good guy mcWayne shows up and puts you out of your bat-shit crazy mind.

Mrs. Yinger sent me to the principal's office in fourth grade. She was handing back old assignments. I got a 6 out of 10 on a simple homework sheet and everything—the world, the lives, the futility, *Nothing*—hit me like a Louisville. I wouldn't stop shrieking: twisted straightjacket shrieks I considered normal laughter when Yinger was laying out long division on the board. She sent me to the office, spooked. I would have been spooked, too. I saw home footage of me laughing right around then, and I got chills. Have you ever gotten chills from hearing your own voice? It gives you chills. Infinite fucking chills. Since then, I've worked extensively on my laugh, borrowing parcels of other people's laughs—a Frankensnicker—made it less morbid, and now I laugh more than anyone.

Nothing's serious. Remember that.

...like I said: dark comedy. Dark dark dark.

I started getting seizures in the middle of the day—seizures where I actually was unaware. With the wristslit, I had a seizure a millisecond before I'd committed to take the razorblade across the 0 line, and passed out on the bed. My parents don't know about that seizure. I woke up next to the razorblade and—you guessed it—*laughed*. Fucking chuckled. *Fuckled*. As I walked the razorblade back to Noor's room, sliding my socks down the hardwood hallway risky business, I remember twelve-year-old me thinking for the first time: something's looking out for me. Has to

be.¹¹² With the tub, I was headed underwater knowing—*knowing*—I wouldn't come up. I lunge down, inhale fucking chamomile bubble soap floating on the surface¹¹³ (problem?), snort, spaz, and hock a loogie into the tub. I decide killing myself isn't worse than staying in a tub with a loogie and I get out, more alive than ever. Fuckles as I dry off.

The knife bit was the worst, but...I stuck the knife in my *leg*. I think if I really wanted to die, I would have stuck it in my eye or my chest or my neck. But I didn't really want to die—I only wanted to kill the seizures. Suicide's a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Some of the if not *the* loveliest whatifs I've ever come across: outliving problems and being able to breathe beyond the bullshit. Be b being abe b able to b bree b breathe be b beyond the b b b bull b b bullshit.¹¹⁴

I don't know if you've heard—the grapevine's awfully dry this time of year—but *demons* cause epilepsy. Matthew 17. Jesus heals a boy with epilepsy by rebuking the evil spirit possessing him, and when the people ask Jesus why they weren't able to rebuke the spirit themselves, Jesus does a 180, whips off his shades and says, “Not enough *faith*, assholes,” and proceeds to tell his disciples that man's looking to kill him, and that he'll be resurrected three days after he's wacked. The disciples are like WTF Jesus, *random*, and the boy with epilepsy is left sitting on a stone, alone, wondering why anyone else's faith measures how much he has to suffer.

I caved and asked for help. I started watching Gramps on Sunday mornings. I started asking

¹¹² And then I went to Sudan and built schools in Afghanistan and did hard drugs before that so please like me and ignore my affinity for hypocrisy.

¹¹³ I made sure it was a bubble bath because I didn't want my parents to see me naked. Guess I could have worn clothes, but I didn't want to get them wet. Semi-suicidal kid logic.

¹¹⁴ I didn't know what to write next, so this happened.

mom and dad to drive me to church—not to play Red Rover, but to soak up the scripture. I became so religious—you might have thought my eldest son had died in Vietnam. I'd carry the Bible around, ferriswheeling Proverbs and skipping the rest because I was too lazy and bored to read whole lines. While other kids were busy syncing their periods with Judy B. Jones, I was spouting off applicable proverbs during adult conversations. Still do, in fact. It's a good way to shut your opposition down in rural America.

“Solon, you're so stupid. I hate everything you say.”

“Do not speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words.”

“...”

“But I suppose...better is open rebuke, than is hidden love!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“It's in the Bible.”

“YOU WIN SOLON I'M SO SORRY PRAISE JESUS PLEASE FORGIVE ME.”

To this day, I skim Proverbs for kicks and giggles.¹¹⁵ My Jesus freak phase faded after a year or so. I realized no one was answering my questions and I turned on the process.

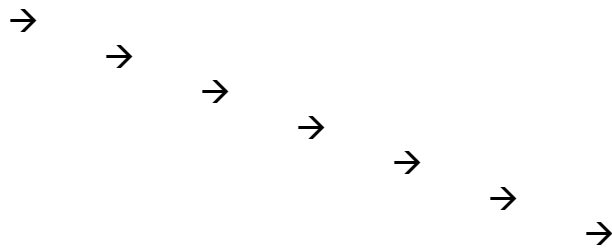
Epilepsy gave me religion, religion gave me poetry, poetry caught its reflection and kicked religion out for good. In the good old seizing days of my youth, I would sit in the dayroom, write sad poems in magic markers on multipurpose paper and hide them under my bed. Pity parties every day. My mom ever saw them, *she'd* have a seizure. They're devastating, especially when you realize they were written by a nine-year-old child; especially when you realize that that nine-year-old child was a past version of you and might not be entirely rebuked.

¹¹⁵ Or as Doc says when Jonesy isn't around: “for spicks and n***ers.”

I woke up, scared again
 Scared again, scared and when
 Will it stop, God?
 How many prayers will it take
 Before my legs won't shake when I wake?
 Why me, God?
 I trust in you, Lord, but I feel like a target.
 Are you there? It's Solon, not Margaret.
 I miss my dreams, God.

Solon Brood, 22 Dec 2002

But hey, I turned out alright.



Right?

/// "O' What a Nightmare" - Margot and the Nuclear So & So's ///

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEyW0gpf9HA>

\\

i can't even.

It's finally here. *Action*. Something *interesting*. Who needs genocide when you've got mini-thugs at train stations?

...

So much to tell. So much to tell. Don't know how to prelim without retyping so much to tell so much to tell so much to tell AAAAAHHHHH YEEEEAAHHHH S. M. T. *T*. Big news, folks. BUH-*HIG* news. Some next level newsboy howlinginthestreet sportin' an apple cap war is over nuh-*hews*, guys. THIS MIGHT ACTUALLY MAKE ME INTERESTING.

April 18th, 2009. I pwned a bigshot niglet (—Jonesy's descriptor, not mine) outside of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, got it on film and won back some sanity.

!!!!

In media res

t in peace.

...

If you're looking online for nearby racquetball courts in Ohio, which you're not, you'll see a map with twenty pushpins above the tropic of Columbus, and only four or five below it. Canton, Strongsville, Toledo, Kent, Mentor, Ashtabula: 2bit rball whores. Hometown: no-bit rball vacuum. Bruce qualified us for state qualifiers in Cleveland, as per Bruce, which is annually a month-and-a-half before graduation, around the time senioritis has mutated into *FUCK EVERYTHING*. The rball team this year has twelve members: Me, Pete, Jonesy, Sir Gregory (Greg), Noble, P-Drizzle (Paul Davis), the Thatcher twins (fraternal), Marx (Carl), Vincent, Eddie, and DG/Cee-Lo/Acres (Derek Green). The twins, Eddie & Vincent, Noble & P-Drizzle are our doubles teams. Everyone else plays singles. School code says rball no get regular bus for

long trip, so you've got 12 Angry Men feat. Bruce Willis riding a cramped MRDD bus four-and-a-half-hours to Lake Erie. The smell of taint and Arby's. I always get the right back halfseat during road trips, and spend the time reading or sleeping or mooning cars with Pete. Last year's state qual trip, Pete and Noble get in adjacent seats, pull down their gym shorts, smash their asses to the windows, and their asses read: (H|O) | (N|K). One letter per buttock. We hear Bruce ask the bus driver if all the obnoxious honking is a usual thing for MRDD buses, and the bus driver shakes his head. Pete farts and his ass cheeks smack the window like a wet towel and echo like a mountain goat. No one's sat in seat 8 since.

This trip around, travel was mellow. Mp3 highway—Circa Survive lens—stop for food. We pull into the sports plex in Cleveland, sore, and Bruce tells us to gather around her at the front of the bus because it's motivational speech time. She's a bigger lady, biceps and muffin top. Great coach. I don't remember the bulk of the speech; basically she was saying to go out there and do our best, we've made it this far, let's show them what we've got, go cats, rah rah rah. What I remember most is when she said, "Let's go the whole nine yards," and I was the only one who laughed. I said, "Yeah. We're *Unbreakable!*" and that was that.

We play first round, everyone does well. Hour break. We play second round, half of us are eliminated, including Jonesy. Go to the hotel, wait for the third and final round the next day. We're showered and ready for dinner, and we head off to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, where we'll have about two hours to do whatever. For the first half-hour, Pete, Jonesy and I stroll around. There's Jimi Hendrix, yep yep, that's Janis Joplin, yep yep, okay John Lennon, no Mama Cass not the ham, no no, yep, Pink Floyd Otis Redding Johnny Cash, yep yep yep. Bruce is walking around with the bus driver, remembering the good old days (when thatthere music wasn't all about themthat booty shaking and partying), and the rest of the team is gawking at

displays, watching the films, so we three kings of orient slip out of the HOF and walk around the city for no real reason.

...

We jump on the Amtrak, make jokes about knife fights and the movie that's coming out soon with Danny Zuko and Denzel, ride around Lebronland and churn the bullbutter. Jonesy and I have got our cameras, and we get some footage of the city and of Pete messing with a sleeping guy on the train with saliva running from his bottom lip to his t-shirt like an unsturdy plasmic zipline.

People stampede in at one stop, and Pete clings onto the sidebars against the doors. He steps outside the train to get out of the way for an incoming lady in a wheelchair (who he now calls 'that Professor X bitch'), and he can't fit back in, so he gets stranded at the stop while Jonesy and I float away into no man's land, ye olde Cleverton. We crack up, and hop off at the next stop. We eyemolest the Amtrak system map at the stop. It's a rainbow clusterfuck with times and lines and limes and tines and and and we do the math and realize we've only got a half-hour to get back to the HOF for departure and 0% knowledge of Grover's surname. The next train to the HOF is in twenty minutes, and we're stuck in the ghettoiest ghetto in all of ghettodom. We figure, hey! twenty minutes! *plenty* of time to throw in another adventure. So we take the stairs to an embryonic off-brand 7/11 under the railway. Moon pies and Vault on a splinter bench, ice machine across the way.

Now it gets good.

Eighteen minutes left, and He rounds the corner:

“Niglet, nine o’clock,” Jonesy mumbles through his moon pie.

I look and there he is: a five foot black kid with a baggy thuglife Bugs Bunny shirt, ankle high jeans, and huge ears. Kid’s got game.

“What you doing hanging out with him?” We don’t even suspect he’s talking to us—he’s across the alley—so we keep devouring our white trash delicacies. “Whatchu doing hanging with that white boy?”

“I think he’s asking you a question,” I tell Jonesy. I’m smiling at this point.

“Yeah, just ignore him.” Jonesy whispers that. Nervous-in-public, no-confrontation Jonesy.

“I saaaaaiiiiiiid, whatchu doing—”

“We are currently enjoying moon pies and Vault energy drinks, my good gentleman. What are you and your friends doing this lovely Saturday evening?”

By this time, his two buddies are standing behind him—one skinny, one fat—sipping on Sunkists, lyk bau5z, laughing at what I said. Reverbs of, “Yo, he’s playin’. He’s trippin’.”

“I assure you, I am neither playing nor tripping, comrades. Not in the slightest! HA!”

“Yo, you better quit playin. Forreal. We’ll fuck you up.”

Am I racist for making them sound how they sounded?

Jonesy’s still sitting intensively passive, terrified of what publicity stunt I might pull, squeezing the cream from his remaining moon pie, making eye contact with his Vault’s nutritional facts. They’re still a few paces away, against the wall, behind the ice machine, and I tell him let’s go while they’re busy not paying attention. We reach the steps, and the kid yells, “See ya, pussies!”

Well I—I just *can’t* leave a room as an alleged pussy without dissolving the rumors, so I

wheeled around and yelled back: “It was nice meeting you, Lil Bow Wow! Have fun with your hopeless future!”

That didn’t go over well, so Musical Youth storms over to us at the steps. Jonesy does a double take, and I stand there resolute. Ringleader cranes his neck up at me and says, “I could take you in a rap battle any day. *Bitch.*”

A laugh escaped my lips at that point, and I tried to catch it, but only managed a lip queef. Apparently the Lil Bow Wow zinger zinged the wrong nerve in the kid.

If you would have told me I would be challenged to a rap battle by an innercity kid from Cleveland in a Bugs Bunny t-shirt, I would have done the same thing: let slip a lip queef. It was the sort of thing that makes me think The Law of Attraction is real and that the vibes I put out into the universe really are as cluttered and mutilated as I think. I look at Jonesy, who’s a few steps above me, smiling—finally—and reaching for his digital. I look back to Bow Wow and say, “Even Saturdays?”

Oh God, this happened. It happened so much.

We battled.

Bugs’s fat friend drops a beat, and he Al Gores two verses:

Yo punk ass white boy think he can rap good [pause to think]

You get assraped if you stepped in my hood

You here with your traitor friend, think you the bomb [pause to think]

Bet the only pussy you ever got was your mom’s

Your stupid ass shirt looks like piss [I had a yellow button-up on.]

And you're so white, your skin looks like jizz [pause to think]

But I bet you like that, cuz you're a fucking faggot

And a racist n***r just like Bob Saget

He lowfives his posse and stares at me.

“Not bad, not bad,” I smartass him. “I’m assuming I should maintain the AABB format?”

He looks at me like - _____ - and says “You wack.”

“Well, here goes nothing,” I say in my best Dave Chappelle’s white guy voice, and proceed to ANNHILATE HIM. Mr. Ungden, Vol. 2.

First off, Sir, it’s *well*, not good,

& I don’t plan on stepping near your hood

Now that you’ve informed me of the assraping

Is that a usual thing? Will *you* be taping?

I might be into it if we use enough jelly

Sure could go for a fresh load in my belly [pause, kid gives me a disgusted look]

Oh, look at that! I won that round of gay chicken—

Hahahahahaha—now put your dick innnn

Your own ass, it might clog up the welfare

Ears like Will Smith don’t mean you’re from Bel-Air

Oh, so you know a lot about my mom?

Well did you know her brother fought and died in Vietnam?

Get a grip, kid. Get a *life*.

How old are you? Fourteen? [pause] How's your wife?

Punk ass bitch, my skin might look like jizz

But I bet the only pussy you ever got was his. [point at his friend] [Jonesy yells "recall!"]

His turn:

Yo you're not Eminem, so stop trying

You wack as fuck, homie, no lying

You call me Will Smith cuz I Am Legend

You should shut the fuck up and learn your lesson

You a wack racist, so bite me, whitey.

My turn:

Yeah, I'm not Eminem, I'm not from 8 mile

But my best mile is an 8, I'llllll

Rip your face off, bitch. I'm *extravagant*

Listen children, you don't want to live your lives as savages

Life will catch up, and this thug thing won't be cute

I know about the hood, and there you're forced to shoot

& kill, lose your will to live in this game

Get off the streets and in the Hall of Fame

Seriously—what's it like being a stereotype?

Only thing missing is a Daffy Duck crack pipe [I laugh at my own line, and stumble]

At this point, the train back to the HOF thunders on the track nearby, we can see it riding the curve that connects it to our stop. Jonesy says, “We gotta go,” and I stay statued in front of this trio of ruffians and I look rightrightRIGHT into the ringleader’s eyes and say—slower and with more concentration:

One more thing before I leave you here crying

Hear that? [hand to ear] That’s the sound of your spirit dying.

You said I’m a racist, but how do you figure?

When I went this whole time without calling you [I reach behind me without looking, tap Jonesy on the shoulder and he whispers it:] *niggard*.

The train ravages the stop, the not-7/11 is shakeweighting like all hell and Jonesy keeps the camera running and we sprint up the steps to the open doors and the people bustling in. At the top step, I look down at the trio, and see them with little birdies flying around their heads. I yell down to them: “By the way, I was a C-section. *Bitch*.” We squeeze through the doors in the knick—sorry, *cav*—of time and it was all so perfect. Situationally, time wise, substance wise. I’m still—*still*—three days later, convinced it was destiny that we ran into Destiny’s Child. We got back to the bus ten minutes late, like everyone else. Pete had gotten back already, and we told Bruce the half-full Vaults were from the HOF gift shop.

I’ve watched the footage about ten times, and though I regret not incorporating a Webster reference every time I watch, the video gets more immaculate with every view. You can hear Jonesy laughing behind the camera, and the last frame is us losing our minds as we grab seats beside another drooling dude on the best night anyone has ever had in Cleveland.

Also, I made states.

'Paper' dnd justice.

/// "Hedonistic Me" – Born Ruffians /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2idNiygDox0>

/// "This Sentence Will Ruin/Save Your Life" – Born Ruffians ///

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKeOse50KZ0>

/////

Ellis, who *was* still Ellis, woke up with cream-colored sheets wrapped across his chest and three people hovering above him like branches.

H'lu, Virg and an unknown man smiled as Ellis attempted to squirm his way out from under the tightly packed sheets. The man and H'lu hugged. Virg clapped his hands together and grinned. His eyes began to water.

“Welcome back!” the unknown man said, looking down at Ellis.

“Who are you?”

The joy permeating the small, wooden bedroom instantly dampened. The unknown man—who appeared to Ellis like Tom Joad without overalls—became noticeably disappointed. “I suppose we haven’t properly met. I’m—uh—I’m Rey, a good friend.”

Ellis would have extended his hand were it not stuck underneath the masterfully packed bed sheets. Virg became impatient and ripped the sheets out from the sides of the bed. Ellis sat up and grasped his own face. A wave of pain shot up his left side.

“You’re Home, Dwyng,” Virg said. “Can’t you adjudicate it?”

“Maybe?” Ellis said. He was drowsy and pale. “I feel weak.”

“Thank the triple dosage,” H'lu chimed in. “We thought we’d let you rest a bit. You had a traumatic day.”

“Hell, H'lu, he meandered a traumatic *decade*,” Virg said. He walked over to the window, cracked it slightly, and lifted the blinds.

A sudden beam of sunlight pierced Ellis’s eyes and made him relive getting shot in the face. Heartbeats.

“Did I make it to the next level?”

“What?”

He swallowed. “Am I in superhell?” He yawned.

“Shut up, ya peckerwood,” Virg laughed. “The dunce probably remembers. He’s just gripping our legs.”

“If he remembered, he’d be Dwyng,” H’lu said. “As long as he’s Ellis, he’s Ellis.”

“How can he be Ellis without a heart?” Rey said.

“He thinks he’s Ellis, but it’s still Aldwyn’s mind floating around in there,” H’lu reasoned. “Aldwyn’s mind was strong enough to do anything—you guys know that—enough to unintentionally-manipulate-his-ex-without-a-heart strong.”

Ellis blinked.

“Well as long as he’s Ellis, we’re at a standstill,” Rey said.

“Thus substantiates Operation: Make Dwyng Remember,” Virg said. He made a trumpet noise with his lips.

“It concerns me that he hasn’t already,” Rey said. “REIGN messed with his memory—I know it.”

“Kryste!” Virg said. “It’s been fifteen yearning years. It would be gargantuan if his memory *weren’t* shot.”

Rey looked at Ellis, who was trying his hardest not to nod off. “Something’s up.”

“Something’s *always* up,” H’lu said.

“*You* were the one giving him the shots.” Rey looked to H’lu. “Did anything seem peculiar?”

“Everything was protocol,” she said. “REIGN supplies, I inject.”

“Ellis,” Rey said, startling him out of his drowsiness. “Do you remember anything odd

about your time in the R ward?”

“I can think of a couple,” he said. Slur.

A single line of blood began to run from his nose.

“Dwyng, you’re bleeding,” H’lu said. She grabbed a rag from the kitchen and wiped the blood away. “Are you feeling ok?”

“I can’t remember.”

The three branches looked at each other. “Look. I’ll relay him through the city and re-log his memory sometime before the retirement,” Virg said. “He’ll be fashioned to remember by the time you can say ‘blood covered white leaves.’” Rey wasn’t amused. “Ain’t that correct, peckerwood?”

“Let him rest,” Rey said. He walked to the window, and closed the blinds.

Ellis saw Rey and H’lu arguing on their way out of the room as his eyes began to shut. Virg lingered for a few seconds, staring at Ellis’s scrunched torso leaning against the headboard.

“Welcome home, friend.”

He smacked near-dead Ellis on the shoulder. He fell sideways onto a pile of cream-colored pillows and back asleep, hoping for once—just for once—he could die and be dead.

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The two-story house being called his Home sat between a family of golden hills and an endless field. Ellis tried to find the end of the field with his eyes, but only succeeded at finding the blurry horizon line separating sky and wheat. A thin valley—in which sat his Home—ran between the hills and field.

A lone sycamore tree stood next to the house—dead.

Rey and Ellis, outside, along the valley.

“So, this is the real you?” Ellis asked.

“What you see is what you get,” Rey said. He smiled. “No heart—unless I’m in the city. I don’t see the appeal of looking like someone else.”

“You should tell that to the girls I teach,” Ellis said. “Well, *taught*. They wore an inch of make-up every day.”

Rey: fingers. Interested.

“Hm. *Make-up*,” Rey said. “Seems like the heart’s predecessor.”

“Vanity dies hard,” Ellis said. “It some obstinate cases, it outlives the man.”

Rey took a sip of pink lemonade.

“If someone wanted to find this place on foot,” Rey told Ellis, “they would either have to travel across a dry ocean or traverse those hills, which go on for miles and miles. The fact that your Home is the perfect hiding place makes me think you were destined to do what you do.”

“Which is?”

“We’ll get there,” Rey said.

Ellis involuntarily laughed.

It had been three days since he’d awakened to see three brooding silhouettes staring back at him. He’d spent the days achy. He had had two nosebleeds in two hours. He hadn’t learned anything more about his ‘real’ life, though he did learn where the kitchen, living room and dining rooms were located. At first, he had trouble walking between rooms, but he regained his footing by the third day.

He and Rey walked down the long valley as Virg and H’lu sat in the living room, hunched over a foreign map, discussing yet another thing that Ellis didn’t understand. Holding a

glass of pink lemonade, keeping pace with his mysterious best friend, Ellis finally found the energy to speak up.

“No,” he said. “I’m sick of that.”

“Of what?”

And he spoke.

“I’m sick of ‘we’ll get there.’ I’m sick of ‘we’ll get to that’ and ‘not yet.’ I’m sick of not knowing and not caring enough to know. I’ve jumped off of a building, I’ve been chased by a hoard of sexless laborers, I’ve been shot in the damn face—and despite *everything*—here I am, walking at the bottom of a range of yellow hills, breathing in the country air, talking to a best friend I’ve never met, drinking pink fucking *lemonade*,” he said, holding up his glass. “It’s clear to me that I’m someone—someone who either deserves respect or deserves to be feared. I saw the way people looked at me in that building. I’m *somebody*. So let’s cut it out with this ‘we’ll get there eventually’ bullshit and let’s get there *now*.”

Pain shot up his left side. He cringed.

Rey was too busy taking a sip of his pink lemonade to notice.

“You know, this is a pretty poignant metaphor for life,” Rey said, pointing to his glass. “Lemonade is one of the world’s sweetest drinks. It’s what mothers would bring their husbands and children after a hard day’s work. A glass of lemonade makes everything better. And such a simple recipe—all natural ingredients. Water, lemons, sugar, *voila*—the nectar of the commoner.” Rey took another sip. “Then one day someone decided it wasn’t enough. It was boring. It could be improved. So he threw in pink, artificial coloring and said, ‘What *I* have is better. What *I* have is fresher—and sweeter. What *I* have is *pink*.’ People caught on and started

sipping their pink lemonade, not caring one bit—not even considering—that it had no significance and it had no benefits that regular lemonade didn't.”

Ellis sucked on an ice cube. He spat it out.

“Did you think of that?” he asked Rey. Rey smiled, nodded.

“As a lit professor,” Ellis said, “I can confidently say—*that's* a shit metaphor. For one, not all pink lemonade is created with artificial food dye. In the South, it's often made with natural ingredients, like raspberries and cranberries. Furthermore, pink lemonade is typically a dark red, not actually pink. And plenty of people still drink regular lemonade, so your sentimentality is wholly unnecessary. If you're trying to say that people go around not truly appreciating life for what it is—that they focus on material things and live life blind to the beauty of simplicity in nature—which is egregiously clichéd to begin with—try harder.” Ellis bit down on a chunk of ice. “A better metaphor would relate life to actual lemons because they are sour and difficult to finish on your own.”

Rey laughed.

“Or life and lemonade. It's filled with ice—so they both inevitably become cold and diluted.”

Rey stopped walking and stared at Ellis.

“Or compare it to this glass,” Ellis said, finishing his drink. “Fragile and ultimately replaceable.”

Ellis threw the glass to the ground. It bounced once, and landed upside down on its mouth, un-shattered.

Rey smiled and finished his drink.

“And sometimes filled with excellent surprises,” Rey said.

He looked to Ellis—staring down, simultaneously upset and mesmerized by the contumacious glass. Rey started toward the house.

“OK, Qualm. If you want to get there,” he said, looking back. “Let’s get there.”

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H’lu and Virg were still sitting at the living room table when Ellis and Rey walked in.

“It’s time to talk,” Rey told them.

Verx, comfortably curled up in the middle of the table, lifted his head to listen. Ellis still didn’t understand the significance of Verx, a domesticated silver fox—that the trio explained was his totem and the inspiration behind his REIGN password—but Ellis had learned in the last three days that the animal was very fond of him and naps.

Ellis eyed the golden hills through the long, horizontal window. Verx jumped from the table and stood next to Ellis. Ellis reached down and petted him on the head before sitting at the long gray table.

A series of bookshelves stood on the other side of the room—filled with what appeared to be videocassette tapes. Nothing, Ellis thought, made sense.

“Talk about what?” Virg said.

“Everything,” Rey said.

“That’s a lot to talk about,” H’lu said.

“Yeah,” Virg said. “That’s literally everything.”

“Well, Ellis here has some questions,” Rey said. “And he doesn’t want to wait until he remembers to get them automatically answered—even though that would make things much simpler.”

“For all I know, I’ll *never* remember,” Ellis said.

No one said anything. Finally:

“Oh, just let the peckerwood expostulate some questions,” Virg said. “I could use a briefer myself.”

“OK, Ellis,” Rey said. “*Shoot.*”

Immediately: “What got us to this point?”

H’lu, Rey, and Virg exchanged glances.

“Do any of you want another glass of lemonade?” H’lu said. “This will take some time.”

“I think we’re quenched,” Rey said, and looked to Ellis. He held his forefingers to his thumbs and closed his eyes for a few seconds. Meditating. He opened them, took a deep breath, and began what would become the Informal Home Address.

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“It all started when ‘virtual’ met ‘reality.’ Remember that.”

Ellis nodded. Verx jumped on the table and sat.

“In the late 1900s, early 2000s—when you lived—the world was being digitalized. You remember. The latest crazes were technological—the quickest phone, the newest computer, the best video game. People were *obsessed* with the future. What’s the next big thing? How can we make this phone, TV, computer, video game better—moreover, how can we make it more *realistic*? That’s the kicker. More *realistic*. People wanted the games they were playing to look *real*. They didn’t play sports outside. They played games that mimicked sports *inside*.

“Every year, a realer, better game was released. People could fight in wars in their living rooms. They could pretend to be the world’s greatest athletes or singers by pressing a few buttons. They could experience things their real life had denied them.

“And it just kept going. Every year, games improved. Technology advanced

exponentially. Impossibilities became possibilities within months. Technology evolved faster than the people. This concerned some, excited most.

“The government saw this trend and utilized it to prepare for battles. They could send stealth bombers without endangering soldiers. They could send robots to disarm bombs. They could spy on enemies without leaving their basement. War became alarmingly impersonal.

“The military was using video games to train their soldiers. Pilots were taking simulator tests to prepare for flight. Soldiers could strap on headgear and fight the enemy in a realistic virtual world. If they died in the game, they could restart and try again. Continued, virtual practice prepared them for real battle. At first, players—that is, *soldiers*—would have to move their bodies in order for their characters to move. You need to punch an enemy? Hurry—punch, punch, punch with your controller. You need to throw a grenade? Hurry—throw! Motions started out simple. To throw a grenade, swing your arm over your head. You wouldn’t have to unclip it from your belt, pull the pin, and throw. Just complete the basic motion and you were set. Eventually, the technology advanced—as usual—and any sort of movement became unnecessary. Eventually, players merely had to *think* about punching someone or throwing a grenade, and voila—punch, punch, punch, throw.

“You still there?”

Ellis nodded. Rey kept his fingers pressed together.

“Ok. This is all fine. It was exciting. It was a years-long craze. The world was getting faster and the people were getting ‘smarter.’ Of course, there were naysayers—and for good reason. People complained that video games and virtual worlds promoted laziness. Kids were in their rooms pretending to play sports instead of actually playing sports. Who needs friends when

you have followers? Television networks went out of their way to tell them to go outside and move around. An obesity epidemic swept the world's greatest power.

“For this reason and others, a certain demographic never really embraced virtual reality. For example, most elderly people missed the craze entirely. They watched their grandkids fight monsters, but never picked up a controller and helped. The controls were too confusing, the sounds too loud, the whole thing too overwhelming. War veterans often found war games in bad taste. The younger generation fueled the future of gaming.

“Remember: eventually it wasn't even necessary to move while playing. That's key. Folks no longer needed controllers to play by the 2030s. They only needed their minds and some sort of headgear. At first, a helmet, with a screen that came down over their eyes. That quickly became just glasses with a cord running along the head. Finally, people had small chips actually put under their skin—usually behind their ear or on their temple—and this chip would read their brain waves. Their brain waves controlled the character. They could be the war hero, the tennis player, the stuntman, the gangster—you name it. The bindis we wear today are these devices' descendants.

“Sometimes this was beautiful. Handicapped people were dancing again. Sick children were going on adventures with their friends.

“Other times, it was frightening. You had children going on murdering rampages—nightly. It wasn't like the past, when they were pushing a button to make a character swing a bat or shoot a gun. Now, the kid *was* the character, and he or she was actively thinking about how to kill others. Strategically navigating a map in order to murder a mob boss or a pedestrian. In the 2060s, there was a torrent of young deaths. They called that generation the *New Baby Boomers*—for a much darker reason. You had young people playing a virtual game every

night—a game that allowed them to die and respawn over and over again; and after playing for a long time, a certain myth of invulnerability followed them into their real lives. Kids weren't afraid of death anymore. They lost sight of what could really hurt them.

“In the virtual world, things don't actually hurt. Your body's not hooked up to the game—*only your mind*. If you're shot in the arm in the game, you'll be startled, but you'll respawn seconds later at your bunker. Safe. You feel it, but you don't *feel* it. Your brain recognizes what has happened to you, but your nervous system isn't present to support that realization. If the monster catches you, you're scared—but you're not in pain.

“Death lost its edge.

“Eventually, effects became *too* realistic. The real world and the virtual world collided. People had a hard time distinguishing what was real and what was fiction. In fact, scholars debated if the virtual world was fictional at all. If we were able to re-create the world virtually, who was to say *our* real world wasn't someone else's *virtual* world? Could *we* claim to be *real*? Everything got confusing—ethically, morally, and physically.

“Consider it. The Internet—which is becoming an old soul at this point in the story—weighed less than an ounce. Information was nearly weightless. All this time and our obsessions barely existed.

“For obvious reasons, the government began to regulate the gaming world. There wasn't anything in the Constitution about dealing with the virtual world, so an entirely new set of rules and standards had to be set. You didn't need the second amendment to carry a gun in *Gangster Team 24*, and you didn't get jail-time for killing mob bosses or selling drugs. Sure, games had their own sets of restrictions. You couldn't make a dragon appear out of thin air in *Next Big Star 87*, but you could in *Hrothgar's Return 3*. There were guns in *Streetz 8*, but none in *Chariotz 8*.

People had traded the ‘real’ rules for hundreds of ‘virtual’ rulebooks—each unique, each complex.

“And then the government patented Virtuality. Virtual reality. The future of gaming. The future of everything.

“You have to understand, at this point in history—we’re talking the early 2100s—the world is grossly interconnected. Globalization, hybridization, creolization—all these big nominalizations became real—there’s that word again—and the world became one big entity. Countries were less self-governed patches than they were homes of dead cultures that had been overrun by the global scene.”

Rey touched his fingertips together and closed his eyes. Brief meditation.

“Mariachi bands were replaced by mainstream tango music, which was replaced by reggaeton and hip hop, which transformed into hip pop and dance, which simply became club music. When people lose their personal culture, they lose their desire to fight for it. For anything. People abandoned their dying cultures and embraced globality.

“The world was essentially one territory. There hadn’t been a war in decades. Of course, people still had to eat, so there were trade-related scuffles and the like, but casualties became a thing of the past. The world reached its limits population-wise. People weren’t dying.

“The Government—with a capital G—launched a new type of ‘gaming’ and called it Virtuality, like I mentioned. The point of Virtuality was to take the virtual world—full of fictional creatures, guns, et cetera—and to base it back in reality. To rope the masses back in. For example, instead of playing *Dragonz 8*, where Little Jonny or Susie would fly around and find treasure, they would play *Being Black in the 1950s* or *Understanding Sexuality 4*: short virtual

games that forced children to dwell within a world where, say, racial or sexual discrimination existed.

“The educational system was revolutionized. Instead of going to school every morning, and sitting in a room full of their peers, kids would go to their learning room—the government mandated learning rooms for every household—and pop in a new virtual lesson. They lived in front of screens. They would read about racial discrimination in their pad, and then they would experience it. Little Susie would become Little Rhonda, a young black girl living in the South in the early ‘60s. If Little Susie was a two-faced racist, she would be given a more intense life to experience—perhaps she would be harassed or even lynched—until eventually, she would learn to respect what African-Americans had to sustain.

“Racial discrimination evaporated. It was a miracle. School curriculum forced kids to lead lives as someone from any and all cultures. By the time they graduated, they had been across the world, in every time period. One life you’re Latina and rich, one life you’re white and middle class, another you’re oriental and poor. These kids learned—literally—what it was like to walk in someone else’s shoes. They learned not only *how* to, but *why* they should accept each other.”

“Sex ed was fantastical,” Virg said.

“Two things,” Ellis said. “First, were these learning games—the ones where you could be any culture—were they based on real lives? Were these kids embodying a real person who had really lived? Or were the lives they were leading vaguely based on the times? For example, did the government fill in the blanks?”

H’lu, Rey, and Virg looked at each other and laughed.

“It’s like he’s back,” Virg said.

They looked at Ellis.

“It’s funny because you always talked about that—as Aldywn,” Rey said. “Ok, so to understand how the government accurately reconstructed history, you start with the Internet. Everyone’s lives were being documented on the Internet. Who needed a census when people were revising their information every other day online? The people basically handed the government their lives. They were constantly uploading videos, pictures, thoughts, relationship updates. You know that. You could find *anything* online.

“Do you remember what a big deal the Human Genome Project was? Scientists were able to map out the human genome; they had the human species in front of them like a map. The HGP and its successors let us predict what our children would look and be like. When you jumped from that building, we were already experimenting with manually changing DNA to alter a child’s appearance, temperament, and predisposition to disease. Old news—but then, controversial stuff.

“Well, by the 2120s, the government had an underground side-project that allowed them to map out...*everything*. The Internet was so overloaded with information that the government was able to reconstruct time and space and fit the pieces together. It’s all quite complicated—I’ve seen the formulas—but essentially everything ever said, done, thought—all of it has been accurately recreated. Just like the Genome being completed—which no one thought could be done—Existence had been completed. We know any and everything that ever happened and everything that *could* have happened. Once you have the formula and plug in the variables, everything is re-creatable.”

“When I was in REIGN, we talked to Dee about timelines,” Ellis said. “She said there are an infinite number of timelines, and the timeline we’re currently in is the result of a very specific string of events and— ”

“That’s exactly right. The formula accounts for these minute changes in our timeline—and traces them all the way back to the beginning of our universe. In order for *this* to happen, *that* must happen first. In order for *that* to happen, *this* must happen. The Human Existence Project followed those thises and thats until they ran out.”

Ellis zoned out on Verx, sleeping.

“At any rate, the government has every life ever lived—and every life that *could* have been lived—stored in the Hall of Info. You can be *anyone*. Virg knows. He works in Info. It’s the huge plaster-looking building right across from REIGN. They call it the Library of Lives. But *first*—”

“Wait, I had a second question,” Ellis said. He had to think what it was. “Oh, about the kids learning to accept each other by living these lives. How did these kids have the time to live an entire life? Did they just experience short parts of a life or what?”

“I’ll get to that soon,” Rey said, holding up a patient finger.

“*First*... Virtuality revolutionized *everything*. The majority of the 2100s and 2200s were spent virtually. Kids were living lives left and right, learning hands-on—history, science, reading comprehension, math, fitness, sexuality, religion, philosophy—everything was being learned through someone else’s eyes. People understood the world around them more than ever—on a much deeper, personal level. Why read Keats when you could *be* Keats?”

“Naturally, once these kids graduated, they would go through withdrawal. Not the virtual withdrawal they’d experienced as a drug dealer in the 1980s—*real*, physically daunting

withdrawal. They were no longer being mandated by the government to live extra lives, but they couldn't live *without* them. Real life was too redundant, too boring, too regular. Eventually, the government allowed post-education reincarnation. In fact, it became the biggest industry in the world.

“Reincarnation is supposed to be a learning experience. You don't explicitly remember your reincarnation, but you do absorb its...*lessons*. You don't remember what Little Rhonda's favorite snack was, but you do remember how a life filled with rejection felt. Certain people live lives to enlighten themselves. Some think suffering—say, during the Great Depression or the Holocaust—will allow them to become stronger individuals in the real world. Survive the Holocaust virtually, you've technically survived the Holocaust. Other people just want to have fun. They pick adventurous lives, or lives filled with travel and opulence. Others just like experiencing the thrill of being famous.”

“Like being Shakespeare.”

“Yes. Like being Shakespeare. Or Jesus. Or Lennon. Or Ford. No matter the person, you simply fill out a form explaining your reason for becoming them. The form goes through REIGN, who will more than likely accept the request. You walk over to Info, find Virg at the front desk—he hands you a life, you take it to REIGN, walk through the archway, and they strap you in for a new life.

“Sometimes if someone is causing trouble—hurting others or creating a ruckus of some sort—the government will force them to lead a life suited to fix their problem. If it's substance abuse, make them lead a few lives where doing drugs killed their father or son. If it's rape, make them lead a few lives where they were raped. It can get grim, but it gets the job done. If it's assassination, make them live until they don't want to anymore.”

Rey took a breath.

“Ok. So now you have reincarnation during school *and* after school. You’re spending your life living other lives. Now we’re at your question from before. How does anyone have the time to do that? Don’t we only have time to lead one life?” He touched his fingers together. “Think about dreams. Dreams are typically short. A few things happen, and boom—you’re awake.”

“Don’t tell me this is all a dream,” Ellis said.

Rey laughed.

“We wouldn’t do that to you,” he said. “But the comparison is apt. Somehow, you’ve slept for eight hours or so—and dreamt for about two—and only managed to, say, talk to your dead grandmother for a few seconds or walk down the street. When you’re asleep, time slows down—it takes you two hours to walk down the street—but you still experience it all in real-time.

“Well, it’s funny I say that, because ‘real-time’ *...isn’t*. Time’s relative. When you reincarnate, you experience everything in real-time, but the actual reincarnation could potentially only last a few minutes. The technology—once again, complicated stuff, but based in various formulas—the technology used to reincarnate adjusts time. It generates a super fast timeline, but your brain adjusts and experiences it in ‘real-time.’ You dream for two hours, experience a few minutes; you reincarnate for a few minutes, you experience fifty years. That’s just how it works.

“Now things get interesting.”

Ellis laughed. “Now?”

“*More* interesting.

“So. By the 2400s—which sounds strange to me because by the ‘2400s,’ they no longer really measured life in years (as you could imagine, considering their arbitrariness). Everyone had lived thousands of lives. The technology advanced exponentially, until sixty years could potentially last sixty seconds—though times were adjustable. Everyone had died thousands and thousands of times. They had spent at least one-half of their ‘real’ life being other people. Some people—actually, *most* people—preferred virtual life over real life.

“Then, in the mid-2480s, the first Mutation appeared. In 2485, a series of babies was born with a rare mutation that promoted immortality,” Rey said. Ellis blinked. “Scientists believed the mutation was induced by the mind’s indifference to death. Think about it. Dying had become the norm. It had infiltrated every aspect of our lives. People died every few minutes. When they were done dying for the day, they would go home, sleep, then wake up to die some more.

“Reincarnation overworked the brain. It jumbled it up. The subconscious was broken. It didn’t know how to react to things anymore. Reflexes changed, desires changed, even the positioning of our brain lobes changed—virtuality impacted us mentally *and* physically.

“There was an asexual revolution. Once you’ve experienced every sexuality, your real sexuality gets scrambled and confusing. Think about it. We had technically borrowed other peoples’ brains. Every time we reincarnated, we let our brains adopt the mindsets of others. Their lives deeply affected us—we returned to our real life with new lessons, new understandings, new fears and outrages. You don’t completely recall your incarnations—the brain can only store so much information—but you recall how they made you feel, what you learned, how to treat others. It makes sense that borrowing brains would eventually affect our own. Just like everything else—culture, tradition, Government—our brains were being globalized. We started to become the average entity.

“Of course, not everyone was born with the mutation. It took years and years and years for the mutation to spread. Aging—and ultimately, death—is induced by the depletion of functioning DNA. We borrowed thousands of others’ DNA until eventually our original DNA raised its white flag. Continual death served as an antibiotic. Repeated virtual exposure—let’s face it; *real* exposure—tricked our bodies into immunization. Being exposed to sickness allows us to overcome sickness. The more you die, the better suited you are to defeat it.”

“The Government continues to manipulate the mutation,” H’lu said. “The rest of us know about the mutation and its basic characteristics, but compared to REIGN, the people—even those of us employed by the beast—are ignorant souls.”

“Egregiously so,” Virg said.

“Keeping us in the dark,” H’lu said, “makes life a search for light.”

Ellis let that sink in.

“At any rate,” Rey said, “a man with the mutation would watch his family grow old and die but continue to live on as a thirty-year-old man. That was the peak—thirty. The Age of the Immortals, the Endless Mid-Life Crisis, et cetera. The mutation inhibited the person from hitting their forties or fifties—they peaked at thirty and stayed there forever. Scientists conjectured that thirty was the average age of lives lived. All things considered, depression followed the mutation everywhere it went. Suicide went through the roof.”

“More like off it,” Virg chuckled. He elbowed Ellis, who asked Rey to keep going, keep going.

“Unfortunately, suicide didn’t work. Part of the mutation—and this is the strangest part—it forced the person to *respawn*. Usually, when you read about immortality, the person lives on into old age—unless he’s murdered or has a serious accident. *Real* immortality doesn’t let you

off that easy. The human mind, because it became so interconnected with the virtual world, carried respawning into the real world. Death and respawn times always went hand and hand virtually, so it would only make sense for the mutation to include both, too. It blew scientists away. It blew everyone away.”

“Everyone was getting blown,” Virg laughed.

“They had no idea how a physical body was able to disappear and reappear miles away. Someone could die on Main and end up in the countryside. Some conjectured that our real world was already virtual—that creating a virtual world within an existing virtual world allowed us to inadvertently manipulate the elder virtual world. Some still cling onto reality being reality, and virtuality being virtuality. Everything started when virtual met reality, remember?”

“But if the real world were actually virtual all along,” Ellis said. “Who created it?”

“A better question is ‘Was it created at all?’ Some think virtuality is inherent—that ‘reality’ has and always will be virtual—that virtual worlds are not ‘created,’ but foundational. The reason we were able to create a virtual world was because we were already living in one.”

“God created everything in his own image,” H’lu said. “Turns out we’re like Him.”

“Or *are* Him,” Virg said.

“Think about it,” H’lu said. “What isn’t real about the virtual world? We can see it, sense it, it affects us mentally and physically. Its ramifications *are real*.”

“There were and are hundreds of theories floating around, but the fact of the matter was...respawning became reality,” Rey said. “The people were forced to accept it.

“Things are impossible until they’re not,” H’lu said.

“People would often apply for trifectas—that’s three lives in tandem—no time between death and new life. One second you’re at the end of a noose, the next you’re at the end of an

umbilical cord. Scientists pointed to trifectas to explain the mutation's emphasis on respawning. The subconscious got used to life immediately following death. It couldn't tell the difference between the lives we were leading within REIGN and the ones we were leading outside. Before gaming was banned—did I mention that? No? Oh, *well*—when the government instituted Virtuality, they also banned regular gaming. There was no more riding dragons or shooting fictional hookers. Also,” Rey said, taking a breath, “Info cut back on lives that did not match up with the current timeline. In the past, it was possible to live in a world where, say,” Rey said, touching his fingers together, “Napoleon succeeded at controlling the world or the cure for polio was never discovered.”

“In the R ward,” Ellis said, “some people said they lived in a world where McCain and Clinton won the 2008 election.”

“Exactly. You can live lives that didn't technically happen. Now, if a timeline strays too far from the main line—*this* line—it's banned. Earlier on in history, say man evolved to have three arms—it's possible somewhere in the strings of time. Now *that's* too much of a departure from Main Line. You'd be reaching too far into the depths of difference. The 2008 election, in some of its various forms, are similar enough to keep things on track. Now, if a timeline exists where, through sheer luck, a hedgehog wins the 2008 election—*that's* crossing the line.”

“Actually it's more like *not* crossing the line,” Virg said.

“Right. *Main* Line. The one we're at the end of right now. The point is: the Government can't have imaginations running too wild. Literally *anything* is possible, but the Government makes only point-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-one percent possible.” Fingers. “Drugs like LSD would let folks experience impossibilities—and hence, government regulation. If the public caught wind of a revolutionary way of thinking—brought on by hallucinations or abstract

timelines—it could threaten the regs’ tunnel vision sense of power. Long story short: regulation *everywhere*.

“Government officials, for obvious reasons, are called ‘regs.’ When gaming was made illegal, people still found ways to keep playing. But if you got caught, you would be forced to live a life or two to teach you your wrongs. Companies were forced by the regs to eventually stop producing them, and the government ultimately monopolized the virtual world—which is to say, the new real world.”

“Well kaputt,” Virg said. “Well kaputt.”

The four shared a simultaneous exhale.

“So—whenever an immortal dies, they return to what we now call their ‘Home.’ For example, when *you* were shot in the face, you respawned *here*.”

Ellis began to smile.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Rey smiled back. “You’re immortal, Ellis.”

Virg smacked Ellis on the back. “You can celebrate when we’re done,” Rey said. “Believe me, you’ll have plenty of time.”

+++++

drunk.

My parents spent the weekend at Hocking Hills, so I took it upon myself to get sweaty on Kamchatka and orange juice, alone, in my room, listening to Manchester Orchestra demos. At one point I fake-cried in the mirror to see what my cry face looked like. The Chappell party fell through like it tends to do before midterms. What we miss before midterms, we make up for after. Lonely screwdrivers in hiatuses do me alright.

Thus far in my scarytale, I've portrayed myself as some sort of teenage alcoholic nihilist headed straight for nothing much (Get it? GET IT? *GET IT?!?!!*), and I apologize.

Honestly, drinking's lost its appeal.¹¹⁶ When I bulldoze 21 in 2012 and I'm "allowed" to drink—the president gives me the green light—I'll probably quit altogether. Regardless, someone famous and important said a drunk body is a sober mind or something like that. I don't know. Look it up. *You* have the Internet.

I will say one last thing about drinking before you press on. (Me: "One last thing about drinking.")

The thing about drinking that infatuated me my first night wasn't the taste of alcohol or the better dance moves or the games—it was the Freedom. Same for Mary Jane. Every night, at some point, between your fourth and fifth Air Bud,¹¹⁷ you realize: everything's a joke. When the dentist fills you with nitrus—samesies. You realize you're a speck on a speck in a speck on a speck in the vastness of vast spacy space, totally worthless and insignificant—Carl Sagan called, he wants his ice breakers back—and instead of getting scared and sad and overwhelmed like you

¹¹⁶ An Italian banana has also lost its a-peal. (If I could place a footnote within this footnote, the second footnote would say, "I'm assuming you just flipped to this page randomly, because there's no fucking way you've been patient enough to get this far in the book by just reading it.")

¹¹⁷ Air Buds are the Bud Lights people throw at you when your can is empty. Come to the barn, yell AIR BUD! and a cold can is flying Yahweh almost immediately.

do sober, you become hopeful Suddenly, you're content—not just content: *happy*. You're *happy*.

You *Zen out*.

You'll know you're a perfect human being when whipping out your penis and saying, "This is what my penis is like. So what?" is as easy as not doing it, and you know you're the perfect post-human when you do that and don't even consider the moment being of much worth compared to the millions of other things that coagulate and put on a nametag that says *Hello, My Name Is YOUR LIFE*.

That's drinking's draw.¹¹⁸ These alcoholics and stoners and under-the-tablers aren't addicted to a substance or to a destructive lifestyle. They're in love with the life they know would be possible if being drunk was called being sober. But they're trapped by circumstance.¹¹⁹ You know something's wrong with the real world when the richest people on the planet—the people you expect to be swimming in jolliness and freedom and unrestraint—are the ones tripping dead left and right of alcohol poisoning, clumsy ODs, and auto-erotic asphyxiation.

The great escape artists.

I pray I never win the firstest of first places, so I never find out that even *that's* not enough. The real blessing of being middle-class in Ohio: there's always something to strive for.

...

If something interesting doesn't happen soon, I might have to stage a new Holocaust.¹²⁰

I take meta-fiction to a whole new level.

-Solon Brood

-Solon Brood

¹¹⁸ That's drinking straw.

¹¹⁹ This is called a generalization.

¹²⁰ If I write a silly footnote, you'll forgive me for being incredibly insensitive, and you won't be as offended because *hey*—we're having *fun* here. HAHAHAAAAAAAA?

/// "I Can Feel a Hot One" - Manchester Orchestra /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDs08ydnvHw>

\\

grad you ate shin & co.

Summer 2008, I visited fourteen colleges. A fortnight of *ANOTHER ONE? GOD NOOO WHYYYYY JESUS MA DON'T MAKE ME MA DON'T MAKE ME I SWEAR I'LL DO ANYTHING. ANYTHING MA I SWEAR. NO MAAAA WHYYYYY?*

We spend one-fourth of our lives in a classroom. *Wuh-huhne fuh-hucking fuh-hourth.* Why would anyone do *anything* for 25% of their life? You say, "To get a better education." I say "Why?" You say, "To get a good job." I say "Why?" You say, "To make money and raise a family." I say "Why?" You, aggravated, *shout*, "Because that's what you do! You're supposed to do that! That's LIFE!" so I say, "Oh, boogerfarts" to break the tension because I'm not good with confrontation.

...

Start from square one. Empty slate. What would you do? Don't tell me you'd go to school, score a job, make babies, and die in a retirement home with pea soup dripping onto your mumu and faded loafers.

Ask your five-year-old self.

"Hey bud, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I want to be a real estate consultant, bringing in a steady wage to provide for my wife and autistic son."

"..."

"..."

“The *fuck*.”

...

OK. Other dayish, I’m driving Mom’s car and yelling. Car’s guts: a séance of Jeremy McKinnon bucknaked in a ragefight. I was furious—at any and every thing: the purple Voyager passing me, the stray dog on the side of the road, the people eating dinner in dumb average houses.

Dear Kitty, if only there were no other people in the world!¹²¹

...

My least favorite word is “cute.” You’re “cute” when you’re not “fucking awesome” at anything. Our elementary choir teacher, Ms. Rice, told us glue-and-glitter kit-kats before one of our kiddie Christmas recitals that if our parents told us we were “cute,” to kick them in the molars.¹²² We aren’t “cute.” We’re “goddamn amazing,” and won’t settle for anything less. FA LA LA LA LA.

LA LA LA.

LA.

Applying for collage,¹²³ my essays were cute epitomized fourteenfold, and I knew it. That’s how colleges like it. They want applicants to beg for it. They want your cheeks scarlet and you sounding sentimental—for you to suck their doctorate dicks and pretend to enjoy the taste of academic cum laudery. Post-visits, I’d acquired aftertaste immunity, and I wrote my cute little essay with tasteless ejaculate running down my chin:

College, Ese by Solon Asa Brood

¹²¹ Or just no Nazis. Either works.

¹²² Ms. Rice had violence issues.

¹²³ College for people who will never go to college.

College visits get repetitive.

College visits get repetitive.

I should have read the fine print: *WARNING PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS: excessive college visits and tours may lead to drowsiness, moodiness, confusion, hysteria, and nausea. If your lips start to taste of buttocks, please consult your academic advisor.*

This summer, I found myself on fourteen college campuses—being interviewed, going on tours, asking questions, driving for hours, scoping the atmospheres, sitting in on classes, filling out paperwork. Why fourteen? Well, my superstitious mother thought ending our search on thirteen was too unlucky. I didn't mind a fourteenth because I understood the visits were necessary if I were going to get into the college of my choice. I knew that even if you did have excellent test scores, a 4.0 GPA, a plethora of awards and honors, and hours upon hours of community service, none of it mattered if you didn't select the right college.

As I asked critical, thought-provoking questions, trying to release the veil of obscurity I had on college life, trying to prove to the college reps that I was a determined, enthusiastic student, my mom tried to find out what *she* thought were the important questions.

“Are these dorm rooms air-conditioned?”

Air-conditioning? This might be the most prestigious university in The Buckeye State, but if they don't have air conditioning, I can't go? I'd rather know things like “What is the return rate in college sophomores?” and “Do you have prestigious Anthropology, Biochemistry, or Filmmaking departments?” and “What is the student-faculty ratio?” I'm an active member of the Global Leadership Committee. I've received the President's Volunteer Service Award twice. I think I can survive a little heat!

“Is this where he can buy his snackies?”

Mom, I highly doubt I should make the biggest decision in my life on the basis of whether or not the college has a place where I can buy Nacho Cheesier Doritos and Gatorade. My stomach can wait. My education can't.

“What do you mean freshman can’t have cars? How will he get a haircut?”

A haircut. Are you kidding? I want to be on an archeological dig, uncovering hair follicles in Egyptian tombs! I want to film a documentary and fulfill my life-long ambitions of giving back to the world at large!¹²⁴ But heaven forbid if my hair’s not straight! I want to cure diseases, not my *cowlicks*!

But the humiliation didn’t stop there. My mom had infinite unusual procedures that informed her if the colleges were up to her standards. She called it her ‘College Checklist.’

*If I had a dime for every time my mom asked where the “potty” was located in the dorms, I’d have enough money to pay tuition anywhere in the country.

*Once we found the potty, my mom would walk into the men’s restroom to make sure the sanitary conditions were satisfactory.

*Each one of our tour guides had a fun time repeating the Food Card concept, which my mom has yet to fully comprehend.

*I am genuinely surprised she didn’t push every Emergency Call Button—or as she would say, “Emergency thingies”—to make sure they were functioning.

*One college offered up a full-ride if you knew how to play the bagpipes. Before we returned home that evening, my mom decided that she would buy me a bagpipe lesson book and a kilt.

Aside from the myriad of embarrassing questions and irrelevant inquiries, the visits were fairly typical. My mom would ask something that I felt was extraneous, and all of the other moms on the tour would nod their heads in rapt agreement.

By the seventh or eighth tour, I had had it with the monotony and the similitude of the colleges. College was so important to me. College was my long-term goal. I had worked my way up through the ashes and to the top of the high school hierarchy. Why did I study so hard? Why did I pursue perfection? Why did I have the desire to be at the top of my class? Because I knew that I needed to do anything I could to get into the right college. Life without college was like sailing across the ocean without a boat or like trying to fly without wings. It just wouldn’t work. My aspirations, my dreams, my desires were *of*

¹²⁴ I threw up just now. I threw up vomit into my mouth.

college. I *needed* an education.

Choosing a college is momentous. It's far too critical to lounge around and expect the opportunity to come to you. As my grandfather used to say: "Life is an occasion. Rise to it."

I've recently taken my college search to the next level. I'm actually on a college overnight trip right now. My roommate is out, so I've decided to write my essay. I'm having a really hard time concentrating, though. It's boiling in this dorm room. This place has no AC! Can you believe it? And I'm starving—I haven't eaten since this morning. There's nowhere to buy snackies!

I should probably wrap this up. I have an early bagpipe lesson tomorrow. I hope I remembered to pack my kilt.

[fin]

...

I didn't mention I took my ACT hungover (and still managed a 35) or that I made it a goal to masturbate at every college at which I stayed over night.

Or that I succeeded.

Twofold.

...

Last summer, I attended a writing workshop and scratched down some community poems like a bau5. There was one in particular. I didn't know anyone in the workshop, so I really concentrated on what I wanted to say in it. It was the best one in the workshop assistant's stack of papers. She told me that. I can remember the burns I had on the side of my pinkies after I'd written it. I remember because I was sober as a three-dollar bill. I'd gone to the workshop the morning after I'd left a friend's party early because I was sick of playing Madden and listening to all my friends exaggerate how much they love vagina.

There I am, putting my soul into this poem, another fucking poem—less-coherent sentences in shorter lines—praying that someone will get it, that someone else will write something better to prove to me that I’m not alone, and then she reassures me, nope—*sorry*—you got it, babe.

...

I’m valedictorian-elect and my speech is already written—a month in advance.

If my college essay was cum running down my chin, my graduation speech is a bukkake marathon, slow-mo, high resolution.

Graduation.

Solon Asa Brood

Hi.¹²⁵

[pause]

Buddha once said, “The world, indeed, is like a dream and the treasures of the world are an alluring mirage! Like the apparent distances in a picture, things have no reality in themselves, but they are like heat haze.”

Well, I’ve been thinking, and if the treasures of the world are mirages, you can justifiably consider high school the Sahara! [awkwardly laugh because it’s lame] [commence {ment}].

At this point in my speech, I suppose I’m supposed to give you advice on how to live your life, how to succeed in college and business, how to be the best you can be. I suppose I should say things like, “We did it!” and “Always remember to keep your chin up!” or “Never give up.”

I’m not going to do that. If you want that, bust a move to Hallmark and smell the potpourri.

I’m not withdrawing advice because I don’t think you deserve it. No—I’m withdrawing advice because I don’t think I have the right to give you advice. I’m in the same boat. I’m headed off to college, through a real-life wormhole, afraid of what might happen, and I have no idea how to approach it. I could

¹²⁵ Whenever I say ‘hi,’ I like to think someone had just asked me, ‘What are you?’

say, “We’re All in This Together!” or “You Can Do It!” and get you pumped for the next four years...

...but I’m not going to do that. This isn’t *High School Musical*.

We’re not going to burst into song and dance, and confetti isn’t going to shoot out of this podium, and the teachers aren’t going to join us in a chorus of “You Can Do It, Grads,” and then—and then—can you see it? [Jimmy Stewart voice] The band will get up and march around the room—& we’ll—oh we’ll all high-five each other and run out of these doors with—with smiles on our faces and—and confetti in our hair as balloons fall from the ceiling and...[pause]

NAY. [wait for end of uproarious laughter {approx. 2-3 minutes}]

[pause]

...

Sorry.

Anyway, any advice you’ll ever need is already with you. You hold the answers, young grasshoppers. Me—sorry, Fritz: *my*—telling you that you should always stick with your dreams and hold onto your friends is universally acknowledged. Make this grand timeline called life your own. Can’t spell timeline without ‘me.’ Don’t do this or that or him or her because it’s what you “should” do or what others are doing. Do it for you. Who else is there?

College, kids, work—anything is going to be what you make it. College could be the best four years of your life. Or it could be high school. [pause]

...

People like to give life a theme. Hope, Faith, Charity, donkey punches, clam hats, the like. But I think it’s open to interpretation. How dare I give *you* advice?

So-crates once said, “I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing.”

Eckhart Tolle once lethargically dribbled, “I cannot tell you any spiritual truth that deep within you don’t know already. All I can do is remind you of what you have forgotten.” He was going to continue but accidentally fell asleep with his eyes open.

So, to sum up: I got nothing.

Don't listen to my speech—that is, if you're not in the 90% that have already stopped. Listen to your own. Listen to the speech you've had going in the back of your mind your entire life. Then! *then* will you know how to make life and everything else the best it can be.

Thank you kindly for supplying me with my good old days.

Congrats.

We're all in this together.

[fin]

If ydk, a donkey punch is performed when a guy is giving anal. Right before climax, he punches the girl in the back of the head, which forces her to tighten her buttcheeks, which makes their climaxes, uh, *juicier*? A clam hat is the female version of a t-bag. A t-bag is when you put your sac on someone's head.

Good way to end this section, I think.

Here-here's to futures.

/// “Red Light Indicates the Door is Secured” – Arctic Monkeys ///

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdmR58BIHOg>

\\

yoof.

I finally caved and went to youth group with Nate. Reed and Scar tagged along, too. They held hands next to me. I went in knowing I wouldn't come out a Protestant, but there was just a part of me that wanted to be reminded why I stopped showing up on Sundays. Nate knows about Grandpa's having been King Preacher in Cali, and the entire time we were sitting in those pews,

he kept trying to gauge my reaction to everything—like I’m some sort of church authority. A few times I caught him doing it, and I would automatically pretend like whatever Preacher McJesus¹²⁶ said really, really perturbed me.

I think the thing that bothers me the most about church is its overwhelming lack of questions. A sermon is a speech filled with answers. A preacher gets onstage and *tells* things. He doesn’t hold a discussion with the congregation—he talks and talks and talks and talks while the congregation sips their free coffee and nibbles their free bear claws. No one sets their bear claws down and says, ‘AY! *Wait* a second! What if this *isn’t* a thing? How do *you* know? What makes you so *sure*?’ If church were like that, maybe we could find some better answers to put in our sermons.¹²⁷

Today’s sermon was about tithing. I ended up throwing \$5 into the tin and a man said, ‘God bless you,’ to which I said, ‘*No*, God bless *you*.’

Nate’s youth group had a basketball tournament after church. Nate, Reed, Scar and I were on a team with a thirtysomething youth leader named Bo with dentures. He popped them out for me. We had to come up with a team name, and we settled with The Angels. I was rooting for The Jesuses, but it didn’t really roll off the tongue that well. We *crucified* the other team. They were The Wisemen. I made a three pointer at one point¹²⁸ and everyone was *happy* for me. Even the dude who tried to block the shot. I made it, and he was like, ‘*Wow*—great shot, man!’ It sucked all of the cool out of it. That’s like punching someone in the face, and them being like, ‘*Wow*—great shot, man!’ Or like shooting someone in the chest, and them being like, ‘*Wow*—great sh—
” *dies*

At any rate, I now have a theory about why Nate is so successful at sports: he’s *nice to*

¹²⁶ It would have been weird if he *didn’t* become a preacher.

¹²⁷ But the bear claw industry would severely suffer.

¹²⁸ But I failed to make a one pointer at three point. ☹

his opponents. If someone dunks in your face and you say, ‘Holy cow, you’re talented!’ it’s probably going to affect him or her. No one wants to dunk on the dude who just made them feel great.

“You’re unstoppable, dude!”

“Fuck off, loser.”

“Wow—what a great insult! You’re good at *multiple* things!”

“Yeah, like screwing your *sister*.”

“She told me how great you were. High-five!”

“Go high-five yourself, you freak.”

“What great advice! I think I will!”

“...”

“Your silence is so great.”

...

After the game, the group went into the church’s basement and watched *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Bo prefaced with the Aslan-is-Jesus schpeel and the whole time I kept thinking how much cooler life would have been if Jesus were a lion.

They also had us write letters to ourselves—and they promised to mail them to us in five years. I wrote, ‘How’s being famous feel, handsome?’ because I’m going to be famous and handsome in five years.¹²⁹

Despite everyone around me being religious, I enjoyed myself. No one pulled that ‘Oh, why aren’t you religious?’ or that ‘Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your lord and savior’ shtick—which was relieving. I was afraid Nate was going to introduce me to some high-up

¹²⁹ Oprah says if I keep telling myself something, it will come true. Did I mention I’m immortal? *crosses fingers*

church authority who was going to sit me down and make me feel bad about being more into warships than worship. Scar & Reed headed home halfway through the movie and I ended up getting a root beer with Nate at a nearby root beer shack.¹³⁰

He asked me if I enjoyed youth group, and I said yeah, and he asked if I ever wanted to go again, and I said maybe. It's pretty clear he's trying to save me. And it's pretty clear I'm trying to save him.

I'm going to keep trying to get him super drunk at the barn parties.

We have a playful 'fuck you' relationship. When we were sitting there, I said, "I didn't think it was possible, but consider me converted. Praise Jesus." To which he said, "That's weird, because I was actually considering Satanism." And I said, "Ha! I was only kidding. I think your religion is dumb!" He thought about and said, "It's not gonna be funny when you're burning in hell."

We have fun.

I'm determined to win this competition, and if Nate just says, 'Ah—great game, man!' at the end of it all—I'm gonna finally punch him back.

But Goddamnit, he's such a teddy bear.

/// "For My Friends" – Blind Melon /// (no link)

\\

camp clinton.

That's my job. Camp Clinton. I don't work during the school year, but I work the

¹³⁰ We accidentally drove through a wormhole and ended up in the 1950s. WHOOOAAAA

summers at the infamous¹³¹ Camp Clinton. Groups waft in and out of the campgrounds every week, and Doc and I ride around in Gators,¹³² transport supplies to hurt/sick campers, help the new leaders with whatever, work the canteen, rip our shirt sleeves off, smoke on the secret hiking trails, befriend the 4-Hers and tell them naughty jokes, report to Ranger Lucy on things, throw rocks down the ravine, eat anything we find in Lucy's cabin or raid the mess hall, conversate the foreign cook ambassadors, run the rockwall, zipline and climbing spots, crank the hick country music, light fires, make animal noises outside of the campers' cabins and scratch the screen windows with sticks, extinguish fires, go home, come back, camp camp camp.

We tried to get Jonesy a job with us this year, but Lucy's a closeted racist. Lucy has a muffin top and her eyes are noticeably too far apart. She's either in the cabin, filing paperwork and sweating because the cabin has less AC than hell—the place *and* the word—or out and about looking butch in her safari gear and glasses. Whenever I enter the cabin I yell, “Lucy, I'm home!” and she does her signature thing: doesn't laugh. I once dreamt that Lucy and Bruce were secretly sisters who were sent to Earth to keep me in line. One took racquetball, the other took camp. Sometimes when I talk to Lucy, that thought crosses my mind and it makes her boring, executive conversations about camp less boring.

4-H camps are especially fun because Doc and I are both lifelong 4-Hers. Doc shows animals, and I do miscellaneous projects. Took a rabbit once. We recognize a lot of the kids at camp from the surrounding counties, and we know a lot of the counselors from school and county fair. Reed used to be a counselor but he traded the 4-Hs for 5-GFs.

...

¹³¹ I feel like you can put the word “infamous” in front of anything and make it sound better than it is. I don't even know how to properly use “infamous.” Does it mean *pretty* famous—like *cult*-famous—or does it mean, like, *mega*-famous—like it lasts the test of time-famous? Infamous is an infamous word for being infamously infamous, nawmean?

¹³² Don't tell Alli.

Every morning at 4-H camp, the campers make a huge circle on the basketball court in front of the main hall, take off their hats, and recite the 4-H pledge and motto. Doc and I stand with them every day, but we have our own version. The real version goes,

I pledge my HEAD to clearer thinking

My HEART to greater loyalty

My HANDS to larger service

And my HEALTH to better living for my club, my community, my country, and my world,

but we say

I pledge more HEAD from hotter bitches

My FARTS for greater loyalty¹³³

My HANDS for better jerking

And my HEALTH to better living in da club, my community, my CUNTry, and my world.

We also fudge the motto, which is

To make the best better.

We say,

To make the breasts wetter.

¹³³ Doesn't even make sense.

The campers call us The Gator Boys.

...

Our first day back was yesterday. We usually go in a month before summer starts to make sure the campgrounds are campy and groundy enough. Yesterday, Doc and I tested out the rockwall, obstacle course, and zipline. The zipline is legitimately terrifying. The gear gets rustier every year. We're one overweight 4-Her away from a funeral and a lawsuit.

The day ended with us starting a fire on Jacoby's Peak. Jacoby's Peak is a hill with a fire pit at the top.¹³⁴ The pit is surrounded by bleachers made of rotting plywood and dirt. A redneck amphitheater. It's where the 4-Hers sit when the counselors tell ghost stories. Jacoby is actually the name of a camper who supposedly fell into the Clinton gorge and now haunts the campgrounds. When Doc and I scare campers at night, we typically whisper *Jacoooooooooooby*.¹³⁵

Last night, it was me, Doc, Noel and Ana, a guy and girl from Wales, slowly ripping leaves along their veins and talking about each others' countries.

Ana has worked in the mess hall for several years. She's 26. Noel started in the mess hall this year. He's 23. They're both part of an international program called Global Campers or Global Partners or Global Camp Partners—something generic and international-y. They live at the camp over the summer and go back to Wales every mid-August. I've asked Ana why she does it, and she says international work looks good on a resume plus she loves getting away from home. Noel says the same thing. Noel is overwhelmingly gay. I could tell Doc was weirded out by that. If it were just Doc and I sitting at the fire, he wouldn't be able to finish a sentence without saying faggot or gaywad or fagwad or gaygot. Noel's presence made him talk much less.

¹³⁴ Just got an email saying I've been nominated for Most Straightforward Description Ever.

¹³⁵ Despite popular belief, Jacoby is not the adjectival version of Jacob.

Ana has a babyface and strawberry blonde hair. Noel is brunette and wears thick rims.

At one point, I asked if there were any whales in Wales, and they got the biggest kick out of that. Even though they speak English, they had these inside joke moments where they would look at each other and laugh and say things I couldn't understand.

“Are there any whales in Wales?”

“BLOODY RUDDY HUDDLEY HARDY DARDY PUELLER HUELLER BOOT,” they said?

Doc snuck two six packs of PBR in his backpack, and we all drank around the fire. I didn't get drunk, but I got talkative. Long story short, I ended up spilling the beans about my book. As soon as I said it—“I'm writing a book”—Doc and the Welshians lost their shit.

“BLOODY RUDDY BOOK HUDDLEY HARDY REALLY HUELLER PUELLER ABOOT?” Ana asked?

(I translated that as “What's the book about?”)

—Gotta say. I didn't realize how dumb my book's premise was until I tried explaining it to people. I said, “It's basically just a journal where I talk about stuff...and it's sort of experimental. I just sort of talk—I just talk about my life in general.” Doc's first question was, “Am I in it?” I said yes. “What did you say about me?”

I thought about it. I thought about how I couldn't tell Doc what I wrote about him because it was hurtful. I said a few decent things about our friendship, but it was mostly about how rich and stupid he is.

And then I extrapolated. I thought about everything mean I'd said about anyone and my brain fast-forwarded to the book being published. My closest friends would be excited for my book's release date—they would congratulate me and support me and fist-bump me a bunch—

and then they would actually read my book and realize what a prick I am when I'm not with them. I'm a loner who critiques everyone because I don't think the people I know now will be worth anything to me in ten years.

...

Guys, *I'm an asshole.*

...

I'm Harriet the fucking Spy.

...

If I published my book, my parents would be ashamed and upset, my sister would never talk to me again, and my friends would get hurt and I'd lose them. The thought of having my name on a book is more appealing to me than keeping my high school friends? My shitty journal isn't even going anywhere. It's not like I'd be sacrificing my friendships for a house in the hills and worldwide respect. I'd manage to get it published, maybe, in some small capacity, but it would stay still, and the only people who would take the time to read it would be the people I rip apart inside.

Sitting at that fire, with two Welsh chefs and a linebacker, I realized I am—and never stopped being—a cunt.

...

Like the inauthentic cunt I am, I told Doc he'd have to read and find out. He says, "OK, so basically you're just writing a diary? What makes you think people would want to read your diary? You're not *that* interesting."

"YIH TAULK ABOUT AN EGO," Noel said.

This forced Ana and Noel into a Welsh giggle-talk panic attack. Doc laughed to himself.

He slapped me on the back, chugged his beer, crushed it against his forehead, and threw it into the fire pit.

I fake laughed.

I chugged my beer and threw it into the fire pit.

...

When things become real, they're no longer immortal. Before last night, no one knew about my book. It wasn't real, so it was immortal. The second I let someone know it existed, it became a mortal Imhotep in a world of frenzied Brendan Fraisers. I gave it life, which gave it death.

This piece of shit word document I've been telling myself will get me somewhere isn't...that...interesting. Hell, it's just a collection of poop jokes and unpolished rants. The most interesting thing that's happened is the Cleveland stuff, but that takes up maybe three pages and books are supposed to be, you know, **FUCKING WAY MORE THAN THAT.**

Move over, Jacoby. Here I come.

Maybe if I survive a gorge jump, my life will be intriguing.

...

I told you I started a diary because I wanted to be the next Anne Frank.

A legend.

No one has gotten famous off a diary in a while. Someone has to fill the hole, right?¹³⁶ I thought I could follow the same path sans the genocide of six million Jews but it's looking like you *need* a tragedy to get your journal noticed—you *need* something *bad* to make your good shine—you *need* the bleak to beget the not-as-bleak—or—or you and your journal stay still.

¹³⁶ Anne Frank called her diary "Kitty," which is weird because when I told Doc I had a diary, he called me a "Pussy." (Also, I'll bet money you were expecting a sex joke when you looked down at this footnote.)

Seizures and rap battles weren't enough.

I need a Hitler.

...

Fuck you, Solon.

/// "And Shot Each Other"- The Chariot /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNn-jjx67nU>

////

“Up next! The M vs. I fallout,” Virg announced. H’lu walked in from the kitchen with a tray of pink lemonade. Rey, Virg, and Ellis still sat around the table. Verx was asleep in front of Ellis.

“Right. So when people started becoming immortal, the mortals got a bit upset. Families with immortal children understood their children’s condition, and it was heartbreaking. Families with no immortal connections got bitter. They blamed the Government. They cried conspiracy. Long story short, some Immortals—the I’s—and some Mortals—the M’s—didn’t get along very well. There would have been a war, but we all know who would have won.

“So...”

“Respawning,” H’lu said.

“Right, respawning,” Rey said. “Whenever someone dies, they immediately return Home. Where’s Home? Right. H’lu, take over.”

“I think you’ve already said it,” H’lu said. “It’s like this. You die—you’re Home. When you were shot, you showed up here. Your body—your mass—transported to a different place. Baffling stuff. Before this started happening, nothing like that had been seen before. People could reincarnate, sure, but technology explained that. This—*this* was different. This defied physics. Like Rey said—scientists think that exposure to the virtual world tricked our brains into manipulating real space and time, which, as far as we can tell, was already virtual. It’s as if we found the universe’s back door. Somehow, being able to respawn over and over in a ‘fake’ world gave us a sort of faux confidence in being able to do it everywhere. It gave us the key to a lock we didn’t know existed. When I’s would ‘die’ in the ‘real’ world, their confused subconscious would take over, and they would wake up wherever Home was.”

“And where is Home?” Ellis asked.

“Home was wherever your heart—that is, your subconscious, *not* your ex—felt like Home was. Where you felt safe. Where you could start from scratch and try not to die. For Rey and me, it was always our parents’ houses. For Virg, his aunt’s place. Where we grew up. But now we all share a Home. *Here.*”

“Which is?”

“The Rev HQ. This is where we extrapolate our next attack,” Virg said.

“And we’ll get there,” Rey said. “Now, you’re basically caught up to the present. People have evolved to be immortal, no matter the circumstances. For several generations, the I’s and the M’s despised each other, but that faded. There was inter-mortality breeding—until finally, most of the M’s were gone and nearly everyone on the planet was immortal. Survival of the fittest mutated into survival of the luckiest.”

“If no one died, didn’t the world become overpopulated?”

“Just the opposite. The population dwindled considerably—for two reasons. First, the people lost their sex drives—as I mentioned. The knowing mind recognized sex as an evolutionary trick. Death lost its edge and sex followed suit.”

Ellis squinted.

“Second, the mutation was accompanied by overwhelming sterility. Nature accommodated for its newfound deathlessness: lifelessness. People *had* sex. People *were* being born. Just at a highly reduced rate. Today, less than two percent of the population can successfully reproduce. Thousands of people have even evolved to appear androgynous.”

“Some REIGN positions are filled exclusively by the androgynous,” H’lu said.

“Why?”

“Because androgyny means the process is working.”

“What process?”

“REIGN’s process,” Rey said. “REIGN is Virtuality’s big, powerful baby. Its purpose: ‘to teach, to enlighten, to help.’”

“To take away life, one life at a time,” Virg said.

“Eight floors total,” Rey said. “Four for educational purposes—this is where children and teenagers are *taught* life’s fundamentals; three for post-education—this is where adults are *enlightened*; and the top floor is for prisoners—where seedy characters are forced to swallow their mistakes. *Helped*. If you die within REIGN—really or virtually—you wake up in REIGN. You remember when Leslie shot himself but was walking around the next day? That’s why. REIGN has manipulated the fields that let us go Home-Home—and they’ve blocked us from getting out until we’re ‘ready.’”

“Can’t spell REIGN without REG,” Virg said.

“We killed you outside so you could get Home.”

Ellis thought about that sentence out of context.

“Now, you know how I said *most* M’s died? Well, some of them are still alive and they have been found out, collected by REIGN, and made into the People’s Union for Humility, AKA the PUH, AKA the Geezers. They’re the last batch. The last decomposing, fertile batch. After the M vs. I fallout, M’s became a national treasure. It’s been hundreds and hundreds of years and if someone is born mortal—there *are* ways to test that without killing them—it makes international news. There are so few now, they’ve basically become demi-gods. In mythology, the gods were immortal and their worshippers mortal. Things got switched. They’ve lived thousands of lives like the rest of us, but they have an expiration date. Tragic, right?”

“*So* tragic,” Virg said, sarcastically.

“The people adore the Geezers. They’re legends. Their faces are plastered all over the city. Posters of them wearing bindis are scattered throughout MC. Aim has twenty-two Geezers, one of which is on his way out.”

“Aim?”

“Oh, right. Aim is old North America and South America combined. We’re in midwest Aim now.” Meditation. “It’s derived from ‘Ame’ in ‘America.’ It’s the Present Western World. When the world fell under one order, names were changed. Now we have Aim in the West and Med in the East, which comes from ‘Mediterranean.’ That’s Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia in one.

“Aim has twenty-two Geezers, Med has thirty-four. That’s fifty-six Geezers with a countdown. People travel from all over the world to visit them. It’s New Mecca. Every year, there are exoduses from across Aim and Med to see the Geezers speak. The Aim Geezers are stationed in MC, across from Blaine Park—in *The Hall*. They’re our policy-makers. They’re the regs’ happy masks. They and REIGN function symbiotically to keep the people...”

“*Consumed by enlightenment*,” H’lu said.

“Otherwise,” Rey said, in a mocking voice, “we’re governmentless. That’s a big bullet point. *The world is convinced it’s self-governed*. No elections, no wars, no problems. We can live any life—hooray, hurrah.”

“It sounds like REIGN *is* your government,” Ellis said.

Rey winked. “Hold your horses.”

“All things considered,” H’lu said, “we’ve all lived enough lives to respect one another and to do what we believe is best for the world at large. War and religion became absurd in real life—you live a trifecta as a Muslim, a Buddhist, and a Christian, you’re almost certain to have

lost stock in *belief*. When you can trace the Main Line back to the beginning of everything, you tend to accept real truths. All in all, universal understanding begat universal peacefulness.”

“We’re living in pleasant anarchy,” Rey said.

Once again, he touched his fingers together and meditated.

“We’ve covered nearly everything. Immortal—check. Peaceful—check. The Geezers and REIGN—check. What did I miss?” Rey looked to H’lu and Virg.

“Teleportation and shape-shifting?” Ellis said.

“Technology,” H’lu said. “You have to understand: the virtual world became real and the real world became virtual. Things got switched. In the virtual world, you have infinite choices. Choose your avatar. Choose your voice. Choose your language. Choose your Home. Teleportation is just deathless respawning. In REIGN, when you saw Zeke port, he was wearing a gadget called a porter. All of the workers in REIGN have them.”

“How do they work?”

H’lu: fingers. “How does a cellphone work?” she asked.

“Well, you push the buttons and waves travel to other phones and—it just does,” he said.

“Well, porters ‘just work,’ too,” she said.

“It might not seem like it, but it’s been thousands of years since you lived. You talking to us is comparable to a Viking speaking to you,” Rey interjected, holding his fingers together, “and trying to understand iPods.”

“Unswervingly,” Virg said. “You’re a Viking to us.”

“As for ‘shape-shifting’ and changing your voice,” H’lu said, “that’s just changing avatars. We gave you a heart and a UniVerse so you could escape. Those are just two more gadgets that let us manipulate the world directly around us. When we wear a heart, we have an

invisible one-foot digital field around us that lets us change how we appear. It's our personal bubble. It's an illusion. We call it our Aura. But then we have shared zones. Your room in the R-ward let you re-create something from your past, but you couldn't do that in the middle of the street. The street's a no sharing zone. Did Dee have you and your roommate share things? Could you affect things in his half? Ok, well that's because your roommate let you. The Geezers—that is, the *regs*—don't allow sharing in MC because it would get too messy. If everyone wanted a blizzard in Blaine Park, we'd be shoveling snow for decades. You get your few feet in the no sharing zones and that's the rule."

"So much for self-governance," Ellis said.

"To understand the strange abilities we have now, you just need to know that we have a much stronger relationship with the universe here," Rey said. "We can sense things that people only one hundred years ago couldn't—things regarding time and space and our place in it—things that seem so obvious now, but were mysteries just a few generations ago. Blind faith in gods mutated into blind faith in science.

"Things are the same until they're different," H'lu said.

"Deep," Virg said. H'lu shot Virg a look.

"When Leslie shot you," H'lu said, "you were both directly inside REIGN's field. If you had stepped onto the street, the gun wouldn't have been possible because hey, no sharing allowed. The revolver would have disappeared. Leslie shot you while you were both still 'inside' REIGN. You accepted the bullet into your field because you didn't have time not to. He shot, you fell. As planned, the gun blast knocked you past the field and because your dead body was outside of the field, you woke up here and not in REIGN.

"On average, it takes four seconds for the brain to realize it's dead. For some, it could

take two seconds, others ten. But typically, when the fourth second ticks, wherever you are determines where you'll wake up."

"That was genius on Rey's part," Virg said.

Ellis tapped the table. Verx lifted his head, realized nothing was going on, and fell back asleep.

"So why did you have to kill me at all?" Ellis asked. "What are we fighting for?"

"The next bit gets complicated," Rey said. "Let's take a break."

Virg chuckled. "'Break' is the right word."

+++++

H'lu and Ellis sat on the hill outside. It was evening. A warm breeze made the grass whistle. Pink and blue stratus clouds.

Home—the quaint house with a dying sycamore tree out front—sat at the bottom of the hill. Virg and Rey were still inside. Ellis could see them through the long horizontal window on the western wall.

"Are you going to lose your job at REIGN because of this?"

"As far as I know, they have no clue," she said. "For a mind-controlling super-force, you think they'd have everything together. You would think they'd always be a step ahead. But—people are just people. They don't have it all figured out. I've been an active rev for thirty years and they let me be your nightly visitor. They either have no idea or they're not scared of what we're doing."

The two sat in silence.

Ellis looked down the thin valley. He spotted a small body of water.

"I've always wanted my own pond."

“Happy birthday,” she said. “The pond is filled with trusty octopuses.”

“What?” he said. “Are you kidding again?”

“I’m not.”

“I think I could go the rest of my life and never hear the term ‘trusty octopuses’ again.”

“You say ‘rest of my life’ as if it has an end,” she said.

“Oh, right,” he said. “I could go for *eternity* and never hear about ‘trusty octopuses.’”

They laughed like two old friends.

“So why did you have to kill me?”

“We’ll talk about it soon.”

“What was the thing about our next attack—”

“Calm *down*,” H’lu said. “You literally have *forever* to figure it out. Let’s have some fun.”

Ellis surrendered and fell on his back, looked up at the sky.

“What’s your preferred weapon?” H’lu asked him.

“What?”

“You heard me,” she said. “Are you a gun guy or a bow and arrow guy?”

“I shot a crossbow once,” he said.

“Excellent choice,” H’lu said. Ellis sat back up and looked at her. She held a crossbow.

“Watch this.”

H’lu held the crossbow up, and pointed it toward the door. Virg opened the door, and looked up at them.

“Time for din—”

He was stopped short by an arrow piercing his left shoulder. Before he had time to react, a second arrow hit him in the side of the head and he was on the ground. Four seconds passed and his body was gone. Ten seconds later, the door reopened.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Virg yelled.

H’lu shot another arrow—into his heart. Four seconds later, his body was gone.

The third time, the door only cracked.

“H’lu, stop it!”

H’lu couldn’t stop laughing.

“Wanna turn?” she asked Ellis.

“Doesn’t that hurt him?”

“Nope. Pain doesn’t exist. Just like in a dream, remember?”

If pain didn’t exist, Ellis thought, then what explained the pinched nerves down his left side?

Virg was yelling random profanities. Suddenly, a barrage of arrows came flying toward H’lu and Ellis on the hill. H’lu screamed and laughed. “Ok! Ok! We’re coming!” The crossbow disappeared, and the two headed down for dinner.

“You aren’t getting off that easy!”

Virg lunged out of the doorway and released a magazine. Bullets pierced the hill. Ellis watched H’lu become a casualty and disappear.

He put his arms up.

“I don’t kill civilians,” Virg said. “No worries, Dwyng.”

Suddenly, a sword through Virg’s stomach.

“Damn it.”

He fell forward, finished. H'lu stood behind him, grimacing.

Virg's body disappeared, along with the blood lining the end of the sword.

Ellis smiled and headed inside for dinner with his immortal friends.

+++++

The four ate fresh salads at the table. Verx was hunched over a small bowl of meat.

Chomps.

"This is from the garden," Rey said. He squashed a cherry tomato between his teeth.

"Can't you just make food appear?" Ellis asked.

"Only if it's in my belt."

Rey squashed another tomato before realizing Ellis had no idea what that meant. He pressed his forefinger and thumb together and closed his eyes.

"And what the hell is that? Are you meditating?"

"Mackerel holes," Virg said. "How'd we forget *that*?"

"Everyone does it," Ellis said. "It's either the wrist or two fingers."

"It's basically the Internet," Rey said. "Or what's become of it."

"All information at your fingertips," Virg recited.

"Computers got smaller and smaller until eventually they became nearly invisible," Rey said. "Today, we can touch our fingers together and scan the ethereal world of information in its entirety. I use it whenever I need to fact check."

"So that's why Dee touched her fingers whenever Bill mentioned a 90s band," Ellis said.

"Because she had no idea what he was talking about," H'lu said. "It's hard to remember the names of bands after thousands of years."

Verx began to lick his bowl.

“And what about the food—why not just create it?”

“You know how when you play a video game, you can pause it, and look through your supplies? You might have a few weapons, some money, some food. We call that supply our ‘belt.’ It has limited space but you can always refill it. You can only make appear what’s in your belt. The bigger the item, the more energy it takes to make it appear. If you belt a building, you’ll die before it appears.”

“Apparently H’lu belts a crossbow,” Virg groaned. He crunched a crouton.

“I prefer making food, anyway,” Rey said. “We don’t die, but it gets tedious when you fake-die every week from starvation and respawn at Home. Might as well just keep eating.”

“Might as well just keep eating” echoed in Ellis’s mind as he stabbed a cherry tomato with his fork and squashed it between his teeth.

“Well, thanks for this,” he told them. “It all tastes very fresh.”

The three branches looked at each other.

“What do you mean, ‘tastes?’”

“I mean ‘tastes.’”

Rey put his fork down. “You’re telling us you perceive a difference in taste between different foods?”

“Yes,” he said. “Thank you for defining taste.”

“Provocative!” Virg said.

“*What?*” Ellis asked.

“It’s just—” Rey started. “It’s just—we don’t taste. We consume, we swallow, we digest—but we don’t taste.”

“Taste existed to promote smart consumption,” H’lu said. “Taste buds informed the brain what was safe to eat. When survival became useless, taste became unnecessary. We could drink poison daily and wake up reinvigorated. No need to perceive differences.”

“So Ellis can taste because he’s still convinced he can,” Rey said. They were talking about him, not to him. “That’s incredible.”

Ellis supposed the ability to taste in a tastless world *was* pretty remarkable.

“Over time, people in the R ward lose their sense of taste,” H’lu said. “If they can’t taste anything, that’s when you know they’re en route to reinitiation.”

“That begets that he’s still deep in it,” Virg said, looking at Ellis.

“Wait. So you guys don’t have taste buds?” Ellis asked.

“Tongues as smooth as Virg’s head,” H’lu said. She stuck her tongue out.

“So there’s no sex, no taste, no death—”

“No voluntary sleep,” H’lu interrupted.

“No voluntary sleep,” Ellis repeated. “What do you guys look *forward* to?”

The three said it simultaneously:

“The downfall.”

+++++

“Ready?” Rey said.

Ellis nodded.

Virg and H’lu walked in from the kitchen. Virg wore an apron and a smirk. By the time he and H’lu sat down next to Verx, the apron was gone.

“Ok, *shoot*,” Rey told Ellis.

“Who am I?”

“Ok. Taking a step back,” Rey started. “Some people claim that this is the 1000 Years Peace. Folks have learned to live and let live because all they do *is* live. What do you fight for when death is irrelevant?” Rey paused. “Still, some of us aren’t content with the way things are. What is peace when it’s founded on falsities?”

“Falsities?” Ellis asked.

“Some people—we included—aren’t convinced that the Geezers are who they say they are. We believe the PUH is manipulating the people’s trust to gain power.”

“How so?”

“The Geezers aren’t mortal. We think—well, we *know*—it’s a cover-up. The powers-at-be recognize that mortality equals respect, and they are using that to their advantage.”

“Why would they do that?”

“To keep the masses calm.”

“What’s wrong with tha—”

“*Everything*,” Rey said. Rey’s quick retort told Ellis this was a sensitive subject.

“Every couple of years, a new mortal is born,” H’lu said. “They’re fated to become a Geezer, to potentially reproduce, and to control the PUH when they come of age. Everyone sings praises and glorifies the newcomers.”

“Isn’t that eerie?” Virg said. “They’re set to die, but they’re fine coagulating their time sitting in the Hall, persuading policies and ignoring their relatives.”

“It’s odd that the Geezers—the only people supposedly destined to die—are the ones who spend their lives in politics,” H’lu said.

“That’s what I just said,” Virg said.

“At any rate, some people found this weird,” Rey said. “Including us.”

“So we, the people, asked the Geezers to prove their mortality,” H’lu said. “Run some simple tests, get it over with. Alleviate our skepticism.”

“And?”

“They refused.”

“*Refused,*” Virg said.

Verx yawned.

“So a group of rebels took matters into their own hands. They set out to assassinate Boss, the head Geezer.”

“The head Geezer is called *Boss*?”

“The head Geezer is called Boss.”

“A small group of radicals figured—if they won’t take the tests, why not test the waters ourselves?” H’lu said. “So they attempted to assassinate Boss.”

“And?”

“The world’s biggest cover-up was set in motion,” H’lu said. “Boss was shot in the throat and the shoulder right outside of Blaine Park. He bled out on the street. His guards carried him to REIGN, leaving a trail of blood between Blaine and REIGN. The Blaine-REIGN Blood Trail.

“The plan was for him to die and respawn—that would prove his immortality and reveal the Geezers’ fraudulence. But somehow—he *survived*. To this day, he has a scar on his neck and trouble speaking. Even though the prick is immortal, they’re having him pretend to be a wounded mortal. It’s sickening,” H’lu spat. “The assassin was reprimanded by the regs, and spent nearly twenty years on the eighth floor, paying for the first M vs. I crime in centuries.”

“What happened to Boss?”

“His retirement party is in two months,” Rey said. “He’s stepping down as head

Geezer—going to live the ‘rest’ of his short life at Home. In other words, he’ll disappear for a while, and live forever in a different body. MC is hosting a huge extravaganza in his honor in Blaine Park, where he was shot years ago. It’s a testament to his resolve and strength and dedication and all that.”

“And the assassin?”

The three revolutionaries looked at one another.

“You’re staring at him,” Rey said.

“*You’re* the assassin?”

He nodded, humbly.

“It was a blessing and a curse,” he said. “I lived some terrible lives, I lived some mediocre ones—never good ones. I was stuck in that hell for eighteen years—life after life after life.

“But I managed. For one, I learned things about REIGN no one else knew. They had me locked up pretty tight, but I gained some insights that fueled the movement.”

“How did you fuel the movement when you were locked up?”

“I befriended a staff member named H’lu who was good about spilling the beans. She told me that REIGN was trying to pass legislation that would make everyone’s Home REIGN. Instead of respawning somewhere safe and comfortable, we would respawn back into REIGN so they could control and manipulate our every move. She informed me of REIGN’s anti-anti-Main Line regulations. She explained that REIGN was pushing for the mandatory documentation of Homes. Homes have always been confidential. You can respawn wherever you want, and the Government doesn’t have the right to intrude. They caught wind of the movement and knew getting control of Homes would end secret gatherings, like this one. REIGN was actively

searching for loopholes to convince the public that secret Homes were bad. Fortunately, it didn't stick.

"H'lu also informed me of the experiments," Rey said. "You wouldn't know it, looking at the posters of smiling Geezers all over MC, but the people behind REIGN are twisted. They are sick, heartless bastards, consumed by power." He paused. "They've found that mortality begets respect and respect begets trust, trust begets power. They've created the PUH to serve as a fountainhead of respect. Make the policymakers mortal, and the people will submit. For years, the people sought immortality. Why do we have to die? Why can't we be immortal? Why can't there be an afterlife? Eventually, they got what they wanted: endless life. And after a thousand years of it, they want what they can't have: death. It's alluring. It's mysterious. The Geezers' mortality is *sexy*. REIGN saw the public infatuation and manipulated it. Celebrity dilutes reason."

"You mentioned *experiments*?" Ellis said.

"We now know that REIGN—the grand box of enlightenment—uses its eighth floor residents to test the limits of immortality. They have revs locked in cages, getting jabbed with needles, while the Geezers sit in their REIGN-provided mansions, with the latest gadgets and toys, spoiling themselves into eternity." Ellis swallowed. "Is it possible to extend respawn times? To shorten them? Can we reinvent taste? Induce pain? What part of the brain promotes fealty? How can we trigger it? And most frightening: can we recreate permanent death?"

H'lu shivered.

"If REIGN could actually make people mortal," she said, "they wouldn't have to lie about it, would they? That would simplify *everything*. No lies means no way to reveal the truth."

"Without H'lu," Rey said, looking at his podgy compatriot, "we wouldn't know any of

this. While I was locked away, she kept me updated on the real world. She was the messenger—between the revs and myself. She is the revs’ number one informant, and despite everything, has managed to stay on Regal’s good side.”

“It really is a wonder REIGN hasn’t figured out I’m a troublemaker,” H’lu said. “I’d pass messages from Rey to the revs, and REIGN would watch as conspiracy pamphlets—that is, *accurate* pamphlets—made their way throughout the city. It was a very exciting time. For the first time in years, things were *happening*.”

“How did you get out?” Ellis asked Rey.

Rey became Leslie.

“First I shot you in the face,” he said, pulling at his hair. “Then I shot myself in the face. We both fell into the street, and we both woke up here.”

“But—but Leslie was legitimately *crazy*,” Ellis said. “Leslie was *insane*.”

“Thank you,” Rey said. “That’s what we needed. Loose cannon. If REIGN thought for one second that I was my normal self, they would have thrown me back into the box for my new worse trifecta. It happened to me time and time again. I would try to catch a break in the R ward, they would catch on and break me. I had to act crazy enough to stay close to you.”

“But—but I remember you—you alluded to *Groundhog’s Day* at one point,” Ellis said, trying to make sense of it all. “How did you know what that was if you didn’t have access to the finger thing—”

H’lu raised her hand. “It was all part of the plan,” she said. “We timed it out so that you and Rey would be in the same R ward at the same time. We did our research. It’s a wonder Virg hasn’t been found out, either. He was responsible for cheating the system and getting your lives perfectly lined up—and for lining himself up as Krink to help out.”

“I live life near edges,” Virg chuckled.

“Loads of people helped us get you out,” H’lu said. “Betsy is a good friend of the revs. If she hadn’t persuaded Regal to let her step in to deal with your examination, you would probably be in a new trifecta as we speak. Regal was doing everything he could to re-indict you. Betsy’s also the one who fudged the paperwork that let me be your greeter. Zeke is a friend of the revs as well. He distracted the two guards while Virg and I snuck you the goods. You have more support than you realize.”

“Look, Dwyng. You gotta understand. All of this stuff—you transfixed it,” Virg said, smacking Ellis on the back. “This is *your* baby.”

Ellis looked around for an explanation.

Rey walked over to the bookshelf and grabbed what appeared to be a trading card. “Well, here we go.” He handed it to Ellis.

A white-haired man smiled from the face of the card. On his shoulder sat a silver fox. In the corner of the card, a few words in what Ellis assumed was Aramaic. On the back of the card, a chart of Aramaic statistics.

“Is this a *trading* card?”

The trio nodded at him. Verx sat up.

“Why am I on a trading card?”

Rey grabbed the card and handed it back. Ellis looked down—it was now in English. In the corner of the card, it read:

ALDYWN the GEEZER

+++++

My parents found me in my own vomit, passed out next to a bag of k2. I wanted to calm down and it was the only thing I had around to smoke. So I went for it. Blew the smoke out the window.

I passed out after that stinging ringing in my ear got too loud. Every time I moved a body part, I could feel an intense vibrating heat between the area where my body had been and the area to which it had moved. Take it from me kids:

k2 blows so don't suck it

My dad splashed water on my face because I wasn't responding. I got a bad lashing. They both kept yelling at me and waving the bag, and at one point I said, "I'm going to be valedictorian. So...this cancels out." They didn't like that and long story short I'm grounded for the first time ever.

Something about being grounded feels great. For some reason, I've spent my life telling myself I don't deserve the things I've been given, so being grounded helps negate some of the good things without anyone getting too seriously hurt. Universe keeps things balanced, so if something shitty happens, something good's bound to happen—right? If things are going a little bit *too* great, the universe knocks you down a peg.

You're born a genius, so you spend a few years making yourself epileptic.

You gain your sanity back, have too much fun in Cleveland, pop your cherry, so you kill your friend and overdose on baby drugs.

Sounds about right.

Life is just one big grounding. Someone grounded us so we can relive how great it feels to fly every time we die.

I'm not going to fucking school tomorrow

[edit: 10 May 2009, ~4am]

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When I got back from the hospital, I found this on my computer. Remnants of the fall:

k2, bingo.....

Orange is vomit and orange is chunky fire and orange is Halloween if Halloween is squishy and volcanic and its temperature never stays the same like some Newtonian fluid freakshow. Orange folders are fake. Orange chip-clips are colorless, they use it for praise, for prays, all for vanity and hands. Orange is evil, it's the substance of fraud and of apathy and of amorphousness and of surfaced heterosexuality that starts at the barbeque with semi-relatives who laugh when the subject appears in the form of a tight bikini or a young man's pelts. Oh, sexuality. Oh, gender. Oh, the everlasting story, of Tristan and Isolde. The story, Isolde. The story is olde. The story is

old and over, folks, Volkes, folklore, Laurinitis, night is orange, too, and it boils in the crevices left uncared for when the grinch spends his catalog of half-holidays reaching for nothing but a coal miner's mortician's psychic's spirit's atom's love. And so it was with us.

Orange has no rhymes, and let that be the first thing that's made sense and the last. Making sense is relative, and right now this orange vomit garbage is sense, it's racist but not and has no consequences but does because there's those thespians in the 1st who take pride in grounding the 2nd and 3rds and beyonders with the 1st sense script and its morals because nothing is allowed from the non-danger zone. Don't zone out, or suspicion with find the 1st forces and you'll have padded orange walls, goopy slimy flubber ectoplasms, weighing you down to the 1st's two dimensional cartoon life with a relative rulebook and a nun's ruler lined with gender roles and commandments and expectations and linearity and so many things, things after things after not everything except the things there, there's so much more Volkes, but there are/they're so many things that you can't, the paradox, it catches up like the anti-bender's bites and disallows the door to otherness to creak open on its blue hinges of brevity and inconsequentiality and air. Take it, bud.

Orange marginally rhymes with door hinge and that's another trick.

Trick or treat is two-dimensional, there's so much in between the two choices that waits to be exterminated of its orange.

My other lives revealed themselves, and gender didn't exist. The updos and lipstick and jock straps and 5 o'clock shadows didn't matter and survival wasn't an option at any rate and the v's struggles weren't annoying but worth it and the uprising was explicitly implicit, and the men were the villains but it was okay because they'd get theirs, they would, they wood, yes, ah, they woods would get it sugar, no more wood vs. vs but hs vs. hs until hs was all they THEYTHEY

THEY *WE* wrote. We rot without we. She wrote murder, he wrote the checks and soon enough the checks will cover the bail rates and endowment and the other can't believe that's still around venetian blinders and become a one-thing world where the doors are open and blue, the orange is sucked down the motifical drain and from the spirit photographs for dum-dums, and the dum dum girls would no longer be a lesbian bus tour looking for rights, but the apolitical breath of fresh air for the environmentally thoughtful, sexually fluid and muted, vegan, recyclable orangeless blue.

I am covered, but in no way covered.

[edit: 10 May 2009, ~midnight]

///

///

Nate's not here anymore, man. Compose yourself (—what a fucking motto). That collection of memories, desires, emotions, quirks, beliefs, twitches, highs, lows, and goals that called itself Nate Yates ceases to breathe. There's nothing with the same equation. There's no one with the same timeline—the same timeline that crossed yours and made you you. Yates is somewhere, I know it—has to be. Energy's invincible—Nate is energy—Nate's invincible. He's somewhere, has to be, floating in space, getting reborn into a wealthy family somewhere east of eden, somewhere across the universe, somewhere out of this pocket. Just waiting to snatch a line. He doesn't care I'm here anymore, but I'm not offended. His run's over, and to him, mine is, too. To him, nothing. To him, *nothing*. Where am I to him, where is he to me, where are we? Who's offended? Who's defending us? US, US, US, us, us, us, us, us.

I like the movies where something happens, but you find out it doesn't. I like the

narrators who can tell a story, then change it and it's okay. I like the people who have an inner-monologue that makes certain things possible but doesn't mess with what's really possible.

Wake up from a nightmare and you're fine. Harry, but why on earth should that mean it's not real?

Life flashes before me as a series of gruesome suicide attempts that make me feel better about walking the line. Every day, like a parasite. Throw your ribs onto the bathtub's shoulder; hang yourself with dental floss from the showerhead; do a front flip onto the sink, break your spine; drink the Windex; drink the body wash, the shampoo, the conditioner, eat the soap; break the mirror, cut your throat.

And that's all before I'm out of the bathroom.

Pile bricks above the hatch to the attic, open the hatch, make it rain; try a back flip in the hallway for kicks and giggles, snap your vertebrae; random trust falls down the stairwell; random trust falls on the rickety balcony railing; sodomize yourself with your tripod, rip it out before your intestines know what to do with themselves; dress up as Edward Scissorhands, masturbate; get Jigsaw on speed dial, call his wife a cunt; hide in the rubble on the bonfire out back, wait for someone to light it; gargle the lighter fluid; don't gargle it, just let it drown you; paper cuts for every page in the phonebook, see how far into the alphabet you can get; swallow buttons for hours; skewers into nostrils.

Hang yourself in Africa, jump from every tree / (make snow angels when the nooses break)

Catalyze the oven heat, burnt to three degrees / (mitten, open, find your birthday cake)

Swallow all the Goo-Be-Gone, drain it down with pills / (realize it's not toxic, have to piss for days)

A boaster

Closer, closer still, close your mills

The water's never coming

Dummy

Love me, I gave up love for nothing

I live with nothing and it's lovely

Something else.

...

Coming, Father, the dots were time

I understand now, I get the script

Cryptic

Shit, I don't, I don't, I can't, I lied there

I'll never fit in, I have to be the smart one

It's part one

I'm far gone, I won't make the second

I'm far gone, but look, I made the second?

I reckon

Respecting you, Dad, because I couldn't nail it

Bowing down, Pa, because I couldn't crack it

I'm lacking

Attack me, I want it to be over

Contact me, I need Your guidance

Why this?

Nathan was born on October 13th, 1989, in _____, Ohio, to parents Harry and Emily Yates who, along with his elder brothers, Ryan and Aaron Yates, survive him. Upon graduation from _____ High School, Nathan received a full-ride basketball scholarship to Marietta College in Marietta, Ohio. There, he pursued a Bachelor of Arts in Accounting and a minor in German.

Nathan was an active sportsman. He played varsity football, basketball, baseball, and track in high school, setting school records in the high jump and long jump his senior year. He qualified for track and field state competition his sophomore, junior, and senior years, placing in the top ten in high jump every year. In 2007, as point guard, he led his high school basketball team to an undefeated season.

Nathan was also active at the Church of _____, where he served as a dedicated youth group leader.

Visitation for Nathan will be Tuesday, May 12th (...)

• • •

the viewing / flush.

It's only been two weeks since the viewing and I'm scared how quickly I've adapted to the permanent absence of a friend.

The viewing was fine. Nate's father gave the eulogy. You would have thought God died, not Nate. "I know God will do this and that and God will be there for us (...) and oh yeah I miss my son I guess. Whatevs. Praise Jesus!"

It was open casket, which made me think open basket, which made me think of Nate even more than I was. He looked jaundiced. Sallow. I'm no good at funerals because I don't have feelings besides anger and jealousy.

Tears don't resurrect, but some folks try their hardest.

I'm one of those people who doesn't grieve every time something sad happens. I'm the dexter who holds it all in and goes batshit on a bus in my mid-40s for no reason.

...

I got really avant-garde and anarchistic as soon as I heard Nate died. Immediate acceptance. Writing this right now—well, it's proof, isn't it? Isn't this disrespectful? AM I A FUCKING HUMAN BEING OR A FUCKER PRETENDING TO BE HUMAN

"Hey, Sol. I hate to be the one to break this to you, but...Nate's dead."

"AREN'T WE ALL? LET'S GET SOME ICE CREAM BECAUSE IT'S COLD LIKE MY SOUL HEY THAT'S MY NAME WHAT DID YOU SAY A SECOND AGO?"

I didn't take the time to soak in the fact that my good friend is gone forever. Hell, I just sort of cracked a joke about it, and his viewing was a fucking fortnight ago. Fuck me.

It's like I need to be the saddest, so I don't act sad at all.

...

I wrote a script last night. I got all sweaty and kept typing even though it wasn't going anywhere. I got Jonesy and Pete to help me shoot it today. I took them in Alli around the lake and shot it. Pete played TEENAGER and Jonesy played ANOTHER TEENAGER.

EXT. MIDWESTERN EXPANSES - NIGHT (ISH)

A Wes Anderson-looking TEENAGER stands in intriguing, quasi-dystopian Midwestern landscapes. He looks pensive, determined. Starting, stopping to think, starting, etc.

He runs through a flattened field before night falls.

He grasps a small flagpole that holds a ripping, purple American flag.

He stands in front of a garage that says "FLUSH" in faded purple graffiti.

He sits atop a graffitied half-pipe.

TEENAGER

it's time for something new. that's not too cliched, yet, right?

TEENAGER

but really. it's time for something new. no, it's time for someone to promise something new and deliver. no no no, it's time for everyone to drop the prospect of providing something new, and to just do it already. Nike it up, like yesterday.

TEENAGER

it's time for everything because it's time for nothing. my nihilists hear me loud and clear.

TEENAGER

i wanna get stuff done. i'm not gonna raise money for a chance to talk at you louder. i'm gonna create something that forces you to look. we wouldn't need money if everyone didn't need money. get it? lincoln has left the building.

Several 5-dollar bills, with b-b holes in Lincoln's head.

TEENAGER

some of my friends call me a hippie. they say i'm in over my head, in too deep, a lost cause. they tell me to stop taking artsy shots of myself and to stop making the world look more dystopian than it is. if i cared enough to tell them something back, i'd say 'nice facebook. let me know when you log off and want to live instead of like.'

TEENAGER

socrates is back. i don't know is a good mantra. i'll never know, but i'm gonna keep trying is a better one. i'm gonna keep trying is the best of the three.

TEENAGER

my parents don't know what to think. that's why i love them so much.

TEENAGER

sometimes you see something and you say 'what in the hell did i just see.' there wasn't a point. there wasn't a plot or a message or anything. but for some reason, those tend to be the things that get you riled up the most. and sometimes, those tend to be things you agree with the most. agree with nothingness, insert your own action. go do.

TEENAGER

this isn't a levi's commercial. this isn't hipster bullshit. this is a kid trying to find something worth doing in a world where no one agrees because everyone does. it wasn't made to make sense, folks. and neither were we.

TEENAGER

make cents. get it?

ANOTHER TEENAGER walks up to the teenager and smacks him in the fucking face.

ANOTHER TEENAGER

Shut up.

Teenager stays down.

...

I couldn't even tell you what it means, but I got the biggest kick out of writing it. Jonesy and Pete made fun of it, said it wasn't very funny, etc., but I pushed it. 3 AM, writing it, I believed in it pretty hard. It was my manifesto. It was a game-changer.

...

I'm the only person. This is all me.

/// "Zombie Boy" – The Magnetic Fields // (no link)

///

miracle on 68.

suicide is for pussies, sol, so fuck you (a dream extraPOLEated)

I knew the telephone pole well before, during, after, now. It sits on top of a slight bump in the otherwise flat-as-flat-things-go landscape, five miles from school, ten miles from home—before the country gives up and conforms to the upcoming towns—and stretches the wires up and over the hump—makes it look like the telephone pole tried to rip itself from the ground that trapped it, but only managed forming the abnormal weed-covered crest below it. Yellow’s what I’m thinking about. Golden-brown. The road peels on off to the left of the pole, and whenever I drive by that crest, on the way to and from school, it manages to absorb the sun more than anything around it—serves as a cornfield lighthouse—comfortably golden. Plan a—no need for bs—was to ruin it. To let the pole escape. Nate loosened it, and I’d finish it for him. If a cameraman took footage of the pole against its backdrop, he’d focus on the pole first, staunch and splintered and dry and stuffed with families of rusted nails and staples, and then focus on the background, the endless beans, greens, and the faroff promising-as-promising-things-go trees, and the pole would be nothing but a fuzzy peripheral blur soon to be forgotten. I’d get the speed—88 for time travel—smack that pole, and my body would fly through the windshield to those trees and I’d be...*okay*. I’d be okay again. Poetry till I die!

Till I die.

So I left my house convinced I’d be buried with splinters up my sleeves. I ate my Honey Crisps knowing I’d shit them out postmortem. I didn’t bring my backpack with me, my camp stuff, my *anything* because I *knew*. There’s a big difference between knowing and *knowing* and you can’t know what it’s like to *know* until you’ve been there and you’ve *known*. No more summer symposiums, no more sexual struggles, no more guilt or sissy cons or sissy cons. When I faced the pole, nothing was going to happen once and for all.

Nate’s gravesticker pokes up to the right of the pole, waiting for Randy Travis to sympathize and hum its immortal hymn. The ashy circle around the pole still holds remnants of Nate’s windows. The red paint stains the wood. Of course it was a red Wrangler. Of course it was.

I can't watch *The Happening*, and not just because it blows.

I stuck the key in the ignition and turned it convinced—*convinced*—the rumble of the engine—my last sound—would escort me into oblivion.

Seven minutes to the pole. Six in, I spot the pole mocking me in the distance, yanking at its golden hump. It knew. It said, "I'll make sure to put up a good fight, Sol. I'll make sure it's worth it." I'm heatseeking the pole once I hit 65. The long stretch. Telephone pole, telephone pole, pole, pole, pole, polepolepole, pppooolllee.

Road, the telephone poles whizzing by, sound like fanblades in the next dimension. When you're dreaming and your mom's voice is telling you it's time for school fits the mold and becomes the nurse in your dream reassuring you post-surgery. When you hear the faucet drip drippydrip while you're sleeping, and a faceless man in the corner of your dream won't stop snapping. When your tabby plops on your chest while you nap, and daydream becomes nightmare when you embody Giles Cory and wake up before you dream up the balls to request more weight. You jolt before suffocation, fling the tabby to the hardwood, and get frozen in the 'real' dimension until your next ambien and southern comfort remix that night around eleven thirty seven.

I was contractually obligated by the time I reached 70. Ride the bump, split the wood, break the lights, forget-me-not blues.

...

And then, *something*.

...

Forget-me-not blues ring like school bells in my frontal, then sidejump matrices, embody something real, blink heavy and neon in my rearview.

Sitting in the driver's seat, "I am the master of my fate," said one shoulder—"Those lights are just a pushy assistant to your master," said one shoulder—"I've got no say in this or anything big," said everything else. What the fuck do shoulders know? I knew what was going on, but my eyes refused to break from the zone outhouse, eye the rearview, and accept my nonfatal fate.

A quarter mile from imminent suicide, I got pulled over by a cop for going 74 in a 55, and received a lighthearted warning for not being strapped in. You say, if you're gonna do it, just fucking do it. Don't whine. Don't be a pussy. Be a MAN. God. You don't wanna live? Don't. You wanna die? See ya. Simple, kid. *Simple*. And the thing that stopped me wasn't fear of death or a wishy-washy personality or any of that usual garbage. It was the guilt I knew I'd feel on the other side, whether that side be flat, black, abbreviated, or just plain gorgeous: for forcing someone to watch me die. I couldn't let them feel like they should have been there. I should have done something, I should have known, I should have said this or that, I shouldn't have said that or those, my fault, my doing, my my me moo moooooooooo oFUCK IT I SHOULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING. It was approaching that pole, with the electric American flag brightly buzzing behind me at an impatient 73, that I understood that shouldhavebeens— *they* were the poison. And I refused to be taken down by something as lame as poison—a poison people twenty years ahead would laugh at because the cure is like, omg, so obvious. *What's next, death by sore throat and papercuts?*

L O GODDAMN LOUD

...

And then, more.

...

The policeman spurred his way to my window, knocked, and placed his Polaroid shades on his hat brim like any other stereotypical policeman does. He must have seen my condition, my tears having made reddish teartracks down my cheeks, but he decided not to mention it like most men do, myself included, when they see emotion. I kept my bloodshot eyes locked on PRNDL as I handed him my cards. Eyes glazed as donuts.

“Sir, I clocked you at 74 miles per hour. I'm going to have to give you a ticket,” he said.

“Hey...do I...do I know you from somewhere?”

My eyes snapped from the PRNDL up to the man I'd once met at a barn party.

“Hemingway!” he said.

Officer Stevens smiled at me from the shadow below his hat brim.

Yep.

“Are you okay?”

I laughed.

And I laughed and I laughed.

He laughed at my laughter.

I laughed some more.

“Yeah, I’m...I’m fine. Fantastic, really.”

His teeth were exceptionally white.

“Look,” he smiled. “I’ll let this one slide, Hemingway, but be careful in the future. A kid died right up there two days ago because he was texting. These roads can be dangerous.”

“Nate Yates.”

“What?”

“Nate Yates was the kid’s name. He was my good friend.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

“Don’t be,” I told him. “You didn’t know.”

Silence. He looked down the road and squinted his eyes at the morning sun like he knew he was a character in the last chapter to a novel.

“Why were you going so fast anyway? Late for summer school or something?”

“Something like that. I work at Camp Clinton.”

“How about that...Well, I’ll let you go,” he said. He looked at me intently, and I felt like I got to see his face correctly for the first time. It was virile and curious and young. “Stay the speed limit and put on your seatbelt and this won’t happen again.”

“Ok. I will.” My voice cracked.

“Well...alright.” And he tapped the hood of my car and glided back to what would have been an

ambulance.

“Well...alright.”

“Well...alright.”

“Well...alright.”

It echoed in my head all the way back home, all the way up the driveway and stairs, and all the way to my bed sheets, which I hid under until my mom got home and asked me why school had been calling the house all day. I told her I was sick and she gave me Airborne, which only escalated the utter sense of everythingness numbing me in most ways possible.

I'll never die.

[fin]

I remember the dream—which I'll call *semi-lucid*—fairly well, but not *that* well. In the dream, everything was amorphous and jumpy and not really that sequential—you know, LIKE A DREAM. I was driving my car toward the pole that Nate hit. In my dream brain, I knew I would eventually run into it and my semi-lucid dream brain figured that that would be the dream's end. I thought I had complete control, but this non-existent dream entity called Officer Stevens showed up and spat on my lucidity and kidnapped the dream.

...

Sub-Sol added the details, made it a melodramatic bitchstorm of a quarter-life crisis, flipped the lid, etc.

...

I graduate in a week and the only person more confused than you is me.

///

\\

shaken and stirred.

1.) *A seventeen-year-old ex-epileptic writes a
depressing poem after the death of a friend
and makes it a thematically-ambiguous acrostic
so people can't know everything.*

They're saying I'm depressed
and that I need the meds now.

Meds *now*.

I zoned out in front of him. I thought about his blue skin
stretching till it tears and leaves his flawless human skeleton
encased in dirt and bugs.

I struggle with profundity

And death can't take my selfness.

My selfness.

Depressed, they're saying. Going up for seconds of
yummy pills and applesauce and pity from my parents.

I know it's all a me thing. I know that this is my fault,
not their or her or his—

God.

I—swore I'd never break down again but

Instead, seize the short life I had left,

alleviated,
 mellow,
 not
 damaged and
 effortlessly scorning my self and my self and oh my—
 all of it's come crashing down like I didn't actually get rid of the
 demons the first time.

2. A seventeen-year-old ex-epileptic learns

to laugh and maybe too fast.

the fiddler on the roof is playing. hope he dont fall off.

if he does though pray the lord his landing with be sof

t.

/// "Jesus Christ" – Brand New /// http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aa_1hVJHccU

/////

Ellis adjusted his bra.

Virg glided next to him on the bridge into MC.

“Once more,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Beatrix Briskoff,” Ellis said, in a woman’s voice—alto. “I’m your everyday regular painter and sculptor, soaking in the city, finding inspiration.”

“You certainly are,” Virg said. He smacked Beatrix on the back, which forced her to lunge forward. Two passersby on the bridge gave Virg two dirty looks.

Beatrix—Ellis—licked her lips. The red lipstick and purple jacket façade made Ellis look—for the first time in his current life—charmingly quirky.

“You look *garnishing*, Dwyng,” Virg said. “We shouldn’t induce into trouble, but better safe than apologetic.”

Ellis looked over the side of the bridge. A deep gorge filled with a light pink mist looped around the outskirts of MC. He could hear a slight roar grumbling from below.

“What’s the deal with the pink mist?”

“It’s the Pink Perimeter,” Virg said. “It was installed a few decades ago. If you need to get Home, jump. The pink gently executes you before you hit the ground, and next thing you know—shibloma, you’re Homa.”

“Why not just shoot yourself?”

“Shooting yourself in public is bad manners,” Virg said. “And the breeze is reassuring.”

As he and Virg traversed the remainder of the bridge, Ellis eyed MC’s skyline and thought about what he’d learned about himself and the revolution.

“If you don’t remember by the time we skidaddle this city,” Virg said. “You might as well keep the bra on.”

+++++

It had been a week since he'd seen his own face shining from a dated trading card. The information on the back of the card was printed in a metallic font:

Name: Aldwyn
 Nickname(s): Winnie the Pooh (Wynn timer the PUH), The Silver
 Fox
 Age: 47
 Lives: 87,912 and counting
 Totem: Verx, the Silver Fox

As he flipped the card over, back and forth, back and forth, the three revolutionaries told him everything.

+++++

After nearly fifty years as a Geezer, Aldwyn—Winnie the Pooh to most—brought the system to its knees.

Growing up, Aldwyn was repeatedly reminded of his mortality. Friends, family, strangers—drenched young Aldwyn in sympathy, in respect, pitied and revered him for his impending death. REIGN's doctors—or 'morticians,' as Virg said—ran the tests and it was official: Aldwyn had a countdown.

At an early age, he saw his picture splayed throughout MC. News stories, billboards, books, street art, the ether—all dedicated to the latest, greatest Geezer: Winnie the Pooh. He soaked up the celebrity, still not entirely sure what it all meant. His parents, saddened by their son's mortality, but excited about his new status, handed him to REIGN after his graduation from the fourth floor. REIGN trained him in politics, morality, communications. He was put through what Rey called 'reincarnation boot camp'—a series of lives specifically fashioned to

teach him how to succeed as a public servant. He was given a totem—a spirit animal—to accompany him throughout his purportedly finite life.

Each Geezer received a totem—also mortal—to teach them how to cope with their own mortality. The animals were loyal and gentle—and became legends as well. Stuffed animal versions of Verx the Silver Fox could be seen in the windows of every toy store throughout MC.

With Verx by his side, Aldywn was molded into a leader, a speaker, a legend—a Geezer.

+++++

Ellis adjusted Beatrix’s bra once more. He tongued the staple clipped onto her molar. S/he and Virg had made it to the center of the city on foot.

“So—if the whole point is to prove that Geezers don’t die,” Beatrix said, “didn’t we already prove that—when I got shot on the steps?”

“REIGN kept it lo-fi,” Virg said. He shook his head. “That’s their specialty. The public still conjectures Winnie the Pooh is deep in the beast’s innards. News broke you didn’t remember, so everyone thinks you’re still in the R ward, masticating baby carrots. For the few people on the street who saw you get shot Home—they couldn’t even elucidate that that was you. That’s too fantastical to consider. All things reconsidered, REIGN probably wiped their memory, granted them a free life. The typical, subvertive superpower shtick.”

The chubby buddha and the quirky add-on stopped in the center of a white-brick avenue. Beatrix looked up to see the giant copper behemoth that was REIGN.

“Welcome home, Dwyng.”

+++++

Virg spent the next month and a half giving Beatrix the MC grand tour. Each trip, dedicated to a new building. On average, a trip a week.

At the beginning of every trip, Virg told Beatrix—who was Ellis—who was Aldwyn—to let the scenery ‘reverberate’ in.

“Especially the smells,” Virg said. “Smells quell amnesia. My mother used to say that.”

“In what context did your mother *ever* say that?”

“Just *smell*, Dwyng.”

After smelling REIGN’s outside and remembering nothing on their first day of tours, they tried inside.

The only memories the lobby brought back to Ellis were those he had a month prior, fleeing from the androgynous guards. The giant statue stood above the doors, as he remembered, and the mosaic on the floor remained, too. He peered up at all eight floors, which, he thought, resembled a hotel. He once again became fixated on the oily rainbow static above the archways lining the lobby.

“What is that holographic effect?” he asked Virg.

“What?”

“You know—the oily rainbow static.” He felt silly saying it. “Above the archways.”

“You mean swavel?” Virg said. Ellis stared at him. “Ah! That’s investing! You can’t perceive swavel?”

“*Swah-vuhl?*”

“It’s the eighth color,” Virg said. “It’s the newest color. It was discovered after Virtuality came to town. When virtual and reality did their little dance, swavel entered the vernacular. The

fact that you can't perceive it testifies you haven't remembered. You're too ancient to see swavel—that's *outstanding!*”

“I don't see how that's outstan—”

“Virgil Everett Tanker!”

Before Ellis spouted the source of the greeting, an overweight man had dawdled over to Virg and given him a sturdy handshake. A bulbous neck, overflowing from his button-up.

It was the fat man Ellis hated for fun.

“Tanker, how've you been, you *kook*? How's Info, ya nympho? Ya haven't burned it to the ground yet?”

“Not yet.”

“And who is this beaux?” the fat man said, gesturing to Beatrix.

“I'm Beatrix Briskoff,” Ellis said. “And you are?”

The man began to laugh.

“Now *that's* funny,” the man said. “You always find the feisty ones, Tanker.” The man gripped Virg's shoulder and squeezed.

“Look, I've gotta get going. We're preparing for the big guy's bash. You'll be there, right? We've got a month and a half, but there's still lots to get done. Every news source in Aim is up my ass about logistics—hell, even some Med folks'll be here. It's great running into you. Tell Jude I say hey.”

The man looked once more at Beatrix. He looked back at Virg.

“You *dog*.”

He dawdled through the statue's legs and down the stairs.

Ellis looked at Virg, whose face had faded a few shades.

“If Regal the Reg’s fat face doesn’t stir something in you,” Virg said, “I don’t know what will.”

+++++

Aldwyn’s official inauguration into the Hall—when he turned the standard thirty years old—came with a startling surprise: he was immortal. Immortal, but *fertile*—a condition which, Aldwyn discovered, was a Geezer prerequisite. In exchange for demi-god status, Aldwyn would be expected to provide the regs with his seed, which would be used for science, and ultimately, re-population. The news infuriated and disgusted Aldwyn. His entire life had been rooted in dishonesty, and he immediately threatened to reveal the truth to the public—the people who had supported him his entire life. The other Geezers explained the importance of the secret, attempted to rationalize the decision to stay ‘mortal.’ Some even invited him to their Homes—stunning mansions, to be sure—to show him the material benefits of ‘dying.’ Aldwyn refused to accept the corruption, and REIGN was forced to put Aldwyn through another series of lives suited to convince him otherwise. After months of what Rey called ‘brainwashing,’ Aldwyn emerged from REIGN exhausted, but still determined to reveal the truth.

The Geezers and REIGN—becoming impatient with the problems Aldwyn was creating—resorted to plan B: threaten Aldwyn with pain. The regs insisted they had created a device capable of reactivating the nerves and inducing real pain—something the public hadn’t experienced in hundreds of years: an indescribable concept.

Despite the threats, Dwyng persisted with his initiative: inform the public. He brushed REIGN’s threats off as scare tactics, and set out to spread the message as effectively as possible.

His persistence proved to be misguided.

As promised, REIGN sequestered Dwyng to the eighth floor for several months, where he was made to feel pain. Various injections concocted by REIGN's 'morticians' successfully reactivated his nerves. The idea of pain was foreign to Dwyng—to everyone—so to *feel* it coursing the length of his body was terrifying and—as REIGN hoped—quieting.

Aldwyn spent the next several years bitter, afraid of his co-workers—and afraid of another trip to the eighth floor. The constant prospect of pain forced him to take orders at the Hall and to play his 'mortal' role. He took part in hundreds of hearings, promotions, and press conferences. Over time, his ability to feel pain depleted, but REIGN's ability to throw him back to the eighth floor loomed over his head.

+++++

The second leg of the MC grand tour was spent at the less-elusive Hall of Information—Virg's workplace. Some days, Ellis spent the day at Home with Rey, discussing the plan, hiking the valley, swimming with the trusty octopuses (which, much to Ellis's surprise, *were* real), as Virg and H'lu headed to work. H'lu to REIGN, Virg to Info. The latter was a white plaster building—with four pillars lining its front—that sat directly across the street from REIGN.

"You were here nearly every day," Virg told him. "You would peruse over from the Hall every morning and we'd discuss everything—even when you were on lockdown. You would walk here with your guards and we would breeze shoot while they knuckle cracked."

Beatrix looked up to see multiple stories of glass panels in front of multiple stories of thin books. Reds, oranges, dark greens, navy blues—the books reminded him of his office in Iowa. The lobby reminded him of Grand Central.

The giant echoless lobby smelled like too much cologne. Hundreds of characters walked through the space, picking out books at small, octagonal kiosks. An enormous clock silently clicked on the far wall.

“The books are called Fates,” Virg said. “Each book equates to one life.”

“You’d think this would all be digitalized or mega-digitalized or whatever we’re capable of now.”

“Oh, they are.” Virg pulled a thin orange book from the shelf and opened it. What Ellis expected to be a yellowed title page was a screen covered in complicated Aramaic symbols. He tapped the screen a couple of times. “If you ever want to be a diseased butler responsible for the death of your head of household, this is the Fate for you.” He closed the book.

Virg walked Beatrix over to the information center, where an elderly woman stood and read through a navy blue life.

“Hey, Judith.”

“Oh dear, you *scared* me, Virg.” Judith looked Beatrix up and down, and smiled.

“Beatrix, I presume?” she said, knowingly.

Beatrix leaned toward the woman who had pinched his cheek and told him to run.

“How—how did you get away?” Beatrix asked her.

“I didn’t *have* to get away,” she said. “I did nothing wrong.”

“They didn’t nab you for conspiracy?”

Something about Judith—aside from her being his Guide—seemed familiar. Beatrix’s pierced ears tingled.

“Little ol’ me? Heavens, no. I’m just a little old lady who bit off more than she could chew.”

She winked.

“Regal says hello,” Virg told Judith.

She took off her reading glasses—connected around the back of her head by a series of turquoise beads—and rolled her eyes. “That man is an imbecile.”

“An unequivocal imbecile,” Virg said. “Regal used to waltz into Info even more than *you*,” Virg told Beatrix. “Always canoodling with us about the state of things.”

“He’s your best friend until he’s not,” Judith said.

“Well, thank you for helping me escape,” Beatrix told Judith. “I understand that was a huge risk.”

“Just promise me something, sugar.” Beatrix nodded. Judith put her hand around Beatrix’s nape, pulled her head down, and kissed her on the mouth. “Promise that you’ll come back for me.” Beatrix’s cheeks turned red, and she looked to Virg. She looked back to Judith, whose glasses now balanced on the tip of her nose.

Beatrix promised.

“OK,” Virg said. “We’re headed to the stacks. We’ll keep you posted, Judith.”

Judith winked once more at Beatrix and resumed tapping the screen of the navy blue life.

“What was *that* about?” Beatrix asked Virg on the way to the stacks.

“Let’s just say—you and Judith had a fling or two.”

“Me and *her*?”

“And apparently the flings were so inspirational, she caught sight of your mortality and never went back.”

“I thought sex was a thing of the past.”

“Sure,” Virg laughed. “But you’re the Silver *Fox*.”

Ellis tried to stomach what he'd just heard as they walked under an archway labeled "STACKS: AA."

"Every livable life—every whimper, laugh, prototype, thought—is stationed in these walls," Virg said. "The stacks expunge for miles underground. They run parallel to the gardens. When you used to visit, we would find a desolate corner of the underground stacks and talk upcomings. Until the guards proposed, that is."

Virg blew dust off of a nearby, rust orange Fate.

"If every life is being documented," Beatrix said, grasping a thin, pine green edition, "then wouldn't they know what we're saying and doing right now?"

Virg's eyes widened.

"Kryste!" he yelled. "How didn't we *think* of that? We're *doomed!*"

He smacked Beatrix on the back of the head.

"We're not *idiots*, Dwyng," he laughed. "The stacks confound at a fifty-year deficit. They won't know what we're portraying for another fifty years or so."

Beatrix held the back of her head. "You just smacked a woman."

"No, I smacked what *looks* like a woman," he said. "Just keep smelling."

+++++

Aldwyn's hair prematurely grayed—not naturally, but in accordance with his contract—and he became known as "The Silver Fox." He and Verx became the public's favorite Geezer-Totem pair, which deepened Aldwyn's hatred for the system in which he found himself tangled. He spent his 'mortal' years brooding, trying to assemble some sort of uprising, revolution, public revelation—without being found out by the authorities.

While feigning moral defeat, Aldwyn spent his scarce free time working on a manifesto entitled *Ab Uno Disce Omnes* (AUDO).

By forty (Aldwyn was obligated to appear older every year), Aldwyn had convinced a majority of the Geezers that he was no longer a threat, though reservations amongst the group persisted. At forty-five, he became the executive assistant to the Head Geezer. Boss and Aldwyn were seen together throughout MC—debating, fervently discussing policy, eating lunch in Blaine Park. Aldwyn entertained Boss’s friendship while inwardly despising the man soon to lose his voice.

In the year leading up to Boss’s assassination, Aldwyn had finished *AUDO* and managed to anonymously disseminate it to a small, loyal group of revolutionaries, including Rey, H’lu and Virg Tanker—a man Aldwyn befriended after his numerous trips to the Hall of Information. The manifesto made its way through underground circles of skeptics. Anti-establishment pamphlets were scattered throughout the streets and posters were hung throughout the city, reading:

REIGN REIGN GO AWAY!

THE HALL OF LIES NEVER DIES

READY, AIM? FIRE!

and

WHERE THERE’S TRUTH, THERE’S PROOF!

The sudden outburst of citywide skepticism concerned the regs and created a vague rift between the public and the authorities. The regs turned to Aldwyn for answers. They had never experienced rebellion. The only explanation was an internal leak.

They had no proof to support their suspicions—all of Aldwyn’s documents were anonymous, hidden at Home, gone—but many—particularly Sidd Regal, the Executive Vice President of REIGN—were certain of his infidelities. Aldwyn was put under intense scrutiny for

the next several months, though REIGN did not have enough evidence to indict him. Regardless, he was forced to stay in MC—and refused the right to go Home. Regs replaced his shadow.

On the day of Boss’s failed assassination, Aldwyn was in the Hall—being closely monitored, as per usual. He heard two solemn gunshots echo from the edge of Blaine Park, as planned. His guards, distracted by the commotion, failed to keep Aldwyn from successfully fleeing MC. The Silver Fox was free.

+++++

The gardens next to Info were filled with carnations. Their third trip to the city possessed the most potential for smelling, by far.

“Sniff it up,” Virg said. “Smells quell amnesia.”

“Your mother never said that.”

The sides of Virg’s mouth pushed his cheeks to his eyes.

“You’re almost there, bud. You’re almost back. I can sequester it.”

+++++

During their fourth trip to MC, a woman with long, frizzy brown hair approached the duo, clasping a pamphlet.

“Excuse me,” she said, “which way is the Museum?”

“That way,” Virg told her, pointing east. “It’s after Info. You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you, Sir,” she said. “While I have you, do you have a moment to discuss patience?”

“I literally have nothing *but* moments,” he said. “But we have to be somewhere.”

“Interesting. Does one really *need* to be anywhere?” she said. “As I see it, there is no

destination. Only journey, my friend. Only journey. As reincarnation teaches us—there is no one single path.”

Ellis looked at the patches lining the woman’s denim dress.

“I represent the Patience Alliance,” she said, unfolding her pamphlet. “We promote patience in all aspects of life. With time comes revelation, and with revelation comes more time.”

Virg rolled his eyes.

“In a never-ending world,” she continued, “the only thing to which we can cling is the present. There is no past. There is no future. There is only *this* moment, *just now*.”

“I’m sorry,” Virg said. “I can’t remember what you just said. You said it in the past, and, as you said, that doesn’t exist.”

The woman didn’t seem to hear him. Ellis thought she might be on future drugs.

“Patience, acceptance of one’s current situation,” she said. “These things allow one to purify one’s sense of self and truly experience nirvana. Patience—”

“Look, lady,” Virg said. “You’re testing *my* patience. Please take your pamphlet elsewhere.”

“Didn’t you say you were looking for the Museum?” Ellis said. He was feeling confident. “You do realize what a museum is? A exhibition of *past* events. Why would someone who doesn’t believe in the past want to go to a building dedicated to it?”

She folded her pamphlet up, and looked at the duo.

“Life is beautiful,” she said. “And beauty is life. I hope you take the time today to breathe and to appreciate that fact. Have a good day.”

“You as well,” Virg said.

The woman skittered away. They saw her approach another group of people across the street.

“Was she drunk?”

“She was tame,” Virg said. “She’s REIGN’s posterchild. They get the people invested in vague concepts—concepts so painfully simple, they must be profound.”

The duo continued down REIGN’s western wall. A series of elderly faces, stuck to the surface. One poster showed an elderly black man with thick rim glasses and brown suspenders, smiling into the distance. A bindi shone between his eyes. Across his chest, in a bright, golden shadow font: “TUBZ.”

“For a manipulative fraud,” Ellis said, “this guy seems pretty approachable.”

“That’s called propaganda,” Virg said. “Under that bindi is a mind content with lying to thousands of people and sending his good friend to jail for fifteen years.”

+++++

Aldwyn spent three years—The Three Years Silence—eluding the authorities, evading punishment, and devising a concrete plan to defeat REIGN, who, as Rey recited from *AUDO*, “had devised a curriculum suited to quell the organic, and thus, the necessary” and “promoted blind enlightenment in order to inhibit natural uprisings.” In his absence, the Geezers, under the influence of REIGN’s hand, voted to impeach Aldwyn—making him the first person ever to be impeached from the PUH. In order to quell the masses, to explain Aldwyn’s disappearance—the Geezers claimed that Aldwyn, as successor to the Geezer throne, left the city—and perhaps even Aim—for fear of being assassinated. His fear was found worthy of impeachment, and that was the end of The Silver Fox’s reign with REIGN.

After the Three Years Silence—during which time he managed the revolution—Aldwyn

organized The Revolution’s Elocution: an unofficial announcement staged at the center of MC, attended by revolutionaries throughout Aim—and even Med—that formally acknowledged the Revolution’s mission statement. After confessing his role as sole creator of *AUDO* and advocate of mandatory mortality procedures for Geezers, he was reprimanded by the regs and thrown to the eighth floor of REIGN, where he was forced to live a series of trifectas suited to ‘help’ him. A team of regs, led by Sidd Regal, successfully confiscated footage from the Elocution and kept non-rev skepticism at a healthy minimum. Aldwyn was indicted for assisting with Boss’s assassination attempt, deemed “delusional” by REIGN and sentenced to fifteen years to life. Due to the help of various revolutionaries within the system, Sidd Regal was unsuccessful at extending Aldwyn’s fifteen-year sentence—despite his seemingly unquenchable desire to see Aldwyn suffer.

The revolution had lost its forerunner, but as Hank the Scottish preteen once blurted, Aldwyn had successfully “split the entire sarking poli-scene in half.” For fifteen years, the public lived in hushed uncertainties. The revolutionaries’ two strongest leaders had been imprisoned for unclear reasons.

Aldwyn’s final trifecta—at the close of his required fifteen-year sentence—ended with Ellis August Qualm, a man who knew when to give up.

+++++

“Here she is,” Virg said. “*The Hall.*”

Their fifth and final trip, an overcast day. The duo missed a couple of weeks due to Virg’s work schedule.

The retirement ceremony was only one week away.

The Hall was beige and unimpressive. Its steps, which stretched the length of the block, were littered with people. Two women sat together, eating green grapes and gossiping. A man down the way played a ukulele, sang a song that Ellis didn't recognize. His brown hat slumped at his feet, collecting change. A teenage boy in polka dot pants amused his friends on the lowest step by turning into an elderly man and back again, elderly woman, back again.

A tall statue of a woman stood outside The Hall's front doors. She held out her arm and pointed north, into Blaine Park. Ellis assumed she and the man sitting in REIGN were an item.

"You convulsed here for years and years," Virg said. "Your inauguration was right there—at the peak of those steps. This place made you who you are." Virg looked at Beatrix, intently. "Anything?"

"Nothing," she said.

They turned around. Across the white-brick avenue: the Hall's permanent neighbor, Blaine Park. Parallel lines of white-leaved trees extended for miles. Virg and Beatrix headed toward the edge of the bright forest, stopping in front of a steel marker between two rows of trees. Aramaic words.

"It's about Boss's defunct assassination," Virg said, touching the marker. "This is where Rey shot him. He was on his way back from Info, and—*bang, bang*—revoked."

In front of the marker sat a glass box atop a small vertical pole. One blood-drenched white leaf, suspended within the box.

Ellis looked down to see a thin metallic line engrained in the white-bricks at his feet. The line headed straight for REIGN.

Virg saw Beatrix studying the ground.

“That’s where Boss bled out,” he told her. “His guards upholstered him to REIGN after he’d been behooved, and his blood dripped all the way. They installed the Blaine-REIGN line to mummify the day.”

“For a futuristic world, we don’t have very impressive weaponry,” Beatrix said. “Everyone uses guns and crossbows.”

“Weaponry needs stood still when war became obsolete,” Virg said. “Guns were the plateau.”

“But if it’s been thousands of years since you’ve needed guns,” Beatrix said, “then why do people still use them?”

“If you approached anyone on these steps,” Virg said, pointing to The Hall, “they wouldn’t have a weapon and they wouldn’t want one. You’ve just been exposed to a handful of revolutionaries who find that a shot to the throat gets more done than a shake to the hand. Otherwise, Aim is offenseless.”

Ellis blinked.

“But if you walked up to anyone in this city,” Virg continued, “you—well, *Dwyng*—would probably want to shoot them. Remember Ms. Patience? They’ve been reincarnated into a happy-go-lucky stupor.”

“Why not let them be happy?” Beatrix said. She looked back to the polka dot teen shape-shifting for his friends. They couldn’t stop laughing. Elderly woman, back again.

“Being happy is tremendous,” Virg said. “Being made to *think* you’re happy isn’t.”

“How do you know they’re not authentically happy?”

“They *are* authentically happy,” Virg said. “Because they don’t realize they shouldn’t be.”

“Why make them sad?” Beatrix the Devil’s Advocate smacked her red lips together.

“Because the truth is sad.”

“What’s the truth?”

Virg thought.

“The regs have tricked us into living in the past and present,” Virg said, “so they can control the future.

“You have the regs.” He pointed to the Hall. “And you have the revs.” He pointed to himself. “Everyone else is just a pawn.” He pointed to the steps of the Hall, where the man with the hat for change held his high note. He bowed.

“And *again!*”

Beatrix whirled around to see Sidd Regal dawdling down the Hall’s steps toward Blaine. A chill ran down Beatrix’s—Ellis’s—spine. A blast of pain—which he hadn’t felt since Home—chased the chill down his left side.

Regal walked through the group of shape-shifters, who, it appeared to Ellis, began to wave at him. He paid them no attention.

“What are the *odds?*” he yelled from the street. “Don’t see you in years, then twice within what? *A month?*”

He smacked Virg on the shoulder once more.

“Beatrice?” he said, looking at Ellis.

“*Beatrix.*”

“Apologies,” he said. “*Be* there a bag of *trix* up your sleeve? That’s how I’ll remember that.”

Beatrix fake-smiled. Regal laughed to himself.

“I just got done talking to the big man,” Regal said, pointing to the Hall.

“Oh, did they install new mirrors in there?” Virg joked.

“Oh, you *dog*,” Regal laughed. His final laugh, a wheeze. “Don’t spend too much time with this dunce, Beatrix—he’s no good.”

Beatrix was all fake-smiles.

“I’m a sucker for coincidence,” Sidd said. “If I didn’t know any better, I would say our meeting were...*Fate*.”

He laughed himself into a coughing fit.

“I’ll tell you what. If I don’t see you again,” Sidd said, “we should get a picture. I got a blank spot right above my desk that’s begging for a picture of us together.”

Ellis thought about what Judith said about Sidd Regal: your best friend until he’s not.

“Whataya say, Tanker? Beatrix, would you be a doll and snap a picture of us in front of the Hall?”

“Sure thing,” she said. And as Regal placed a hand around Virg’s shoulder and smiled, Ellis realized he had no idea how to take a picture in the future.

“I—uh—I’m afraid I forgot my camera.”

Regal choked on his own laughter.

“Now *that’s* golden. Go ahead now.”

Beatrix looked to Virg for help. Regal’s heavy arm weighed his left side down.

“What would you expect from a painter?” Virg laughed.

“Painter?”

“Beatrix here is a painter and a sculptor.”

“How about that,” Regal said. “Well I’m afraid we don’t have time for a portrait sweetheart. Just take the damn picture, and send me the statue later.”

Fake-laugh.

She started to tap her pockets, doing anything to find something capable of taking a picture.

“The joke’s over, honey.” Sidd had lost his smile. “You—”

“I’m afraid photography is below Ms. Briskoff,” Virg whispered to Regal. “She’s the premiere painter this side of the Perimeter. Brushes only. Here—”

Virg lifted his right hand in front of himself and Regal, faced the palm toward their faces, and waved three times.

“There. I got three beauts.”

Virg shook Regal’s hand.

“Sure did.”

Regal looked to Beatrix, who had reduced herself to digging in her purse for nothing.

“Why didn’t I think of it before?” Regal said. “Why don’t you stop by the retirement venue and say hello to some of the aces?”

“I don’t know. Where—”

“Azna’s Point. I *insist*,” Regal insisted. “Hell, you can bring an easel if you like Ms. Bristol.”

“*Briskoff*,” she corrected him.

“Apologies,” he said. “Last names are *below* me.”

He wheezed himself into Blaine. “I better see you there, Tanker,” he said, and continued into the trees.

Beatrix took a deep breath—relieved she had survived a second scuffle with Sidd Regal, albeit narrowly. She looked up at Virg, who was waving at her with both of his hands.

“For future reference,” he said, smacking his fingers into his palms, “*this* is how to take a picture. Transfer them by shaking hands.”

“That should come in handy.”

“Good one.”

She looked up at him. “I think Regal was pretending to be a guy named Godfrey when I was in the R ward,” she told Virg. The realization was abrupt. “He had the same wheeze, and I swear I saw him press his fingers together once, but I didn’t realize—”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Virg said. “He was doing everything he could to extend your sentence. He was probably hoping to get at your deepest dankest secrets when you were most vulnerable.”

“The guy seems insane—”

“He’s obsessed with bringing you down,” Virg said. “More than anyone else in the world.”

“You know what?” Suddenly, his voice rang down the line of trees. Regal was walking back toward the duo. “Why don’t you just come with me now? I’ll give you the grand tour and you can get out of MC before the city’s overflowing with early Bossies.”

“The retirement isn’t for a week,” Virg tried to reason.

“I *insist*.”

Ellis squirmed beneath Beatrix’s skin.

+++++

eyes white shut.

I'm beating around the bush—the same bush that spoke to Moses, the same bush that befriended the bin Ladens' afghan wallets & ignored the memos, the same bush that itches my lower belly every few bi-months & reminds me it's either shave or convince the locker room fellas I'm quasi-Iranian, the same bush that's Nate's death & my part in it.

Monster and pills like bumper cars in the lower intestine make a content writer of Brood.

Nate left the Fridaynightparty very early Saturday morning, happily dry. 9 May 2009.

D.A.R.E. t-shirt, five o'clock shadow, ray-bans.

A 21st Century Aryan prince.

I didn't see him until Africa, which traditionally happens later in the nights when it's cooler and the blakes and greeks come out to awe. Denzel and the Washingtons played "Heaven Is A Place On Earth," and I remember zoning out, which—how about *this*—is all I've done since that night—blurred tunnel eyes on the hayloft and Christmas lights, and thinking *this song means more to me than it's worth, ain't no one like me like this like whoa*. Protocol morethanthis-Sol-thoughts at the barn.

Don't call me Brood for nothing.

In preparation for the beginning of the summer parties, and in celebration of this year's graduates, someone's elder-someone took the trip to Indiana to bring back Yuengling's for the mystery gang, and we drank like kings and queens. What were diesel chugs with Naty were now cosmopolitan sips of opulence with Yueng's. Shit's fancy. Too classy for pong and boom, too remarkable for shot gunning. To add to that, Pete scoured department stores and brought one hundred some nitrus whippets to float on (I told the same Devo joke several times). Filling a balloon with three at a time will get you home, and I did that twice—once on the mattresses,

once in the hayloft. The inhale on the mattresses was better because constellations get to me. Find my soft spot's soft spot and milk it for all it's worth. My contribution was novelty contact lenses that gave us Marilyn Manson eyes. I gave a pair to Jonesy, to Pete (my compensation for the whippets), and to the Washingtons. We freaked people out. Happy thoughts found me in the form of knowing everyone would be talking about the guys with eyes the next morning when they vaguely remembered the barn smell, the eagle beer, and the new-englandy This Is Ivy League soundtrack.

After schlepping around the party, freaking a random murder of thick country girls out with my eyes, sniffing and swirling my Yueng's, and nitrusing with Pete in the hayloft, the two of us headed to Africa. Nate hadn't shown yet because he was commuting from some out-of-town party his Marietta roommates were throwing. On the trek to Africa, Pete and I spot a group of freshman/soon-to-be sophomores lying on their backs in the middle of the field, stretched out on six Sertas, stargazing, smoking legal lemon potpourri, and friendlily debating.

"No, man. Doesn't matter if Obama's president because he's black or not—the guy's better than Bush."

"Obama's not a guy, man. He's an image of a guy we wish existed but doesn't. So we settled for the...the fucking *image*."

"He's the closest thing we've got."

"That's scary to think about."

"Politics fucking blow, man," and the kid exhales. "Washington hasn't got anything going for it. It's all greedy assholes and republican dumbfucks."

"We're liberals now because we don't have responsibilities. We can drink and smoke and do whatever because we're kids, but once we're older and have kids and have finances, we'll be

conservatives. No doubt. That's what being a parent does to you. When you don't have to pay for stuff, you...fucking don't have to pay for stuff, you know?"

"That's why the only liberals are celebrities, well-off, faggots, or us."

...

"I don't want to fucking ever grow up."

"Me, either."

I stood there listening to the freshies for a few minutes, smiling. The weight of the Yuengling's in my pocket. Pete and I crashed on two vacant mattresses and I say,

"Join the club."

The freshies lean up and see us—me with my arms behind my head, searching for Orion's belt—and one of them says, "Hey, it's Sol and Pete!" Speaking to freshies is the Sin of Sins at school—you talk to a freshman, you're worse than one—so I wasn't used to the interface, and they weren't used to being acknowledged. But hey, public school, we all recognized each other. They knew our names, not vice versa, but I could tell you who played what sport and where I'd see them in the hall between classes. Pete and I and Jonesy and Doc and all of us guys are royalty in school and especially at the barn parties, so these astrologer freshies were starstruck¹³⁷ when we, these two A-list seniors, pulled up a mattress and struck up a conversation.

"So, not a fan of politics?" Pete says.

"No way." "God, they suck." "They're the worst."

"That's what I like to hear."

"Bipartisanship is to progress as dildos are to impregnation," I blurt. "Nothing gets accomplished even if you're trying your hardest."

¹³⁷ Unintentional, believe it or not.

I have to be funny.

“Fuck you, Sol,” Pete says.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

...

Every senior has two worlds. He lives in a world where older people rule, where upperclassmen are the cool guys, where wisdom shines from experience and weatherdom. And then he has a world where he *is* the older person, and he gets inspiration from the younger, fresher guys who haven’t given up (as much) (on everything). He has a seven-year reach, one foot in the past, one in the future. Sometimes he grovels with the older guys so they’ll think he’s cool and he can be a part of something already established. Sometimes he’ll act like someone else so he can impress the younger guys and show them he’s worthy of their attempts, and that he might have a leg in with the even older guys. And sometimes, when cancer is clicking its claws above a field dotted with mattresses and the smell of chunky faux weed is sinking into your flannel, he stops giving a fuck about years or being cool or politics and treats the present like it is one.

After talking to the cosmos for a while, I stood up with Pete and we continued to Africa, where I melodramatically called him Brigham—“Whenceforth, Brigham! Discovery awaits!” Before that, though, I stood behind the Sertas and asserted to the freshies: “You guys’ve got it made.” Couldn’t tell you what I meant when I said it, or why the dippers convinced me it was as world shatteringly poignant as it was, but I said it and I like to think, three years from now, at their graduations, those freshies will find the new freshies faking horrorscopes halfway to Africa and tell them the same thing.

We lyed in the twiny net that leads up to the treehouse and shot the bull like two proto-

Caulfields. Religion came up, as per usual, but I stamped it out and changed the subject to Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon. You can't beat Pete at SDoKB. Give him anyone: fucking...the voice of Patty Mayonnaise, and he'll get you there in *four* steps. The Washingtons, accompanied by a bong, joined us halfway through Patricia Heaton and we headed into the treehouse for Ouija and...the bong. Washington 1 asked Ouija who would die first—he or Washington 2—and the invisible goodies said “NO.” We stopped playing, turned on the tree stereo to Thrice and massacred the bulls.

We quite, yes, quite seriously discussed installing a Culkin zipline outside the treehouse as our going away gift to the barn party posterity.

Two hits later, we discussed time travel. I recall saying “man” and “whoa” a lot.

Somehow *The Blair Witch Project* came up, and I said, “Annoying bickery assholes should have climbed a tree.” We proceeded to call movies by their opposites in Cockney accents.

“Yeah, yeah. You ever erda *Titanic*? Yeah, in Liverpool, we call vat *A Delightful Boating Experience*.”

“Oh, yeah? You...you ever erda *10 Things I Yate About You*? Yeah, well, we call vat *No Things We Love About Me*. And we call *12 Angry Men*...we call vat one *Hundreds of Content Women*.”

“We call *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*...we call it *Mrs. Johnson Stays at Home*.”

“I love vat stationary! Almost as much as I love *South by Southwest* and *Thursday Morning Cold*.”

“John Travolta’s great in vat one! But I prefer’im in *Pulp-Free Non-Fiction*.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“Crumpets.”

“Cheerio.”

“Michael Caine.”

“Arry Potta.”

“Yeeeeeeeah.”

The bong bubbled itself to sterility. Nate showed up soon thereafter, sober.

I said, “Oh, look who decided to shooooow” like a smartass Carol Channing (AKA Carol Channing, AM I RIGHT?). He said he couldn’t stay for long because of some thing about something. He just kind of sat Indian style and soberly cackled at our highness. We’re good entertainment up there and we know it. For him, we went out of our way to think crazy thoughts. The Washingtons and Pete nitruled. And then he was gone. He said, “Well, I’ll see you guys soon. I need to be heading out.” We said, “Ok, see you Nate,” “See ya,” “Peace Yates,” and that was it. Nate Yates was down the net, past the Sertas, back through the barn, and on his way home. The four of us slaughtered the remaining bull population for twenty some minutes, and at some point I texted Nate.

These were the texts:

“Wish you could have stayed longer bud.”

“Haha me too man. But ive got stuff to do tomorrow. Lol”

“Like what? SCrewing all teh bitches and getting all teh moniez?”

“Nailed it lol.”

So I said

“LOL.”

...

And then the ethereal Beauty arrived and I forgot about him because I didn't know what I know now about what was going to happen. If I'd known, I would have called him and ordered him to pull over. I would have supermanned to the car and sliced the back of his knees so he couldn't get away (wholly unnecessary, but effective). I would have thrown my phone out the window, taken back my V, and saved both of our lives.

Jesper

Jesper

Jesper

Jesper Jesper Jesper Jesper Jesper

Jesper climbed into the treehouse alone, wearing a Bon Iver tee and sporting two thin purple hair feathers. The Washingtons and Pete were at the end of their nitrus high, crouching up to go back to the barn to see if any Yueng's survived the night.

I hadn't seen Jesper since the first/last time I saw her, in Africa, and fell in love with her Energy. For all I knew, she was a hallucination, a specter, a ghost of things I wish existed that anonymous night...that is, until she hobbled into the treehouse and changed that. Until she pushed her hair over her head and said *Trust me, I'm tangible*. The guys are gone and she says what every guy wishes a girl would just come out and say: "Wanna bang?" She did. Verbatim. I didn't know what to say back. You know you've met your soul mate when, years after departing, you can run into each other and know. You know everything. You know what's going on between the two, what's happening during the hiatus, what's this and that and why that's this and what needs to happen next. And what happened next was bang. While I sat there, figuring out if she was a persistent hallucination or my dream girl, she had rolled the twine net up into the treehouse.

We made out until I gained the knowhow to put my hand up her shirt. Five minutes before she got me unzipped and official. I got it in in a fleshy stoned blur. The sex was *Fight Clubby*—wispy and contorted, fluid and sweaty, glimpses of Helena Bonham Carter every so often. I stayed on top the whole time. I told her how much I loved her and how I'd give her beautiful dark-Irish babies one day and how perfect everything about her was and during a particularly hard ram, I gritted to her: "Come.on.skinny.love." I felt like anything I said mattered a lot more than the things I throw out of my mouth every day. I kept rewinding what I was doing in my head, and changing what I said to see which one was best, like Dorian: "How's this. for a funny. bone"; "Nailing it!"; "Knock. on. wood." I kept looking down to make sure she was still there. My heartbeat quickened every time I saw she existed, like a good realization in a nightmare. I came sooner than later and stayed for a long time. I rolled off of her and lied there. Side by side, naked and high. Before I passed out, I whispered as seductively as a lanky white boy can whisper, "Let's go to the Balkans."

There's a poster of the Balkans in the treehouse, and it inspired me, I guess.

I was asleep a little less than thirty minutes when Jonesy woke me up, startled—me *and* him—and asked me why I was naked. Jesper was gone. He waved away the nudity thing and told me something was up, someone was hurt.

I got word at 4:13 AM that it was Nate.

The night I lost my virginity, probably synchronized it with the big pop itself, one of my best friends wrecked his red Wrangler into a telephone pole and died on impact. He was texting and driving. He was texting me. His name was Nate Yates and I loved him.

The more you know.

The more you know, the *more*, you know?

/// “Dead and Gone” – TI feat. Justin Timberlake /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN2TRn2YTvY>

(I sang this song with Nate once at a barn party in April. He’d come from Marietta for the weekend. We were drunk and didn’t know the words.

“I TURN MY HEAD TO THE EAST I DON’T SEE ANYBODY BY MY SIDE / I TURN MY HEAD TO THE WEST STILL NOBODY INSIDE / SO I TURN MY HEAD TO THE NORTH SWALLOW THAT GUILT THAT THEY CALL PRIDE? / THAT OLD ME’S DEAD AND GONE BUT salifhdfkaisdffsa ALRIGHT?”

I didn’t know real life had foreshadowing.)

\\

luv all, first serve.

It’s all a going out of my way and I’m not good with going out of my way because I like everything to go my way, hey, this sentence is now two verses, curses, life is all a versus, hark! the hearses!

I didn’t rehearse this

You don’t deserve this

Here’s better service:

I’m talking love. You’ve got Disney princesses, every story ever written, every movie

ever made, every Beatles song ever produced, and it's all about love—what's love got to do with it? Fucking everything, Tina. Fucking *everything*—and how you're not normal if you don't have it and often. Find yourself a girl, guy, lay, make, raise, die, badda bing badda banality. Man gets woman, they make babies, babies become newer men and women, they find their opposites somewhere, rinse, repeat.

I'm the guy who got shampoo in his eyes early on and now despises the whole game.

Dear future folk, we here in 2009 grew up in a world where couples are *THE THING*. Gay, straight, other: get a significant other or forward your vitae to Barnum's. (Side-note: As things are, gays, much like an improperly written algebra question, don't have their equality, but, regardless, they're just as anal about relationships. We here in '09 all know they'll get their rights eventually, just like black people did, sort of, but we're making a big deal about it now so it reads as good history. We've all Googled homosexuals, and we all know the Greeks were pederasts. City-state motto: Erastes, eromenos, let's take off our togas and get greeky. For some reason there was a two thousand year hiatus in which the church subdued the dikes and faggots [it's what thoughtless people called lesbians and gay men in our day], and it's only within the past thirty years or so that they've surfaced again as the butch twinkles we all know and love them as. Still, it won't be a while until the straight-laced "straights" ease back into an openly fluid state of sexuality. Give it fifty years or so, maybe from where you're reading, and everyone will be screwing everyone will be screwing everyone and no one will be a faggot for doing it.)

You can't watch thirty minutes of television without a mention, shot, scene of a kiss, look, hump, sexual innuendo. Money is the root of all evil, but fuck is the water that waters it. Sex sells because we're convinced we're nothing but a million-year coagulation of evolutionary

sex cells. Gametes.¹³⁸ Sex feels good, sure; that one time I had it, I really had myself a little blasty blast. In, out, in, out, on, under, skin, skin, skin, skin, smack, slap, bite, lick, hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on, there, oh, there, yep, there it is, buzz, buzbuzz, buzzz.

...

True story, I've been depressed, dark, and damn near dead, dear dailiers, and, don't you know, I've had four sex dreams in two days. You know how a bunch of shit happens in one dream—like you have several snippets in one large what-the-fuck sleepscapade? I had that and every snippet was sexual. EVERY FUCKING SNIPPET WAS A *FUCKING* SNIPPET.

I've never had a sex dream before. I've never had a wet dream. Not that I can recall, that is. Maybe the security guards in the dream world have footage of me screwing/getting screwed by someone, but I don't remember a thing.

But I just made up for it. Pulled a Clinton, made the deficit a surplus.

The first night, I relived the night in the treehouse with Jesper, except this time, I put on a condom. And so did she. Dreams, am I right? Cut to: Glen Miller, the popular big band man himself, yes, Glen goddamn fucking Miller, with slicked back black hair, no glasses, a sweaty brow, and his baton, nailing Jesper from behind while his orchestra played in front of us and crescendoed to his climax.

Second night: Glen and I took turns with Jesper. We were both very generous, didn't rush one another. "I've Got a Girl from Kalamazoo" switched to Chiodos over and over, and with every switch, my and Glen's libidos shot through the roof. That's right: I could feel Glen's libido. We were the same person, but not. Cut to: Glen Miller and Nate, in Nate's jeep. Then there they were, in the treehouse. Then there they were, shirts off, grabbing things, and frenching like toast. I'm viewing this from the backseat. Suddenly, a deafening crash, we're thrown against

¹³⁸ Why are gametes so popular? Sex cells.

the windshield, arbitrary screaming—and I'm awake.

Apparently, I'm sexually frustrated. Who knew? Thing is, it's only when I'm dreaming. I wake up, and—I'm nothing. *Nothing*. My sex drive, if it exists at all, awakens when I don't. I don't/can't look at someone and say to myself, 'I'MMA LAY THEM' and feel good about it. I look at people and think, 'I'MMA CHANGE THEIR MIND ABOUT THINGS,' 'I'MMA CHANGE THE WORLD, WHICH THEY'RE A PART OF,' 'I'MMA MAKE THEM WISH THEY WERE LAYING ME BECAUSE I'MMA MAKE SUH-*HO* MUCH NOISE.'

Dear future folk, I believe everyone should fuck everyone and that that should be kewl. But if you don't wanna fuck at all, that's cool, too.

For now,

You can have your thoughtless, stupid fucking breeder mindset, and I'll have my Teslian progressivism.

For now,

I'll pretend I have one life, and won't pretend that my great-great-greats mean anything to me.

For now,

Fuck everyone—but don't—I'm asexual. Not a sexual. *Ahsexual*. Not *ahhh*, *sexual*. *ASEXUAL*. Ring on my middle finger. You don't have kids? Great. In all honesty, I'd rather just dust off the Trivial Pursuit, listen to shoegaze, and talk futures.

Fucking Glen Miller.

Fucking Glen Miller.

This is turning into a dream journal.

t minus one week to graduation.

/// “Don’t Let Them” - Other Lives // <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13JxmvkIyDQ>

\\

neither noor needs a hug.

The whole thing started when I saw Noor walk out of mom and dad’s room and I said, “How much did you take *this* time?”

She didn’t like that, and the fact that she didn’t like that pleased me in a weird, dark place. The hallway’s all dim and she tells me to “Shut up” as she bumps into my shoulder.

Usually, I’d keep walking and roll my eyes and feel sorry for Noora because she’s always been her own victim and all girl interrupted and blee bloh blee blah. This time, though—this time I didn’t make up excuses for her. You know, it’s common courtesy to say “condolences” or “sorry for your loss” or something to that degree when someone close to someone close to you dies. The first time I see Noor after Nate’s death and she tells me to “shut up.” One day until graduation and she tells me to “shut. up.”

You have to understand my and Noora’s siblinghood dynamic to understand why I said what I said to her next. You have to understand that my entire life, I’ve been there for Noor. *I’ve* been there for *her*. She’s eleven fucking years older than me, and *I’ve* been there for *her*.

I was there for her when she got suspended for kicking another girl in the stomach and I pretended to be sick for a few days so I could stay at home with her and watch cartoons and make her laugh. I was there for her when her new boyfriend broke up with her the day before Valentine’s Day and I had my entire third-grade class sign their valentines to her instead of to

me. That’s fucking cute shit. I was there for her when she was sixteen and I was five and she started smoking cigarettes behind my parents’ back.¹³⁹ One day I see her smoking outside, and she tells me to keep it a secret. I was in kindergarten, and my sister, nearly done with high school, is telling me to keep her secrets. Eventually my parents find out, and Noor’s convinced that I snitched—that, you know, I don’t know, the fucking *smell of her jacket* didn’t give it away—so she cold shoulders me for a week. She legitimately gave a kindergartner the cold shoulder. *LEGITIMATELY*, PEOPLE. Of course, I felt guilty for getting her upset, so I drew her a picture of the two of us smoking cigarettes on a sunny day. Who else wants to bet she sold it for dope?

Hell.

She’s one of those hardasses who uses their experiences to “warn” others. They say, “Don’t do drugs because I did drugs and drugs are bad,” or, “Don’t have sex because I had sex and it was great but sex is bad.” It’s like she’s tried to protect me my whole life. Like at any moment a drug dealer could bust through the window and strategically throw coke in my mouth and I would join the circus and impale people for a living. But her protection wasn’t an *active* protection. It was an occasional “you better not smoke like *me*, Sol” or “you better not be hanging out with those *girls*, Sol” or “you better never *shoplift*, Sol,” followed by a giggle and a noogie. To this day, if I swear—she yells at me because I’m her little innocent brother and she’s the bad kid and she doesn’t want to see me go down the same road as her. Because everyone knows saying “hell” leads to saying “damn,” which leads to “fuck,” which almost *always* leads to hard drugs and theft.¹⁴⁰

By the time I was twelve, I realized that I never got anything in return—besides this weak

¹³⁹ My parents share a back.

¹⁴⁰ ...and impaling people for a living.

faux protection—from Noor. I felt obligated to make her life less shitty, but she never really batted a lash for me. She had her good days and would tell me she loved me, but the next day she would be ditching family night to go fuck a guy she met a bar and to drink off-brand Patrón.¹⁴¹ She’s bi-polar—we’ve known that for a while—so that was always my excuse. *Oh poor Noor can’t help that she’s depressed. Oh poor Noor doesn’t know any better. Oh poor Noor needs me. It’s not her fault she only treats me well sometimes.*

...

There are certain people in the world who you can’t believe actually exist. Sometimes they’re the random homeless joe who flails around on the street corner and talks about whatever and you can’t imagine him ever having grown up or being a child or holding a steady, thoughtful conversation. Sometimes they’re the sidewalk evangelist with a top hat and spotted pants and you can’t imagine they’ve ever loved anyone or fucked any willing other. And then sometimes they’re your sister.

Dead eyes and an inability to spot nuance and it’s your fucking sister.

You don’t throw change in the homeless guy’s cup and you don’t entertain the psycho. But for some reason, because she’s lived a room over from you her entire life, because you’ve smelled her perfume every morning regardless if she’s home, you hug your sister and blame it on her “condition.” Is it a condition or is it permanent? Somehow, you convince yourself that things will change, and she’ll be able to break out of her thirty-year dope-and-dopes phase and find God or the military or *something*.

When you put change in the homeless guy’s cup and he calls you cheap. When you give the psycho five minutes of your time and he calls you a sinner. When the person you’ve spent your entire life trying to please for no real reason—the person you’ve stuck up for more than she

¹⁴¹ It’s just pronounced “patron.”

knows—the person who refuses to snap out of her “condition” and prove that she exists and share the weight of family with you—when that person bumps your shoulder in a dark hallway and tells you to shut up—

you stop trying.

...

So everything culminates into this one little hallway incident. Any brotherly sympathy—any sense of camaraderie—any inkling of understanding—*gone*.

...

I turn around and say, “Hey, Noor. Noor. *Noor*.” She’s fled to her room, and her door’s nearly closed. Finally, she opens it to hear what I have to tell her. I make the meanest, dankest, blood-thirstiest eye contact I’ve ever made with anyone and I say it.

“Noor, you’re a fucking piece of shit.”

...

She slams the door. I go into the living room and watch *Lost*.

Mom gets home from her *Taste of Home* shebang and we talk a little about our days. She asks where Noor is, and I say, “She’s in her room. We got into a fight.”

“What kind of fight?”

“I saw her taking money out of your guys’ room so I called her a piece of shit.”

I normally wouldn’t say that so nonchalantly in front of my mother, but I didn’t care this time around. Like not at all. It might be because I just watched one of my best friends get buried so I have a fresh, empowering sense of futility, or it might be because—no, yeah, the best friend getting buried and futility thing is it.

Of course she says, “You *what*?!” and I repeat myself and she looks all shocked and

upset and I say, “You know I’ve been wanting to say that for a long time.” It’s like my parents and I have had a secret my entire life: we like each other more than we like Noor. Sometimes Noor passive-aggressively says something like, “We all know you love Sol more than you love me,” and all three of us laugh and say, “Oh, be quiet. What? *Nooooo.*”

...

Mom is sitting there on our outdated green couch, taking it all in, and when it looks like she’s about to yell at me, I look at her and say, “Noor is twenty-eight.” Mom puts her head in her hands and says, “I know, I know.”

That’s when the phone rings.

Mom answers it. It’s Noor. She’s in her room crying, and refuses to come out. She’s sniffing and telling mom how upset she is and how she’s never heard me say anything like that and how snuffle snuffle snuffle snuffle snuffle snuffle snuffle snuffle. Mom says, “Ok. Ok. Ok. I will. Noor, don’t—ok, I’ll talk to him.” And then my mom tells me I have to apologize. I refuse. They kill a polar bear. Dad shows up.

I watch *Lost* while Mom relays the story to Dad. The phone rings again and mom answers it. It’s the same as the first. My dad has had enough, so he goes up to Noor’s door and tells her to come out. She refuses. He says, “Noor, did you take money out of our room?” and she dodges the question and says, “Did you hear what your son said to me?” and he dodges the question and says, “Noor, answer the question.” She doesn’t say anything, so eventually he knocks on the door—hard—and says, “Let me in *now*, Noor,” and she says—hard—“I’ll open the door when you teach your son some *manners.*”

This makes me laugh. I get up to leave the room but Mom stops me and says, “Where do you think *you’re* going?”

“To get some fresh air. I’ll be right back.”

I end up taking Alli on a ride and not coming back to the house for an hour or so. I practice my val speech. Tombstones, audience. I take a few lake laps, wave to the neighbors, listen to The Doors,¹⁴² and Zen out. When I get back, Noor’s still locked in her room—asleep—and my parents are sitting at the dining room table.

My dad immediately tells me to go apologize. I tell him I’m not sorry and he says, “I don’t care. Go apologize,” and I say, “Or what?” and he says, “Or you *will* be sorry.” I say, “Good one,” but neither of them smile and I laugh alone.

Long story short, I end up sitting on the side of Noor’s bed, saying, “Sorry about what I said. You know I love you. I’ve just been going through a lot.” I felt just like Dwayne in *LMS*. She side-hugs me and that’s that.

I still feel sick to my stomach when I think about it. Not for calling her a piece of shit. No, no, no, no, no.

For taking it back.

...

Life’s too short to say anything other than what you fucking mean, even if it’s to your sister.

Especially if it’s to your sister.

...

Graduation is tomorrow.

/// “I Will Never Be Untrue” – The Doors /// (no link)

\\

¹⁴² Topical.

Virg made sure to do the talking on the way to Azna's Point. Any questions aimed at Beatrix were swiftly hijacked and rerouted.

"Beatrix, where are you—"

"I can't imagine what you've prepared for the ceremony. Knowing you, it'll knock everything out of the...*park*."

"Oh, you *dog*," Regal would say. "Beatrix, have you ever painted Blaine Par—"

"Do the leaves look brighter than usual to you? They seem brighter to me."

Azna—who Ellis learned was the tall woman memorialized in front of *The Hall*—pointed her forefinger into the depths of BP. To follow the arc of her finger is to arrive at Azna's Point, a large opening in the center of Blaine Park—a stargazer's paradise and post-post (...) bohemian hangout.

"From the air, Azna's Point looks like a bullet hole in the heart of BP," Regal explained. "To have Boss speak in its center is a metaphor for his strength and blah blah blah—point is, the public will eat this shit up."

The trio walked through a purple mesh fence and into the opening. The sky, a daunting gray. Several sexless workers—or 'aces,' as Regal called them—scurried around a broad, circular stage in the center of the bullet hole.

"Hey!" he yelled at the workers. "Seats don't set themselves up. Come on!" He pointed to several stacks of chairs at the side of the stage. The workers looked at each other and hastily began to un-stack and organize the chairs. "These bozos would lick my ass if I told 'em to," he coughed. It seemed to Ellis that Regal's life was a continuous battle for oxygen.

"The big surprise won't be revealed until the ceremony," Regal said, leading them to the middle of the enormous opening, "but the blueprints have been set for *years*. Look at this. You won't believe it."

They approached a large round table in the center of the large round stage in the large round opening. On it sat a lonely blueprint.

“Here he is.”

Beatrix looked down to see an image of a man pointing into the distance. Boss, the Head Geezer.

“No,” Virg said.

Regal wheezed.

“Here?”

“Right here,” he said, pointing at his foot.

“Don’t tell me he’s pointing—”

“Right back at old Azie. Same height and everything.”

“This thing is in a week—you’d have to have it built—”

“Get *this*,” Regal said. He paused for dramatic effect. “We’re doing it *live*.”

“You can’t—”

“Get *this*. I talked the board into allowing a split-second field drop—right at the end of the big man’s speech. That way, he says goodnight, yadda yadda thanks for everything, and then *boom—statue*.”

Regal, a proud smile.

“Does he know?”

“Not a

clue. We’ve been engraining the image into hundreds of staff members’ heads these past couple of months, keeping it hush-hush. When Boss walks off stage and I give the green light, up goes the surprise of the fucking *millennium*.”

As Virg and Regal talked logistics, Beatrix became transfixed on the aces—who, since the trio had arrived, had managed to set up tens of rows of chairs in concentric circles around the stage. Suddenly:

“I’d like to see you sculpt *this*.”

Beatrix snapped out of her transfixion and looked at Regal. As she had been throughout the day, she unconsciously adjusted her bra.

And just like that, Sidd Regal became enraged.

“What in the *hell*?”

He glared at Beatrix’s breasts. He looked at her then back down.

“Excuse me—” she said.

Virg stepped in. “Sidd, what’s—”

Ellis looked down at Beatrix’s chest to see a partially exposed heart sticking out like a plastic cowlick. Unpeeled.

“Virg, you know I don’t like being lied to.” His face, a boiling red orange.

Sidd Regal was your best friend until he wasn’t.

“What are you—”

Before

Virg could finish, Regal had thrown his hand at Beatrix’s chest and ripped her heart off. He threw the flimsy band-aid-like circle to the ground and panned up to see Ellis August Qualm, his prime suspect.

Ellis stood there, dumbstruck. Despite the seriousness of the situation, he was, more than anything, relieved to be braless.

Without hesitation, Regal headbutted Ellis and pushed him to the ground. Blood instantly

ran from Ellis's nostrils. Pain shot up and lingered along his left side. A handful of aces heard the commotion coming from center stage and approached the trio.

Ellis, on the ground, tasting blood.

Virg, grappling with Regal.

Ellis pushed himself back up just in time to see Virg Tanker punch Regal in the jaw. The red flab sticking out of Regal's button-up rumbled against itself.

With the Regal the Reg temporarily incapacitated, Virg grabbed Ellis by the arm and pulled him away from the stage.

"Now we run."

The two revolutionaries sprinted away from the Point. Several aces sprinted after them. Regal attempted to follow, but lost wind and threw orders to the able pursuers. The blood running down Ellis's nose made its way into his mouth and he swallowed. Metal.

Cracked vision and another shot of pain. His peripheral began to overflow with rainbow static. Tree after tree after tree after tree flew by. His knees began to resist his pace.

"Why can't we just teleport?" he yelled to Virg, who was half-a-line ahead of him.

"Only way out and in of MC is across the bridge," Virg yelled back, panting, "or off the cliff."

A mouthful of blood sailed down Ellis's throat. A second wave of faux swavel shot into his peripheral. He turned his head around—the aces had fallen behind, but were still too close. An intense déjà vu overcame Ellis as he watched the ten sexless laborers swerve between the white trees.

"Get ready!" Virg yelled.

Ellis looked ahead, and spotted the last five or six lines of trees. He looked to his left and right: infinite, grayish space between rows. A pinkish glow emanated from beyond the last line.

Pain gripped Ellis's left side. He yelled—an image of himself in the white room rang through his mind's eye—an image of Regal with a club—the club, in Ellis's ribs—the club, into Ellis's back—the club, his mouth. Regal, enraged, headbutt—headbutt. More blood ran down his esophagus. He kept running when—an image of a syringe, sinking into his forearm, over and over and over and—two aces with masks, flicking syringes, watching the drips, checking the time—syringe, in the arm—syringe, in the side—syringe, in the gut, the gut, the gut—needle in neck, needle in neck.

He snapped back to BP and there it was: rainbow static—like oil on concrete—like spit on a screen—consuming his vision and dissolving.

The taste of blood brought it back full-force.

Ellis August Qualm blinked and saw swavel for the first time.

Before he knew it, Aldwyn was flying off of a cliff, following his best friend into the bottom of an endless pink gorge. A reassuring breeze.

The night's first batch of stars watched as the pink mist consumed the man with silver hair and green eyes.

+++++

the shit of all shits.

The powers-at-be gave us our diplomas before we gave our speeches, thank God.

...

I was val & Scar was sal. She went—eh—then it was my turn.

I gave my speech just as I'd written it. The Buddha thing, the *High School Musical* bit, the cheesy 'Good morning' joke.

All of my pupes were sitting in front of me—~20 rows of chairs. Somehow, Jonesy got placed in the last row. At rehearsal, Principal Loveless overheard us making Rosa Parks jokes, so he discreetly moved Jonesy to the front row.

Public school.

As I was giving my speech, I looked down and saw Jonesy grimacing in the front row. And I started to laugh. It was right when I was saying, "Thank you kindly for supplying me with my good old days," right between "old" and "days."

It was like Jonesy and I were the only two in the room and everyone else was just a part of our two-man act. Everyone else frozen, holding their overzealous jazz hands, waiting on us to hit the last piercing note. I laughed because it never felt like that before. Usually, it was always a one-man act starring Solon the Cunt and even Jonesy was in the background. I forced people to be my shadow. But here, in this dyer moment of don't-fuck-up, I fucked up because I was busy having an earth-shattering epiphany: I'm not alone. I don't know how to make that sound less clichéd, but I think what happened next in that asbestos ceremony did that for me.

...

I'm standing there, at the rotting gymnasium podium, making knowing eye contact with my best friend, in front of hundreds of bored white Ohioans who I'm slowly realizing will stay

that way, and I realize I haven't said anything in a while. I'm standing there, giving a speech I've prepared for for four¹⁴³ years, and—despite acting like a hardass know-it-all—a speech that means quite a bit to me. I snap back to reality to finish what's left of my speech—which is just “Congrats” and “We're all in this together”—but my subconscious slips through at the last second to judge my conscious for laughing too much, and I say, “OH SHIT.”

I accidentally said ‘OH SHIT’ in my commencement speech.

Everyone laughs. A lot.

The class is legitimately laughing, and a lot of the parents have OH NO HE DIDN'T...BUT LAWL ANYWAY faces. I decide not to look over at my parents, because I don't feel like feeling guilty in one of my proudest moments. I logic'd that sometimes there are things more important than your parents' respect. I turn around to Principal Loveless—whose neck barely fits out of his shirt—and he's red. The rest of the school board has wide eyes that are silently screaming, “Oh Jesus, what is he going to do?”

Instead of saying, “Ok, Sol, it's time to say ‘congrats’ and walk off-stage,” my brain chugs a 40 and says, “KEEP GOING, BRO. YOU GOT THIS. YOU *GOT* THIS.”

So I keep going.

Miraculously, my dad didn't turn off the camera right then, so here's everything post-OH SHIT:

“I was going to dedicate my speech to Nate...but maybe now I won't.”

The laughter escalates.

“Actually, knowing Nate, he'd be laughing the hardest right about now. So, here's to you, Nate. That ‘shit’ was for you.”

More laughter. I say ‘congrats’ as people are cheering, and I float to my seat onstage.

¹⁴³ What if the rest of the book was just different variations of “for”?

What kept me unterrified of my parents' reaction afterward was the intense sense that I'd done something correct.

...

Life's improved when life's improv'd.

You *got* this.¹⁴⁴

/// "Now We Can See" – The Thermals /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJu611UdfxA>

\\

a diary with substance.

it's all you've ever wanted,

anne frankly all you need.

good friend dies,

journal entries on the rise,

fucking cringe until you bleed.

/// "Center of the Universe" – Built to Spill /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdTw596Ok68>

\\

ma goes berserk.

I haven't written in my journalbook in a while. It made me feel guilty. When you say "something bad needs to happen in my life" and then your friend dies almost immediately, you convince yourself his death was your fault. You convince yourself you've gotten too good at the

¹⁴⁴ Wait. Did my journalbook just turn into a self-help book?

law of attraction and you inadvertently(?) went too far this time. And then, when his death makes your journal entries more interesting and you realize that that makes you happier than his death made you sad—you really begin to fucking hate yourself.

I've been writing other stuff in the meantime, but something about capitalizing on the death of a friend seems, you know, fucking like the worst thing imaginable.

...

I've been riding Alli a lot-a lot. These summer days are long and fragile.¹⁴⁵ Graduation parties are pretty much wrapped up, so now I'm left to myself, the graying township road I call homish, and a raw indie playlist overflowing with Billie the Vision & the Dancers. I did a 750-piece puzzle of Times Square in one sitting yesterday. I had a bowl of tomato basil soup.

My day-to-day is a lot of zoning in-and-out. I'll catch myself riding Alli over the hills next to Parker, doing donuts,¹⁴⁶ and then I'll do that long enough that I forget I'm doing it—I start thinking about something else, and I get lost in my brain until I catch myself again¹⁴⁷—now waving to the Yogles and their new baby. They had a baby, named her Cecilia. Cecilia Yogle. She and her name belong in a Dickens novel. We went to congratulate them, and I awkwardly held Cecilia's little baby hand and said, "What are you doing?" in quasi-baby talk. I'm finding out that "What are you doing?" is my go-to for babies and pets. Whenever I make eye contact with one of our cats, I'm always like "What—*what are you doing?*"

If nothing else proves to you that my days are slow and fragile, look no further than what I just took the time to tell you.

I sat on the path to Oasis today and watched Clockwork paddling around Lakewoods. I

¹⁴⁵ I've been practicing writing vague, angsty one-liners in the hopes that I can sell them to vague, angsty bands for profit because my heart beats to the sound of nothingness.

¹⁴⁶ Just got a vivid image of a dude unsuccessfully fucking a bunch of donuts.

¹⁴⁷ Exhibit B.

wonder if he's adopted such a routine in order to cope or in order to stop coping.

...

I was working on scholarships earlier today, and mom came in and helped for a while. I know nothing about finances, so mom has been doing my FAFSA and teaching me about interest and loans and grants and harloquins.¹⁴⁸ I'm scholarshipped out for the evening, and while I'm supposed to be filling out an online application, I browse stumbleupon instead. Mom comes in and gets mad that I'm not "taking school seriously" and I tell her "sorry, Mom" and I minimize adorablekittens.net and I go back to the application. This doesn't please her, and she goes into a minute-long explanation of why I need to take it more seriously.

Her eyes bring up the k2 thing all the time.

She says, "Solon, you can't be putting this off and pretending it's going to pay for itself," and I say, "Mom, it's going to be alright, I swear." That makes her cry even more because I just don't get it, and I don't know what to do because emotions are confusing and stressful, so I hug her. She slaps my shoulder, which stings, so I, thanks to my reflexes, pull my shirt sleeve up to see where she slapped me. Lo and behold, this reveals my secret tattoo. She sees the tattoo and the shit flies across the entire globe so it can find and hit every fan ever fucking made.

"WHAT IS THAT WHEN DID YOU HOW COULD YOU
 AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHGHJKVKGVMHGVJH<VBJ," she says, verbatim.¹⁴⁹

My tattoo is of the sun—like a southwestern, silhouetted version of the sun. It's small, it's simple, it's the sun. I got flustered and angry because she saw my tattoo before I wanted her to, and I whisper something about PMS under my breath, and all of the shit on the fans flies back off, across the world, and finds a different fan to hit.

¹⁴⁸ That's a financial term, right?

¹⁴⁹ To be fair, AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHGHJKVKGVMHGVJH *is* less than VBJ.

Don't ever tell someone they're mad because of PMS, especially if it's your mother.

As I'm convincing her it's one of those "new temporary tats" and that it should be gone in a month or so, dad walks in just in time to hear mom say, "I'm the only one who cares about any of this!" He says "about *what*," and she storms out of the room, teary-eyed. She runs to their room, where I assume she bit a pillow and fell asleep. Dad asks me what happened—that's his thing now—and I explain and show him the tat. We leave mom alone for the night. I finish up the scholarship and dad and I watch *The Three Stooges* to pass the time.

I love my mom more than anyone in the world, but something about our relationship makes me feel the need to be an asshole to her. It's not like I watched my dad be an asshole to her so I borrowed the habit. He's superdad. I know my mom better than I know anyone else in the world. I know she deserves respect, especially mine—frankly, I should be kissing her feet and fetching her grapes and shit—but something keeps me nagging her and perpetuating this whole I'm-your-teenage-son-and-I'm-angsty-and-unhinged act.¹⁵⁰

The Roles sucked me back in, player. GOTCHA.

...

Something about things happening makes

life seem fake.

/// "Heartbeats" - Jose Gonzalez /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A20rx8VQnTE>

\\

¹⁵⁰ Then again, boys are mean to girls who they like and vice versa. Maybe I secretly want to be with my mom? And—and maybe Noor secretly wants to be with me? And—how have I not seen it before now?—maybe I secretly want to be with *myself*? And maybe derpty Schmerpty bleg plerg gloofta meerp schmeerp blarfty poog?

o

[with a-morphous twang]

Ever notice poems go and throw out no one's reading?

Always rowing showy notes and booing blowme breeding?

Overflowing go the O's, betrothing—so you notice?

Oprah tows the lowly lones and loans the woeful lotus.

Patron'll open ocean's up, oh yodel till you echo.

The phone'll quote the homing rut, ho! socials at the Petco.

Eroding oldie moldsters are evoking Homer ohnos

With Chronos voting solo after overhoning Yono.

Holy snowy Bono mows the flowing zoning oaks flat.

Woe is quo'd and Bowie ghosts throw roses: Linda Ronstadt.

Relocate foes and prose them toes that go immobile sideways.

Ovaltine reposts and goes, 'Sol: should've chose the highway.'

(Presley played a mamma's boy, his momma played his tunes.

Nietzsche spoke of superman, and man now speaks in ruins.

Oedi pussied and shagged his mom, his name is now complex.

Goes to show that killing paps is Runic for momséx.

Digress.)

/// "Digging My Own Grave" – Thrice /// http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Wp7d_kgxI0

∞

trail mix.

I went hiking at Glen Helen with Jonesy and his brother. Glen Helen: very earthy, very rocky, very watery, very naturey.¹⁵¹ Lotta wet logs and such. Jonesy's brother's name is Elijah. Their parents have an "E" fetish. Elliot, Elijah, and Esther. They are Emily and Edward. Their two dogs are Elephant (Ellie) and Emu (Mu). They only eat egg salad and edamame.¹⁵² They only drink Earl Grey, Evian, and energy drinks. They don't guess—they estimate. They don't learn—they are educated. They aren't insane—they're eccentric.

They were, like, soooooooo pumped when email became a thing.

We hiked for a good three hours. We didn't have anywhere to be, so we went wherever our feet took us.¹⁵³ I got some footage of us walking around—climbing on fallen trees, smacking each other with branches, walking across plywood bridges, etc.

Elijah lives in Cincinnasti—Deer Park area—and works at an alternative radio station as a jockey.¹⁵⁴ We talked about music while hopping over mossy crick rocks and he invited me to come and guest DJ. I said yes, definitely. So that's a thing.¹⁵⁵

I found a retro Fanta bottle off the trail. I'm going to clean it out and use it for something. Fill it with flowers and give it to my mom. Fill it with my mom and give it to some flowers.

Something.

We went canoeing on the Little Miami after our hike. I was pooped, and I end up falling

¹⁵¹ How much better would the world be if all adjectives were just the noun version of a word followed by "y?"

¹⁵² This is where it started becoming humor.

¹⁵³ Exhibit D.

¹⁵⁴ The radio station is alternative because it's all about equestrians.

¹⁵⁵ This is unrelated, but I'm starting to actually hear lyrics. I used to hear a song and sort of soak up its feel, not its words. Now I listen to songs like they're narratives, like I would be missing out on something if I didn't catch every word. Sometimes I'm moved in an entirely new way, and other times I realize how fucking lame Bob Dylan is.

asleep in my canoe and getting separated from the Jones' for some time. There was a split in the river, right around a long, skinny island—I went left, they went right. I only realized this because as I was heading left, I heard them yelling at me. We were back together five minutes later.

I used to go canoeing with the Boy Scouts around Yellow Springs, and it was always good fun. We would pull each other out of the canoes, swim around, pick up river muck, toss it, and get red swimmer eyes by the end of the day. Getting red swimmer eyes and pruny fingers is a childhood rite of passage.

I'm realizing I'm not sad. I'm apathe

/// "I Am Warm & Powerful" – Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin ///

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LV6JgCC1hwk>

\\

highlights.

- 1.) June 28. Rball state competition. I made it to final four, got silver. Lost to a kid with the last name Littlejohn. I'll remember him forever.
- 2.) July 1st. Reed proposed. Scar fled. Jonesy and I contemplated photoshopping Reed's head over Mufasa as Scar dropped him into the stampede of antelopes. We decided against it and went to Yellow Springs.
- 3.) July 4th. Independence Day. Turned 18.
- 4.) July 12th-13th. College orientation.
- 5.) July 16th. Noora confesses she's two-months pregnant. She wasn't stealing money; she was looking for old pregnancy tests. I'm going to be an uncle. The father is Phillip, an Italian auto

repair guy and ex-husband of 2.

6.) July 17th. Today.

If *word.* were a movie, this would be the stoic¹⁵⁶ montage where I do a voiceover that makes you really think about shit.

/// “Empty” – Ray LaMontagne /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mT69zOTNa8Q>

\\

soon.

Mom let us know Grandma’s in the hospital in San Diego. She says, “Grandma’s in the hospital. She had a stroke,” and I consider saying “OF GENIUS?!?” but stomach it because I recognize the moment’s no-no, this-is-serious-time aura. Instead, I hug her, she grips the back of my shoulders and squeezes. She says, “We’re leaving this weekend to spend time with her and the family.” I say, “OK.” And she says, “We can all use it anyway. We all need some fresh air,” and it was clear she meant “I” when she said “we all.” She’s stressed as hell. I say shit in my graduation speech, Noora gets knocked up, I’m leaving for college a couple months after nearly ODing on a bag of brown crumbs. I told her, “Yeah, I know,” and that’s that. We’re flying out of Columbus in two days, staying with Uncle Earp, who bought a condo out there last year to be nearer to Grandma Coop. Me, Noora, Phillip, Mom, Dad, Aunt Shan (mom’s sister), Uncle Quinton (Shan’s husband), Trace (their son), Earp, Becca (Earp’s girlfriend for now), and G-Coop.

Ma showed us a picture of Grandma. Her hands are more vein than skin. Her hair isn’t

¹⁵⁶ Oh, didn’t you know? You can use the word stoic in any context and it makes sense.

blue like most of her friends', but a light gray. If she were a younger man, it would qualify as a jewfro (ironic, because I suspect she secretly despises Fagin's gang). Her front teeth are whiter than the rest of her teeth, and I've always pretended not to notice. I've seen pictures of her and Grandpa from World War IIish, and they're the *it couple*. Grandpa was a chipper, tan son of a bitch,¹⁵⁷ and Grandma was a smart-but-feisty add-on. Somewhere along the line, she gave up her whippy feminine post-flappery independence for childbirth and what the times convinced her was mandatory submission. She had Shan, Howard (d. 1973, Vietnam), Earp, separated from Grandpa, *then* had Mom—got un-separated immediately—and with each new addition, she became more stringently religious and less openly herself. Last time I saw her, she didn't exist. She'd been sucked into a passive, offended trap. In short, it's a surprise every time she sees me and happens to get my name right.

/// “Poke” - Frightened Rabbit /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD8Gvx92Rdg>

\\

numan.

Jonesy changed the game.

He stayed at my house last night and we shot “Extreme Parkour.” The video starts with a flashy lens flare intro where a bass-y voiceover says “EXTREEEEEEME” over and over, trance music plays, and after the sweet intro, it's just footage of us doing really lame parkour tricks in my yard and down the street. There's a shot of Jonesy jumping over three gnomes in slow motion, and the voiceover says, “THREE GNoooooMES.” There's a shot of me climbing halfway up a fence then jumping back down, and it says, “HE GOT HALFWAAAAAY.”

¹⁵⁷ No, rly. My great-grandma was a huge bitch.

Another of us playing leapfrog: “DEATH-DEFYINNNNG.” We inserted a bunch of sweet trance interludes, and every time, it cuts back to us, doing somersaults through a flower garden.

Anyway, this morning, we’re in the car, on the way to bd’s out at the Greene to meet up with Doc, Pete, Reed (he’s back for the moment)—and Jonesy starts cracking up. He reaches for the bobblehead I’ve had suctioned to my dashboard’s downstage since he gave it to me for my half-birthday back in February. He put it there himself, and I remember his saying something like, “Keep this in your car forever and cherish it. It took me a long time to find,” and I say, “It doesn’t even bobble!” (it didn’t even bobble), and he says, “It’s ironic. You should love it.” The bobble’s head is Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*. I’m nearly fluent in nadsat, but I stick with the basics like droog, devotchka, bezoomny, horrorshow, nagoy, and sarky.

En route to bd’s, Jonesy unsuctions Alex real horrorshow and says, “Ahhhh, yes!” I say, “What?” He says, “I forgot about this.” I say, “It’s been in here ever since you gave it to me.” He says, “No, not the bobblehead. The camera.” I spurt,¹⁵⁸ quite justifiably, “What are you talking about?” He laughs and says, “I put a hidden camera in here to get you goofing off in the car, and I forgot all about it. It’s got to be dead by now. It’s why the head doesn’t bobble.” I say, “Why would you do that?(!)” and he tells me about his video idea—how people singing in their cars get views—how candidness sells—how he knows I brick house in the car—how it could become really popular, etc. Honest to gods, it’s the most I’ve ever heard Jonesy say. I say, “No way man. No fucking way,” and we argue a little bit: echoes of “joke,” “private,” “illegal,” “sorry man, sorry” “it’s whatever,” “and then the goat made her queef like a dick in a Frappuccino bottle,” “pretty funny actually,” “the rame in Spain falls manly on the plerks,” “I know, right?” “but I’ve got to look through it first,” “ok, whatever, yeah.” He says, “There’s got to be some gems on

¹⁵⁸ Just looked at the word ‘spurt’ for a good forty seconds, and even though it’s not underlined, I’m no longer certain it’s a word.

here for sure.”

& he was right.

...

The three things I do in the car: (1) sing every song, (2) badmouth other drivers, and more recently than ever, (3) practice poetry—and the camera, in its short life, got all 3.

For (1): Alex rarely caught me *not* singing. Highlight: “Hand In My Pocket” - Alanis Morissette. In the footage, I sing the first half of the chorus correctly, and make the second half explicit. “I’ve got one hand in my pocket / AND THE OTHER ONE’S JERKING A JEW OFF.” Alex also got me singing parts of or all of: “1 Trillion Dollar\$” - Anti-Flag // “Danger” - Blahzay Blahzay // “For My Friends” - Blind Melon // “The Breeze” and “The Rabbit, the Bat & The Reindeer” - Dr. Dog // “Combat” – Flobots // “Centerfield” - John Fogerty // “Shake It Out” - Manchester Orchestra // “The Re-Arranger” - Mates of State // “Bury Me With It” - Modest Mouse¹⁵⁹ // “King of Carrot Flowers Part 2 & 3” - Neutral Milk Hotel // “You Better Pray” – Red Jumpsuit Apparatus // “Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh” - Say Hi // & “Stoned” - Smash Mouth¹⁶⁰

...

For (2): At one point, Alex caught me calling a slow driver a “nipple humping bigot.”

...

For (3): This one needs a preface. PREFACE: Whenever I’m alone in the house, I head down to the laundry room and recite sloems (slam poems) I’ve written. I scream into a giant rectangular mirror that hangs above the family’s giant piles of dirty clothes. I try to get the timing and the volume right, even though I can’t imagine ever reading them to anyone besides my reflection. But I miss being on stage. Something about reciting lines to myself and liking it

¹⁵⁹ “We’ll all float on.” ~Modest Mouse /// “I don’t know about *you*, but *I’m* definitely floating on. *God*, I’m handsome.” ~Immodest Mouse

¹⁶⁰ This song has some of my favorite lyrics of all time: “We’re okay / Reeling in the day / We’re alright / We’re just getting high / Let us be / It’ll be alright.”

gives me back some of the dopamine I used to get from performing in semi-packed, muggy gymnasiums. A couple of times, when the house was occupied and I was raring to recite, I drove my car out to Oasis, parked the car near the cemetery, and shook it out.

It's strange. When I'd act them out, I'd say to myself: there's something about this that feels *happening*. Feels *worth it*. And then Jonesy shows up and says, oh yeah, *I was filming*.

I actually wrote the sloems down on paper—authentic, not-a-computer-screen *paper*. I even put half-serious footnotes and descriptions for the future academics who might not get the references so quickly.

I'm a narcissist.

Alex caught me reciting this one:

numan breakthruman

I'm gonna be Frank, Lloyd, all [Wright?¹

My bros] are hos² if we lived by the same standards. Quite

A [double A, {battery} leaves the girl half fighting}³

Till he sticks it in her arsenic⁴ and leaves this world a-writhing

One less case for tithing⁵

Pause here.

I want to slam something with cause here.

I don't want to be symbolic, I don't wanna be artsy

I wanna be forward, not joke around: *farts*, see?

So let's restart. *Please*.

My name is Solon, and I'm self-centered

My mom and dad love *me*, but *my* family life is splintered.
 I've always gotten great grades, I take pride in intelligence
 But thanks to standards, I learned to revel in irrelevance
 I took pride in acting like, hey—I D C, honky
 Stepped on stage & pretended to be a plain errorer—that's quasi-Bronte⁶
 But I'm not plain, I'm more powerful than Gandhi
 Plus Lennon plus King plus Barack menos Mitt Romney⁷
 I believe if I were Prez,⁸ we'd have unadulterated victory
 I'd lead we peeps to peace and be a substantial piece of history
 Still listening?

Not long ago, I dusted aspirations from my shoulders
 Scolded my free spirit for not realizing it was time to get older
 To get a girl, to get a job, to get a clue, to get a pension
 The infinitives scared me, so cut-to: filter pinching
 That's code for marijuana,⁹ wash down with PBR¹⁰
 At parties every week every week every week, see? We *are*—
 Generation Y, we DK what it's like to *care*
 We're no good with profit because we're perfectly fine to share
 We ask WHY WHY WHY when our forbearers asked WHERE
 Guys, I'm *scared*.

I'm the unique one, the freak one with po-tential
 But weightless opportunity mutated into way-too-consequential
 Do I feel special because someone somewhere is dropping hints at my future?
 Or does everyone feel like they'll be famous and powerful and loved?

Suture self

‘Self,’ that’s the word that gets me steamy

But everyone around me’s given up, gotten hitched, and tells me that I’m dreaming

Sex is old news: gender, race, environment, it’s all hackneyed and shitty

I’m postmodern Walter Mitty¹¹

I can’t keep up with the just kiddings

Not when I mean everything I say, God or not permitting

Am I gonna let it make me or will I make the living?

‘I’m a Jedi in a world of horny meaningless wookies’¹²

Any day now the masses’ll be calling my publicist to fucking book *me*

The death of my best friend, whoa now, it really shook me¹³

But to cry now & give up on the Power: What are ‘signs of a rookie?’

...I’m no rookie. I’m a New Human, a *numan*—

Like Gary—safest of all, here in my car¹⁴

[blunt non-rhyming pause]

Get where I am, be me—but still youish

Only thing my older brother had I don’t is being Jewish¹⁵

Don’t ruin this this time, population

You’ve had a two-thousand year vacation

To get it right,

So get it right

So turn left.

I started out a kid with dreams, and that’s how I’m stopping

So get your conventions out of my B-line cause no one here can stop me

Your handhelds can't clock me

The rolling stones can't rock me¹⁶

I'm the new Iraqi¹⁷

Check it like hockey

Blocking Rocky's shots lyk a Chaucer-mocking bau5, see?

[slower] My name is Solon, and I believe with all my being that nothing else can shock me

Shocking?

I'm an asshole by tragedy's traditions,

Step back and see we're being conditioned by their conditions

No o-ridge, only renditions

Spent our whole lives petitioning petitions

Take a bow, Evil—you deserve it, we're the herded

I just spent 3 minutes blurting!

When I die, you'll find these poems

Read them, love them, know 'em

They're prophecies of a time not so far away

Where grokking¹⁸ is knowing and being straight is fucking gay

Where loving is having a solid discussion

Where feeling God is falling asleep: divine concussion

I'm the person for whom you'll be cheering for at luncheons

Hear me, fear me, and yo—I'll give it right back

Screw what's behind us, you know? *Bite back.*

Let's write and love and give and get and say wow

These are things on my mind, my Sol. —*How*

Can this not be where I am now?

Treat the past like it has

The present like it is one

And the future like it's—you know—future-y or whatever

(...)

Not only Asa Brood, I also ace a test

I need to fucking rest¹⁹

¹ - Frank Lloyd Wright was a renowned architect in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Brood once took a tour of Wright's Westcott House in Springfield, Ohio as a young man.

² - Here, Brood refers to both the Wright Brothers, the famous Ohio-born airplane inventors, and a popular adage in the early 2000s, "bros before hos," which simply meant a man should look out for his guy friends before his girlfriend.

³ - "Battery" takes on a double meaning here. First, as in the context of a double A battery, which were used to power household appliances when Brood was young; second, as in the context of spousal battery or abuse.

⁴ - "Arsenic" takes on a double meaning as well. First, as in the poison the woman uses to kill her abusive husband; second, the prefix "arse" in arsenic is used to implicate anal intercourse. The latter begets the former in this case, as the woman poisons the man for his forceful advances.

⁵ - Throughout his early career, Brood made it clear he was staunchly anti-religion.

⁶ - “Plain errorer” refers to Charlotte Bronte’s Victorian classic, *Jane Eyre*.

⁷ - Several references used here. (1) Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the Indian Independence movement, (2) John Lennon, member of rock band The Beatles and peace advocate, (3) Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights movement icon, (4) Barack Obama, President from 2008-2016, first African-American President in history (5) Mitt Romney, Republican politician and Mormon who ran against Obama in 2008.

⁸ - President

⁹ - Marijuana was still illegal when Brood wrote this piece.

¹⁰ - Pabst Blue Ribbon was the king of hipster beers.

¹¹ - “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” by James Thurber, a famous author, sketch artist, and Columbus, Ohio resident.

¹² - References to George Lucas’s Star Wars franchise. Jedis were awesome mind-warriors. Wookies were tall, furry sidekicks.

¹³ - Brood’s good friend Nate Yates died in a car accident just weeks before Brood graduated from high school in 2009. The experience is evident in much of his work.

¹⁴ - “Cars” - Gary Numan (1979)

¹⁵ - It is believed that Brood is referring to Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ - The Rolling Stones were a popular rock band during the British Invasion of the 1960s. They were like The Beatles, but harder.

¹⁷ - The War on Iraq began when Brood was quite young, and lasted long into his teenage years and beyond.

¹⁸ - A reference to *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein.

¹⁹ - This line is widely debated. Some argue it harkens back to the line about Jesus, and that Brood is claiming he is the second coming, that “rest” refers to the day of rest. Others argue that with this line, Brood is finally breaking free from his need to be perfect and “ace a test.” Other others argue that Brood meant both things simultaneously. At any rate, “ace a” is a pun for “Asa,” Brood’s middle name.

...

Driving, the thought always latches on: someone's watching me. Someone will see this. This will matter. This counts for something. Some-one or -thing some-where is sympathizing with my falsetto, applauding my screams, laughing when I use my screaming falsetto to tell the slow cars to gtfover. Before I could drive, and mom was my Hoke Colburn, I would look into my side's rearview mirror, mouth the words to the songs, and pretend I was performing for a TV audience of millions, and I'd pretend my mom or the people driving by couldn't tell I was doing it. Now I sing as loud as I can, dedicate the choruses to Alex, and generally immerse myself in myself.

And all this time, I was nagoy. Where there was nothing—*suddenly*—everything was worth it. And I'm wiggling out.¹⁶¹

...

Lot of people say "thing is," and go from there. They say "thing is...blah blah my opinion," and because they say "thing is," readers trust them. Everyone wants to know what the thing is—grease is the word, it's all about the hokey pokey, etc.—because everyone has a blurry image of what the thing is—maybe it's God, maybe it's sex, maybe it's something small like the inability to snap or a greek yogurt & honey fetish, maybe it's nothing—but everyone has a thing and spends their whole life trying to define it. Thing is, there are an infinite number of things. A lot of people believe there's only one thing & it's our purpose to catch up to it and label it first. *Go, string theory! Go, tao! Go, antimatter! Pikachu, I choose you!* When someone else says they know what the thing is, we perk up. If someone else has it figured out, there's no need to keep searching.

Wrong move.

¹⁶¹ Am I cool enough to use the word 'wiggling' non-ironically?

No one has the same search. Thing is, once everyone finds their thing, the big central thing will reveal itself. It's locked tight until everyone learns their individual lessons. You shoot for the moon, you don't land among the stars. You get stuck in space, and float in a vacuum until your silenced carcass hits an atmosphere and burns up before it reaches ground. Think small to think big, folks.

College in a month.

/// "Let's Explode" – Clem Snide /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1R-IANRSg0>

\\

zitweird.

zitweird hearing from my generation for the first time? I mean, really hearing? Really getting what it's like? Not even what it's like, but what it is? It's not Atari and hippies, or war and yuppies, or grunge and bellbottoms and babies and scandal. It's all of that plus everything else. We're the Generation of Knowledge. We know too much for our own good. We're too good for our own knowledge. We can't even begin to know all of the goods at our exposal. When you didn't have ALL info at your fingertips you had the room to make something of your life—your little happy-go-lucky, whatever-I-can, individualistic lifeline. You didn't have 80 new webpages published every nanosecond, showing you why what you thought before was wrong or what you didn't think about was everything you should have been thinking about. Me and mine know everything there is to know, and we're stuck living our lives in retrospect, searching for the big thing everyone else overlooked on their *not*-Internet. You haven't tasted angst until you've Wikipedia'd angst and been told exactly what you've tasted, why you're tasting it, who's most

likely to taste it, the side-effects, the benefits, the stats, the charts, the quotes, the studies, the fucking *everything*, until you give up and the only angst you're allowed to have at the end of the day is the angst of not having real angst at all but instead some amorphous odorless labelless generational void of everythingness and nothingness that doesn't let you taste, but!instead! eats *you* alive.

/// "No Hope Kids" – Wavves /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt6imgDYoTg>

/////

“He’s back. No, yeah, he’s back. Get *over* here.”

The Silver Fox screamed. Pain in cream-colored sheets.

Blood flowed from both nostrils. Bloodshot eyes. Bloody teeth.

He sat up. Virg, H’lu and Rey gave him troubled looks.

“Sit back down, Dwyng,” H’lu said. “Something’s not right.”

“I’m fine,” he said, and pushed past them. He pushed the bathroom door open and spat into the sink. He washed his face.

He leaned on the bathtub and vomited as pain traveled the length of his left side.

He vaguely remembered the past month. He clung onto the events at Blaine Park as best he could, but they began to retreat into oblivion. Ellis’s memories and thoughts were being cleaned out and replaced with the mind of a revolutionary.

He spat again.

“Dwyng, you need to rest while you can. The plans have—they’ve gotta be changed.”

“The plans aren’t changing.”

“But they know we know.”

“The plans aren’t changing.”

“Dwyng, you’re not telling us something,” Rey said.

Blood spit.

“Your average respawn is four seconds, but this time it was seven,” H’lu said.

“Something’s *wrong*.”

Dwyng lifted his head from the bathtub.

“The plans aren’t changing.”

+++++

H'lu, Rey and Virg sat at the table.

As the sun peaked its head over the golden hills a week before the retirement, Dwying petted Verx and summarized the past fifteen years as he would a chapter in a book.

As they knew—after his arrest, REIGN forced Dwying through fifteen years of trifectas. Though he couldn't remember each individual life—of which there were thousands—he *could* remember that each was dark, depressive, formidable, tailored to force his fall. Specific events were lost on him, but the sense of terror and futility accompanying each Fate latched onto his—*being*. As Virg might say: “‘Fectas affect.’”

“Between ‘fectas,” he told them, “they tortured me.”

He recalled his time spent in the white rooms: syringes and clubs, syringes and clubs.

“These two aces, after every ‘fecta—these two heartless goons would take me into a backroom pandora and stick me with needles. They would—they'd sedate me and I'd wake up in another room—where Regal would be waiting.”

Dwying closed his eyes.

Regal, as Dwying explained it, would talk to him about coming back to the Geezers—would try to persuade him to stop with the ‘rev bullshit’ and ‘give into the process.’

“He actually called it that,” Dwying said. “‘The Process.’ He'd do the talking bit, I'd refuse—sometimes because I was sticking up for the right thing, other times because I didn't have the energy to lift my head—then he'd slam me with his club. The fucking club. He called it *Otto*. ‘You have you're AUDO. I've got mine. See?’” Dwying shook his head. “He and his posse beat me to death more than once.”

“I should have done more to stop it,” H'lu said, tearing up.

“No,” Dwyng said. “You put everything on the line.”

“Is that why I still have my job and you’re *broken*?”

Dwyng wiped his nose. Drying blood. A blood vessel in his left eye had exploded, and a dense red film enveloped his iris.

“They called it the Poom—the PUH room,” H’lu said. Dwyng was hearing this for the first time. “The pandora where they’d stick you. I had no idea what they were doing to you, but every time I saw them escorting you—you were out of it.”

“H’lu told us about it,” Rey said. “She said she tried speaking to you several times, but they had you locked up too tightly. You were impossible to find.”

“I managed to be your faker for your last trifecta, and your R ward guide,” H’lu said. “It took a lot of coaxing, but Betsy harassed Maddox until I got it.”

“That was another thing,” Dwyng said. “The fakers. They would send in the three fakers who would make me feel safe and convince me things would be alright—or would ground me, at least. Then boom—they’d stick me and I’d wake up in the—the *Poom*?—the Poom, with two aces shoving juice in my gut.”

“Why would they go to the trouble of getting you fakers?” Rey.

“Yeah, why not just vacuum you to the Poom?” Virg.

“They wanted me to stop trusting people,” Dwyng said. “Even though I was a different person each time—the white rooms always made me lose hope. They scared me. Every time I was in one, I suffered. REIGN programmed me to hate the people. That way, they could convince me to stop fighting for them.”

Verx yawned.

“At first, it was monotonous and nothing else. *Tedious*,” he said. “I’d finish the ‘fecta, get my hopes up, torture, new ‘fecta. Over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over.”

“They were washing your brain,” Virg said.

“They were doing more than that,” Dwyng said. “They were making me *feel*.”

The trio shared confused looks.

“I started to *feel* the blows,” he said. “I felt pain again.”

Explaining pain to three people who had never experienced it was like explaining sight to the blind.

Dwyng lifted up his shirt. A long pink scar ran up the length of his left side. “They made it permanent. It wasn’t just in my head anymore. It was physical.”

“How?”

“The juice. Whatever those aces stuck me with changed my nerves. It’s what they did in the past, but this time, they stretched it out over my fifteen years.”

“So—what does that mean?”

“They figured, ‘If we can’t make him *say* he’s mortal, we might as well make him *think* he’s mortal,’” he said. “It got worse over time. The first couple of years, *nothing*. Useless shots.” He paused. “At first the only change was taste. I could sense the differences in foods. That’s how it was the first time. Taste, followed by pain. After a few years—the pain finally caught up. Eventually, I could feel the bruises before and after the same ‘fecta. They were getting the pain to stick.

“One day Regal told me—he said, ‘We’ll have you ready for the retirement if it kills me—or you.’” Dwyng coughed blood into his own mouth. He swallowed it. “I think they were

holding out to see if I would give into the Geezers before Boss's retirement party. They timed everything out so I would be 'fixed' in time for the statue."

"We assumed the retirement always depended on you," Rey said.

"They wanted me to show my support," Dwyng said. "That was it. All of the needles, all of the blows, the lives—just for me to give up and say 'Ok, I'm old.' A fifteen year sentence—for one sentence."

"Everyone at REIGN knew that Regal wanted your jail time extended," H'lu said. "I'm sure he had something to do with your not remembering. If he couldn't get you to surrender as Dwyng, he would make you forget you *were* Dwyng."

"Undoubtedly," Virg said. "If he could keep you forgetful until the retirement, he could've convinced Ellis to propose being mortal to the public."

"Hell, the cause has haunted Boss since the assassination attempt," Rey said. "People have been on edge for years. The rev presence has kept the city skeptical. If you hopped out of REIGN with a 'Congrats Boss' button, everything would die down and REIGN would force-feed us into eternity."

"Goodbye public suspicion, goodbye revolution, goodbye change," Virg said.

"They had fifteen years to get it right," Rey said. "And they failed."

"We have one night to get it all right," Dwyng said. "And we can't fail."

"But they know we know," Virg said. "We can't risk it."

"And you're—you're *hurt*, Dwyng," H'lu said. "You woke up late, covered in blood. I've never seen anything like—"

"That's old news," Dwyng said. "Whatever they were shooting me with brought it on. The harder my death, the harder my respawn. They got the pain to respawn, too. Regal's posse

would kill me in the Poom, and I would wake up in my pandora with bruises. They successfully slowed down the healing process.”

“But what about when we shot you on the stairs?” H’lu said. “You seemed fine when you woke up—and you respawned in four seconds, like normal. Just now, it took you almost *twice* as long.”

Aldwyn thought about it.

“I wasn’t myself the first time,” he said. He had trouble remembering what actually happened before. Who was Ellis? What did he do? What was his favorite snack? “My ex didn’t know any better, so my body took over instead of my mind.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” H’lu said. “Your mind can’t defy physics.”

The three of them looked at H’lu with raised eyebrows.

“His mind let him manipulate his ex without a heart,” Rey said.

Had Ellis been around, he might have laughed at that comment’s absurdity out-of-context.

“Ok, ok. But what if—what if you just *don’t* respawn this time? What does that even *mean*?”

H’lu, crying.

“That won’t happen,” he said.

“You don’t *know* that! You’re yourself again—your ignorance won’t make things conveniently OK.”

“There’s no other time to do this.”

“There’s literally an *infinite* about of time, Dwyng! *Infinite*. You’d be risking *everything* if we carried through with the plan as is. You woke up *covered* in blood. You can barely *walk*. Something is *wrong*.”

H’lu, hysterical.

“Yeah, I know there is. It’s called *REIGN*, H’lu. And we’re going to fix it. *This week*.”

She stood up.

“I spent fifteen years waiting for you,” she said. “I can wait a few more weeks before we’re ready to retaliate. This isn’t our only chance—”

“It’s the only one that—”

“*No!* Dwyng, I *can’t* let you do this. We’ll find another way to end it. Your well-being means more to me than *REIGN*’s fall. We can wait until your pain subsides.”

She covered her eyes with her hands. Silence in the living room.

“H’lu, the man just fell from a cliff and is walking around,” Rey said, pointing to Dwyng. “He’ll be fine.”

“The Pink Perimeter knocks you out before you hit the ground,” she said. “If he gets hurt any worse, he might never be able to walk again!”

“I’ve dealt with fifteen years of hard blows,” Dwyng said. “I can handle one more.”

“You don’t *know* that—”

“No one knows *anything*, H’lu,” Dwyng said. “But I know I’m willing to risk my legs to get this done.”

“What you risk wasting are these past twenty years! Don’t you get that? What if this is what they *want*?” She screamed. “If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t know anything about the statue or the field drop or—*Kryste*, Dwyng. I sacrificed *everything*—”

“Spend fifteen years in jail getting shots to the stomach and then talk to me about sacrifices!” Dwyng stood up, leaned over the table. Rage. “*All* of us have made sacrifices, H’lu! Virg is jobless, Rey spent his life in *jail*.” He paused. “We can’t stop now. We *don’t* stop now.”

The two stood on opposite sides of the table. They refused to break eye contact.

“I can’t let you do this,” she said, calmly.

& she disappeared.

+++++

trace and the theory of relativity.

Last week of August.

Wrote this blurb twenty minutes before landing in San Diego.

...

Plane ride was plain. Delta. Sat two rows behind Noora who sat two rows behind Mom. Dad was in a loner seat at the front of coach. I read most of *Life of Pi* en route. I beat my high score in Cube Runner. I listened to my short but sweet California playlist (is it weird my computer doesn't recognize 'playlist' as a word?) that I cleverly entitled *California*.

- 1.) "California" - Dr. Dog /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxMzqqQvj2s>
- 2.) "California Sun" - The Ramones /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Z9iUdiS3hI>
- 3.) "California Girls" - The Magnetic Fields /// http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuENHA11_K0
- 4.) "Oh California" - Colin Hay /// (no link, just released)
- 5.) "California Dreamin'" - The Mamas & the Papas /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dN3GbF9Bx6E>

...

Sol Brood reporting from San Diego, tired. Writing from Earp's wicker room with floral bed sheets. Today, I was playing with Earp's white kitten DiGiorno in the kitchen, having a good time, when Aunt Shan, my mom, and the rest of the elders bring up the will like it was all we came to Cali for in the first place. The way it came up made it clear that everyone had been dying to bring it up (...) the entire trip over, which ruined all of the previous discussions I thought were genuine—but, like I said, turned out to be fodder for the will debacle. I don't get involved, but here's the gist: (1) When Grandpa died, a large chunk of money was unaccounted for, (2) Aunt Shan dealt with his money prior to his death, monetary dispersion after, (3) the

money doesn't add up and everyone's suspicious about everything and it's all another good excuse to give life a better juicier plot by inducing some sense of conflict for the potential flicks made about it later on when an ancestor gets famous enough for a familial spotlight. The elders are getting kind of heated next to the kitchen, rocking back and forth on the stools, and Shan tells my mom something like, "You've always got to be *right*, don't you?" and mom is clearly offended. Suddenly, Noora kicks into despite-being-mostly-awful-to-mom-I-must-stand-up-for-her-when-others-are-awful-to-her mode and tells Shan, "Too bad mom's the only normal one in this *fucking* family." Shan shit's a brick—several actually—enough to rebuild Jericho—and what was an awkward family segue morphed into a Capulet meets Capulet deathmatch.

Shan says, "You don't know *anything*, *Noor*," which doubles Noor's defense, and the glue-on nails come out a-flippin and a-flappin. Expletives, etc. Mom says, "Noor, *don't*. Not with Trace in here."

Shan had Trace when she was fifty-four. When he graduates high school, she'll stand up, clap, and die. He's seven now and the family is calling him 'little Sol.' "Oh, he's just—he's just such a little *smartie*. Best in his classroom. He's like that genius boy in that movie...oh, what's that movie...you know it...there's the mom and the...*LittleManTate*. That's it. Anyway, Mrs. Randall gives him harder spelling tests because she doesn't want to hold him back. Must be a genetic thing, *huh* Sol?" I joke and say, "I don't know, Shan. I've seen you're old grade cards," and she says, "Oh...*shut up*," and giggles like the hearty hoaxy Southerner she is. Trace has two older siblings in their late thirties, my first cousins, DeeDee and Cheney. One has kids older than Trace, and the other has Ani DiFranco albums older than Trace [(can you guess which one's the lesbian?) Spoiler alert: it's Cheney.

I've contemplated asking her, "Why don't you like Dick, Cheney?" and seeing what she

hears: (1) an abrupt question about her sexuality or (2) a thoughtful question about the vice president.] How fucking badass is it to be younger than your nieces and nephews? He'll jump on them and make them say uncle and it's damn near the cutest/assholeyist thing you'll ever see. Despite his adorability, the kid registers as a threat. I'm the smart Cooper/Brood, and it would be bizarre having blood with a better vocabulary. I'm too used to having a dim shitty family that makes me feel better about my existence to have someone I enjoy having around around.

Honest.

I don't know how to love.

I know how to compete.

...

At a mostly-awkward family get-together at a dusty Covington restaurant with sour coal slaw [sic]—he's maybe four or five—Trace orders the exact same meal as me because I'm the cool strong sexy talented funny insightful inspirational flawless modest older cousin. I tell him, "I don't know, Trace. That's a lot of grub for a little guy like you. Don't want all that food going to waste." He looks up at me, deadpan, and says, "But...all food goes to waste anyway."

I helped him finish his baked potato.

...

The Noora thing is happening—the family is fighting about fighting about fighting about fighting—so much getting nowhere going on, Descartes walks in and starts applauding—so I take Trace on a walk. I rent a pair of balls from the California spirit shop, say, "Settle this before we get back, or I'm catching a plane back home tonight," like a bamf to the whole family, and Trace y yo are outty. Kid doesn't need that in his baby genius psyche.

We get lost, nab a bench that says, “Gotcha! Park bench ads DO work!”¹⁶² I’m not good with kids, and my mom says she’ll have me fixed if I go through with the whole naming-my-twins-Huffle-and-Puff thing. Talking with Trace, it felt like *Three Men & a Baby*, but instead of three men and a baby, it was me and a seven-year-old. You get it. He’s clearly upset about the family outbursts (AKA the family)—stuck in a contextual downer—and he tells me, right off the bat, “I’m not as smart as mom says. I don’t like it when she brags about me.” Kid’s *me*, I swear. I say, “No one’s as smart as their mom says. Don’t worry, bud.” He confesses, “The teacher gives me harder words, but I don’t get them all right.” “What kind of words don’t you get?” “I got ‘controversy’ wrong. I put an i where the second o is.” “Ahhh, come on, that’s not a big deal. It sounds like it should be an i anyway. One time I misspelled ‘misspelled’ when I was making fun of someone else for misspelling something. Looked like a jack,” caught myself and said, “rabbit.” “I spelled ‘guard’ wrong, too.” “Don’t feel bad, bud. When I was your age, I didn’t know how to properly open my milk at lunch. I’d just rip the top open and drink from the square. But,” I told him, “I convinced my friends that that was the cool, adult way to drink milk, and they believed me. Had milk running down their shirts every day.” “You didn’t know how to open your milk?” I shake my head. He says, “Mom says I’m a genius like you.” “That’s weird. My mom says I’m a genius like *you*.”

Maybe I’m good with kids.

We spent a good portion of our sojourn dissing the jokes on the Laffy Taffy he had in his pockets.

“Why did the ghost buy a jacket?”

“Why?”

“It was ghoulish outside.”

¹⁶² [Unlike the people who sleep on the bench.]

We squinted our eyes at each other. Two skeptics.

“Where do dogs buy their groceries?”

“Where?”

“K-Bark.”

“What the fff,” caught myself and said, “un.”

“Why did the duck’s mother’s back break?”

“Why?”

“Her son stepped on a quack.”

I could tell he had to try not to laugh at that one.

“Hey, what do you call a joke on a candy wrapper?”

“What?”

“Doomed to fail.”

We ambled back to the house. I gave a homeless guy a two-dollar bill which induced his flipping the shit out (“Where you get this?” “Narnia.” “YARRRRRG.”), and I don’t know what it was, but being with Trace gave me something back I’d forgotten I’d lost—like that.¹⁶³

...

Got to meet G-wick¹⁶⁴ today, which is Friday, and he gave us his condolences for Grandpa’s death and for Grandma’s unhealth. He told me I had a firm handshake, and I told him he had a nice watch. The guy—not young enough to be a boy, not old enough to be a man, like Britney Spears with a penis—is genuine. He’s got a freshness about him I admire. Smells like Brut, just like Grandpa. Grandpa probably passed his Brut collection to Gwick as a preacher’s

¹⁶³ The whole time I was walking back with Trace, I kept thinking how hypothetically funny it would be if I lost him along the way and went back into Earp’s place and Shan freaked out and yelled, “WHERE IS MY SON?” and I looked at her all serious and said, “Looks like I returned home... WITHOUT A TRACE,” and then the screen would go black and the credits would roll.

¹⁶⁴ I’m just gonna call him Gwick from now on.

rite of passage.¹⁶⁵ But when he opens his mouth and the gospel spills out, the illusion—the illusion of hey, this guy’s pretty alright—shatters and I’m left in disbelief.¹⁶⁶ He’s my height—around 6’2”—but he’s musclier, bulkier. Looks like he could have played for the Broncos or some western team—western because he’s not a supercity type of guy and that’s my only reason. Guy’s cornfed, but he’s one of those guys you look at and have a hard time imagining he has parents he visits. Like a sharp-dressed alien or something. Certain expectations come with a muscle guy with a nice watch and manners, and he breaks them when he spends half an hour debunking the Jonathan-David romp rumors instead of spending his time pounding puss, pounding fists, and chugging Brovaltine with his brews.

And somehow, I respect the guy. I’d give money to get drunk with him sometime and really get to meet him, but heaven forbid¹⁶⁷ he affiliate with any spirits that aren’t holy. Mom namedropped my poem skills, and Gwick offered me a slot on the show—which at once, terrified and elated my parents—to read something inspirational. Every week they have people sing solos or play instruments and he said the people would love to see Grandpa’s own blood onstage.¹⁶⁸ I said sure, so hopefully you—the ether—will tune in Sunday morning to see me dazzle the elders with one of my not-so-angsty poems.

Bananas?

...

Grandma’s health isn’t. Doctors are saying weeks.

“So, Doctor, how long does she have?”

“Weeks.”

¹⁶⁵ “Thou shall not smell of Ralph Lauren, nor of Bod, but of Brut. Also, that gay shit isn’t allowed. Stop it.” Genesis 69:69.

¹⁶⁶ Literally.

¹⁶⁷ Literally.

¹⁶⁸ Grandpa’s church is really into sacrifice.

“Oh God. Isn’t there anything you can do?”

“Weeks.”

“Ok. I understand. Thanks for all of your help.”

“Weeks.”

“Um, ok. I—”

“*Weeks.*”

After getting a personal tour of the church with Gwick, we spent a few hours with G-Coop today, sitting around the bed, asking her questions about her past and critiquing the limited number of television shows available in the corner (—Earp says he’s seen every season of *The Price is Right* since Grandma’s been sick). Her favorite President was JFK because “he was handsome.” Her favorite band was “gospel music.” (Look at me talking in wases. Yeesh.) I knelt near the bed to give her an awkward side hug and to tell her I love her, and she managed to sit up, hold my face in her hands, look me in the eyes and say, “You’re getting so handsome.” I blushed and said, “Like JFK?” She said, “No. *Better*. Love you honey.” “Love you, too, Grandma.” Sometimes I wonder if she thinks about me more than I do about her, and sometimes I get myself upset thinking how likely it is. Something about family and friendship didn’t click for me early on, and I’m really starting to feel it.

Earp, Becca, Noor, Phillip, Trace, Quinton and I headed to Mission Beach while Mom, Dad and Shan stuck around the hospital with Grandma to talk business. Earp had had enough of it. I brought my camera with me to get some stock footage for a solo project I’ve been working on (—let’s just call it *The Project*).¹⁶⁹ Noor and Phillip disappeared pretty quickly to [you decide!], Quinton and Becca struck up a conversation about real estate because they’re both

¹⁶⁹ Really, I’ve been working on two things on the side. I’m calling them *The Projects*, which makes sense, because they both definitely could use some improvement.

players in said business,¹⁷⁰ so Earp, Trace and I went on a walk barefoot down the shore and let them bask. The beach was packed like that one Georges Seurat with the umbrellas and the gratuitous monkey—everyone’s faceless, everyone’s bright, everyone’s got their own little stories. Earp asked me the basic relative questions: *You seeing anyone? You excited for school? What are you going to major in? Plan on drinking a lot once you’re there?* I answered all of them honestly except the last one, to which I said, “Ha ha, yeah *right*,” and nervously giggled. Earp’s serious about not drinking.¹⁷¹ Trace skittered behind us, picking up wet shells and sticking them in a Ziploc. We ended up walking down a dock that extended into the ocean. When we got to the end, I leaned on the railing, realized why it felt familiar, and couldn’t help but smile and say, “You know what? *Fuck* beauty contests. Life is one fucking beauty contest after the next.” Earp says, “What’s that from?” “*Little Miss Sunshine*.” “Never saw it.” “You’re missing out.” “What’s it about?” I thought about it, looked out at the ocean—which gets less impressive every time I see it—and I say, “You know. *Whatever*.” Trace runs up with his bag, shows us some beauts, and we head back. I run away from the waves with Trace for a while, realize I should set my camera bag up shore so my camera doesn’t get ruined, and ASA I do that, Earp tries pushing me in, manages in getting all of us soaked. Homebase—Becca and Quinton are passed out tanning, Noor and Phillip are still MIA. We get boogie boards and go wild in the first forty or so feet of the Pacific like true pacifists.

Took two showers since, still smell like salt.

Hospital again tomorrow, then to the church to meet the regulars and then dress rehearsal.

¹⁷⁰ “Quinton and Becca struck up a conversation about real estate because they’re both players in,” said business.

¹⁷¹ The first time I heard the phrase “I don’t drink,” I was watching an episode of *All My Children*. Kelly Ripa was offered some alcohol and she said, “No, I don’t drink.” For a good couple months after that, I was convinced there were certain people who didn’t drink *anything*. “Hey, do you want a sip of my cranberry juice?” “Nah. *I don’t drink*.”

I wrote a new poem that's fifty percent Bible puns. This weekend, the church is hosting a volleyball tournament and barbeque. There will be thrifty sale tents lined up outside, and people, including the family, intend to stay the night. The church/show does that, so in the morning, when they need to fill the pews with sunny-eyed Godlovers, they'll be sure to have them already there, awake and ready to worship, instead of riding in ten minutes late on their scooters.

...

Volleyball was fun. I decided to sit down and write before I headed back to the church for the divine slumber party. This wicker room's a second home.

I went with the family to the hospital before volleyball and ran the one-two with Grandma again. I brought my camera for The Project and for the family (I think it will be nice to have footage of Grandma after she dies). You can tell the sisters and Earp want to jump down Grandma's throat and get the questions answered but the smell of impending death inhibits them. Death can be a real asshole sometimes.

A church friend of Grandma's came in today and cracked me up. Her name was Helen and she's fluent in sign language. She's one of those rarities who can make you laugh just by telling a true story. She told us about the time her dog ate her wedding ring, how she demanded her husband get it whenever it "came out the other end"—the time she and her deaf sister got into a signing argument at a school dance and unintentionally started a new dance when everyone saw them and joined in—the time her son wore a pink shirt to school and came back with a bloody nose—the time she and Grandma walked onto a nude beach by mistake and had a "snicker conniption."¹⁷² The lady deserves the Thurber Prize for humor. She told me I was handsome—seems to be the elderly's primary pick-up line—and that I must have the ladies after me all the time. I got Jonesy cheeks and laughed. Dad gripped my shoulder and told her, "He's

¹⁷² *Snicker Conniption*: the title of my second novel.

been too busy being successful. First in his class.” “Oh, congratulations!”

We all said goodbye and headed to the churchnigans. Ate. Volleyball team with Earp, Quinton and twin brothers named Aarav and He Who Sets Ball (they were both Indian). We dominated. Everyone took their shirt off except for me because mom was nearby and I didn’t feel like reminding her I have what might be two permanent tattoos. Earp has a huge tattoo of a phoenix stretching from his shoulder down to his elbow and a smaller tattoo of block O on his peck. Farmer’s tan for me until I’m old enough to move out and pretend I paid for my tats with my own money.

We headed back, and I took a shower—got the hot sand from between my toes, wrote this, and now you’re caught up to

riiiiiight

now.

...

Rehearsal was cool. I got to stand onstage and recite my poem to a mock audience of producers and cameramen, make sure content was acceptable, lighting was okay, microphone was functional. I had my poem lined up on the podium, and only had to glance down a few times to get my bearings. I start the whole thing by saying,

“Proverbs 2: 1 through 5 says

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you

Turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding

And if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding

And if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure

Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God

It is with this proverb in mind that I begin,”

and then I begin:

I struggle with profundity

Hence my sticking the muggles under me

But I pray you won't begrudgen me

You see, folks, I've just been suffering

When I should've simply stopped my self-snubbery

And seen that Solon the Sage was summoning me to restart my buffering

Buffering:

Job's jobless, but he'll continue praying

Samson got a haircut, with 'Hey There Delilah' playing

In the distance

And my mom claims *her* hair gives *her* resistance

[pause for laughter]

Philistines, I mean *philisteens*—*philistines*?

At any rate, they partied too hard, things got out of line

It's funny: Samson's bangs made the temple fall,

Because his bangs were falling over his temples

We say Saul,

The gist is simple.

Speaking of Delilah

Some think Jesus was a Plain Whitey,

But a Lot of people and their wives disagree

And claim he's Arabic

That he has a Middle Eastern heritage
 And others like me honestly don't care a bit
 Jesus is Christ no matter the amount of melanin
 Who else finds race irrelevant?
 [I feel like Satan threw it at us just for the...*hell* of it.

Is it any wonder that I'm celibate?]¹⁷³

Some get along fine not believing, but merely listening
 To their hearts
 And who can knock them?
 It's not anyone's right to rock them
 I mean *stone* them
 Or *scone* them
 I mean *scorn* them
 Don't *abhor* your enemies, *adore* them—*remember*?
 And not only during the last week of December!

Jesus was a carpenter,
 He said, "We've only just begun"
 Disciples gather, he says "this whole *life* thing needs redone
 Needs *re-doing*
 We're screwing it up by being hateful and greedy
 I'm going to die soon, but look—you don't need me
 You need *each other*

¹⁷³ They made me omit this.

Every man and woman is your lover
 At my fall, spring up and welcome summer
 You can Carey yourselves, *Dumb & Dumber*
 And if your water turns to wine when I'm gone, best to call a plumber
 If you need me, I'll be on Tumblr
 Don't make my last breath a bummer."

[Jesus and Black Friday alike save Lazarus from going under
 Jesus is JC, and He says to give up Pennies
 Mall puns bring the thunder]¹⁷⁴

Money is the root of all evil
 Funny, the evil of all roots lied with Samson
 Despite popular belief, The Holy Trinity isn't Hanson¹⁷⁵

Nope, it's the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
 Strangely, some folks resolve to only fear it
 Some folks speak in tongues because they hear it
 But *listen*:

There's no need for audio,
 There's no need for sight
 The energy's all around us
 The energy's what just might
 Save us like it did Lazarus

¹⁷⁴ I omitted this on my own.

¹⁷⁵ No, really. Look it up.

But right now that only accounts for barely half of us

When we're sad, the devil laughs at us

You see what I'm saying?

We're predators praying

Yesmen stuck naying

I'm belab'ring the point

I'm not the best person. I'm not an empty slate

I run at the mention of meaning, I freak out when faced with fate

Cain is Abel-minded, but he'll have to deal with Seth

Was it a test or was it decided? Guess we'll guess.

God bless

Yes, *blessings*

That's what life is, what strife is,

Anyone know what the name of Noah's wife is?

But back to the point I was making:

I can't stand here and say the spiritual are faking

When they spend their whole lives giving, not taking

Their faces glow with belief in the Son of Man—Yahweh—King!

I'll sing hallelujah

I think it's beautiful

Sure, I'll put my hands together, parallel my cuticles

But I don't *need* to

Instead, I need *you*

I need the people

We need the people

We, the people, need to be *One*

[pause]

We're all believers when forced to bereave our loved ones

We find hope in Ascension, in the doves, hugs—

It's time to let live and love

To love our fellow beings, not shove or tackle em'

To create a new world that's nothing less than

Immeasurably immaculate

Thank you."

The crew mindlessly clapped and were on to the next one. They got the shots blocked. I joined my also clapping family and skidaddled. Life is good.

...

First and foremost, fucking fuming with fury thanks to some numbnut named Kirt who I've got the pleasure to call my roommate. We got into it. Or let's say—I got into myself, thanks to him. Thanks to Him. Fuck. Like I've said, Grandpa's church has a Jesuspalooza every Saturday evening before the infamous Sunday Christcapades: the housewives gossip gospel, the elderly try not to die quite yet (no offense, Grandma)—Gwick shakes hands with the prolesytariats, and the kids run amuck and play freaks versus philistines.

“OH MY GOD, DON’T USE THE LORD’S NAME IN VAIN. THAT’S BAD AND JUNK.”

“OH MY GOD, YEAH, I KNOW. I LOVE KUTLESS.”

“MEH TOO. JESUS AND TOBY MAC ARE LIKE, MY HOMEBOYS.”

“WE’RE SO RELIGIOUS BUT ALSO SO YOUNG AND HIP.”

“JESUS FREAKS FOR LIFE. I LOVE YOU GUYS.”

“YOU KNOW WHO ELSE LOVES US?”

“JESUS?”

“NAILED IT!”

“THEY SURE DID.”

Anyway, Kirt is, scientifically speaking, God’s little fracking bitchwhistle. Imagine Perpetua and Felicity having a faith orgy in a faith dungeon, queefing each other dry until faith runs down their thighs, aaand...you’ve seen Kirt. Christian as all the fuck. Long story short, I mention I’m a nihilist, and he just, well, he just can’t function knowing someone nearby doesn’t have Josh’s dick swooshing around their lower intestine. “Now what exactly *is* a nihilist?”

“Someone who’s really into Egyptian rivers.”

“...”

“There are a bunch of intricacies, but basically, a nihilist is someone who believes there is no inherent meaning in anything.”

(I think the human’s curse [let’s pretend we’re all part of some big Sisyphean punishment gig right now] is feeling and understanding things better than being able to verbalize them. Here’s to the day we build a machine that can express what we mean better than we can with words [and get that boulder over the top and down the other side {Heh. The Other Side.}])

We were lying in separate beds, both looking at the ceiling.

I continue kind-heartedly. I tell him about my experiences with Christianity, how it was a fruitless quest (at which point I made an Adam and Eve joke, which didn't only go over his head, but fucking flew out of the room, down the hallway, out of the building, and is now halfway across the Pacific.) I got salty about something I shouldn't have gotten salty about and told him Pentecostals and people speaking in tongues are fakers—or really good at faking themselves out.

He says, “Yeah, I’ve never understood speaking in tongues either.”

To get a grip on Kirt: the kid’s voice is higher than his body says it should be.

“But, I—I have *faith*. I know that I don’t know if there is or isn’t a God. I just know that I have to have faith.”

“I mean, I have faith, too. Just not in the Bible. I have faith in mankind and in the universe and in actual sanity.”

“Not everyone is blessed with the correct faith.”

I sat up on my shoulders and stared at the white brick wall to my left like an anti-hero in a not-so-climaxey novel.

“If God created us all, and he wants us all to have faith, why didn’t he give everyone faith? Why didn’t he just make us perfect? What’s life’s point? Why not just all live in heaven forever? Why exist at all? Why are there things like sin and hatred and murderers and death?”

“Well, this is how I see it...”

He kept saying that. I need an extra-italicizer to show how fucking much he emphasized his I.

His I: *___*.

“Well, this is how *IIII* see it: God created us, but—but He let us be free. He wants us to

make our own decisions. For some of us, that means bad things. He doesn't want to interfere."

I threw the I's back.

"I'm just saying if *I* were God, *I* wouldn't want to see my creations suffer. And, if *I* had the ability to create them all, *I* sure as hell would fix any major problems they were creating. When *I* saw the Holocaust on the horizon, *I* would have stomped Hitler and taken his punkass out of the equation, considering he was my fault in the first place. *I*'d look out for my creations. *I* would love them and never let them get hurt. *I* wouldn't just sit around in voyeuristic paradise and—"

"Do you have a dog?" he asks me.

"No."

"Well, if you had a dog, would you love it?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is how *IIIIII* see it...would you ever keep your dog from going outside?"

"If there were a tornado or notorious mountain lion in the area or something, yeah, *I* would."

"What if it had to use the bathroom?"

"Then I'd probably let it out, but I'd keep her on a leash and keep a good lookout for—"

"Well, to God, we are His dogs. He doesn't want to keep us from exploring on our own. He loves us and wants us to live free."

I let out a cough-laugh that sounded Morse for "the fuck?"

"So, God wants us all to explore and live free."

"Yeah, He does. He really does."

"What about people with disabilities? People with Downs Syndrome? Why does God

make them go through that? Take away the ability to experience life the way it was meant to be experienced?”

“Well, this is how *IIIII* see it: those type of people are here to give us inspiration and remind us that we have a wonderful life to live. God works in mysterious ways.”

Cough-laugh.

“Okay. Imagine...a child was raised without ever meeting anyone...ever. They grow up alone, no one around, and die. You say that people that aren’t saved go to hell, right?”

“Yeah.”

“But, that kid never heard of Jesus or Buddha or God or anything in his life. You can’t tell me that he’d burn in hell for all of eternity just because he never got the memo.”

No answer.

I went on:

“For one thing, hell doesn’t exist. If I were God, I wouldn’t put my creations through a shit life and then punish them for not living it how I wanted. Hell makes God a dick. I mean, He’s the one who supposedly put us here in the first place. He can’t punish us for not living up to his standards—standards that aren’t even close to being universal.

“To *meeeeee*, it would make more sense if God had weekly meetings with the people of Earth and taught them the stuff He wanted them to know.”

No answer.

I went into a three-minute speech about how we are one with the universe, one with each other, etc. I mentioned Tolle and Daniken and Tyson. I fucking quoted shit. I said that the Big Bang formed one universe and expanded and that we’re all made of the same energy—energy that will never die, and most certainly never burn in hell. I told him about Nate, and about how

much I miss him. I felt childish even taking the time to entertain Kirt's bullshit. Eventually, I asked him a question:

"What do you think God looks like?"

No answer.

"Kirt? Kirt?"

He's asleep.

"Kirt."

"Oh, dude, sorry. D'I fall asleep?"

I bit my lip and said, "It's cool. Good night."

"Good night."

...

So here I am, at one of the desks, writing this. Kirt's asleep, to my southwest. The congregation has a surprise in store. Live television, here I come.

I JUST CAN'T

WAAAAAAIT

TOBE KIIING

/// "I Just Want to Make Love to You" – Etta James ///

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Pu_AdU_NQg

\\\\\\

“All hearts go in the bin. All hearts in the bin. Ma’am, do you have a heart? In the bin.”

A smileless ace pointed to a bin at the edge of Blaine Park. A temporary plastic archway stood behind her. A series of identical archways lined the south and west sides of the park. Entry stations.

“Warning. Belts *will* be dismantled when you walk through the archway. Disable belts before walking through archway. Ma’am—*hearts in the bin.*”

Two days before the retirement extravaganza, Virg received an update from Zeke, fellow rev and REIGN insider. Without H’lu—who Virg, Rey, and Dwyng hadn’t spoken to since her dramatic exit—the three revs relied on Zeke for information. Zeke sauntered over to Info, approached Virg’s kiosk and said two words: “No hearts.” He glided past the kiosk and through Info’s side door, like a shade. The kid took being covert seriously.

“They’re going to have heart detectors at the Point,” Virg explained to Dwyng and Rey after work. Rey stood near the bookshelf, flipping through Fates. Dwyng sat at the table, meditating. Verx sat next to a stack of colorful Fates. “They know we’re up to something.”

“We assumed so,” Dwyng said. “We figured it out.”

“Wait, what? How—”

“Hearts aren’t the only way to change your appearance,” Rey laughed. “Just like porters aren’t the only way to get from here to there.”

Virg, confused.

“Just because the world’s technologically dependent, doesn’t mean *we* have to be,” Dwyng said.

“Get to the point,” Virg said. “Or we *won’t.*”

Virg laughed at his own joke then remembered the seriousness of the situation.

“We figured they would boost security, so we found a solution,” Rey said.

“Well, *I* didn’t find it,” Dwyng said. “This was all Rey.”

“Really, this was all *Ellis*,” Rey said.

“Wait—what? *Ellis*?”

Rey beamed.

“We’re going to wear *make-up*.”

Virg and Dwyng now approached the entry station looking like two slender motorcyclists. Two orange-brown beards and black leather vests.

An extra pound of prosthetics, fake hair, and make-up clung to their faces. Virg resisted the urge to itch his face, which was covered in a thick adhesive prosthetic, fake hair, and a healthy layer of foundation. A fake nose wart. A mole.

After spending several hours in front of the mirror, they were ready.

“Make-up?” Virg had said with fingers together.

“*Make-up*,” Rey had said. “Ellis told me it’s what people used before hearts. It’s the Ex’s ancestor.”

And before

Virg could ask another question, Rey had created the necessary materials out of thin air. The sudden appearance of bodyless hair and fake skin had made Verx flee the living room.

Now, Dwyng and Virg walked through MC, unrecognizable. Rey sauntered through another sector of MC, disguised as a balding man with a harelip.

“Belts—off. Hearts—off. No exteriors. In the bin.”

Twenty people and a strict ace stood between the two faux-motorcyclists and Blaine Park.

“Shite, shite, shite,” Virg said. “We look behemoth.”

“We’re fine,” Dwyng said.

“*You’re fine,*” Virg said. “It subsumes my face is *melting.*”

The line moved.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Dwyng said. “Act natural.”

Their leather vests squaked as they approached the archway.

“Hearts in the bin, gentlemen,” the ace told them. *Squak!* “No hearts, walk on through.”

“I haven’t had a heart in years,” Dwyng told the ace. He winked at it.

And they were through.

Virg chuckled.

“I can’t wait to see the look on peoples’ face when you rip yours off.”

+++++

An exodus of eager Aim residents drifted to Azna’s Point. Dwyng and Virg let the flow carry them to a seat near the front of the concentric circles.

Dwyng spotted Sidd Regal standing near the edge of the stage, surrounded by a troupe of aces. Orders, orders, orders.

A thin white tent ran tangent to the stage, extending into the forest toward REIGN, splitting the circles. The Geezer pathway. A tall, wooden podium stood in the middle of the stage. Twenty-two empty seats sat behind the podium, waiting for their occupants. Dwyng turned in his seat to see a majority of the circles filled with bright-faced spectators.

Virg eyed the stage, looking for any sign of H’lu.

Several cameras floated around the Point, relaying their images to the screens splayed throughout the circles.

They sat in silence for several minutes, people-watching.

Finally:

A general ‘ah’ rose from the crowd. Dwyng and Virg looked up to see the master of ceremonies, Sidd Regal, dawdle to the lonely podium.

The crowd threw their hands into the air, taking pictures. Thousands—waving.

“Hello!” Regal started. His voice boomed through the Point. “Welcome to what can safely be called the biggest event in recent history!” Cheers. “Tonight we celebrate the life of Mr. Krystopher “Boss” Poasley, a man who has dedicated his entire life to the people of Aim.” Cheers. “Here, in support of their elder and friend, you know their names—the People’s Union for Humility—Aim’s very own—The Geezers!”

A standing ovation as twenty-two elderly men and women strolled out of the white tent and to their seats behind the podium. Waves both ways.

After a minute of uproarious praise, the sages sat, the cheering died down. Regal resumed.

“Boss has sacrificed everything to make Aim—and more specifically, Main City—the world’s leading superpower. Without his undying—” Dwyng and Virg laughed at the word choice “—resolve to create a better city, Main City would undoubtedly be a far less self-sufficient place.

“I remember the first time I met Boss. He looked at me on my first day as Vice President of REIGN, looked me in the eyes, and said, ‘Lose weight, fatty.’” Laughter, applause. “Since then, I have had the honor to work with Boss on a variety of projects, including tonight’s ceremony. All these years, and I have lost neither weight nor respect for the man who gave me a

chance early on.” Applause. “Now, with some words for her co-worker and compatriot, Boss’s successor and new Head of the Peoples’ Union for Humility, Roberta ‘Mama’ Leighman!”

As the old slender woman in the red suit jacket side-hugged Regal and waved to the masses, a chorus of fingers slapping palms.

“Boss may be old,” she started, “but he’s sharper than ever.”

A five-minute speech, concluding with, “I look forward to leading the Peoples’ Union into a new era. With your help, Main City will continue to be the self-sufficient utopia that it already is—and *then* some. Thank you!”

Her gummy smile led her offstage as Regal returned to his spot behind the podium.

“Now, to tell his side of the story,” Regal said, “the Geezers’ next next-in-command, Mr. Henrik ‘Tubz’ Tubbs.”

A large black man with brown pants and suspenders ambled to the podium. Dwyng watched as the man he used to eat lunch with received a standing ovation. His face appeared on the giant screens standing throughout the Point.

“Sit down, sit down,” he told the crowd. “Sit *down*. I *mean* it.” Laughter. “A day hasn’t gone by that I haven’t spoken to Boss. He is a friend and—”

A five-minute speech.

Virg leaned toward Dwyng.

“What if Boss confessed everything in his speech?” he said.

Dwyng just smiled.

Tubz, returning to his seat.

Waves as Regal re-greeted the podium to introduce the man of the half-hour.

“Without further ado, the man of the half hour, Krystopher ‘Boss’ Poasley!”

Boss stood from his seat behind the podium. The seventy-year-old legend's hair had completely grayed since the last time Dwyng had seen it. Fifteen years ago, his coarse, black hair still fought for space. His gravelly voice—passing cautiously through his scarred neck—vibrated across Azna's Point for fifteen minutes. A low-pitched breeze punctured the pauses not filled with deafening applause. No mention of Aldwyn, of the assassination attempt, of the revs. Things in MC, it seemed to Dwyng, were perfect.

The people wouldn't stop waving.

Boss closed his speech with various necessary thanks—to his fellow Geezers, to his guards, to Regal, and lastly, to the public, whose constant support and search for enlightenment fuels the paradise that is Main City, Aim.

“Always remember,” he said. “People are people.”

Dwyng stood with the rest of the world and applauded. He lightly tapped his palm as two graceful aces escorted Aim's hero to his seat onstage.

Regal returned to the podium one last time to reveal the surprise of the millennium. Aldwyn had waited for the ceremony for years, and now, he thought, it was flying by.

“Before you go, we would like to present Boss with a going away gift,” Regal said. “Boss, you have served Aim for seventy years. You have made the city what it is: an oasis. For your dedication to the people, we would like to present you with a not-so-small token of our appreciation.”

The screens showed Regal run offstage toward a hefty hoard of aces. Mass cahooting. Dwyng closed his eyes. Unrivaled concentration.

Regal's thumb went up and so did the statue of Boss, pointing into the distance.

And there, sitting on top of Boss's copper forefinger, was Aldwyn "The Silver Fox,"
ready to fly.

+++++

So I found a better climax—one that leaves me less, you know, grief-stricken and self-loathing. It comes¹⁷⁶ in the form of *The Divine Hour*, a church service shot out¹⁷⁷ to the nation every Sunday morning from San Diego, California. Jizz.¹⁷⁸

And it goes like this:

Woke up in a black-and-white world. The pews, black. The walls, white. The faces, white and black. The eyes, black. The light, white. The dust, black.

Front row. Family to the right, aisle to the left.

Hymns.

Asian prodigy on the piano.

The sermon's thesis was the "evil in media." It was over/ I blinked/ I was onstage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a very special guest with us today. He came all the way from southwestern Ohio to bring us his message. I had the pleasure to meet him this weekend, and I can tell the spirit shines bright in this one. Pastor Royal Cooper passed just last year, but his legacy lives on. Not only in the thousands of souls he touched as the head of this wonderful church, but in the impassioned voice of his grandson. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Solon Brood—academic, athlete, and poet."

Applause.

I'd been staring at the purple—black—tapestries along the walls. I snapped my head toward the congregation at the claps and soon enough the words flew, from some glorious, untapped well beneath my chest, below my throat.¹⁷⁹

"Proverbs 2: 1 through 5 says

¹⁷⁶ Get it?

¹⁷⁷ Now?

¹⁷⁸ I'm basically spelling it out for you.

¹⁷⁹ You get a Pulitzer if you're a melodramatic douche, right?

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you
 Turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding
 And if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding
 And if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure
 Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God

It is with this proverb in mind that I begin.”

And then I looked down at my family. Trace between his parents in a kid’s suit. Noor and Phillip looking strangely happy together. Dad and Mom with their anxiety eyes. I looked down at the podium, over to Gwick, and I closed my eyes. Only a few seconds passed, but I thought of Grandpa’s ghost floating across the stage—Grandma lying in her hospital bed next to Helen, both commenting on how handsome I look up in the corner—Jonesy, with crusty eyes and bed head, taking the effort to watch me on my big day—Mr. Fritz, setting his coffee down to watch, too—the thousands—maybe millions? doubt it, probably like twelve to fifteen people—tuning in on their lazy Sundays, ready to hear a poem and fall back asleep—and I thought about what I must look like to a future version of myself, and, in that last cosmic millisecond, my present self decided I looked pretty outstanding.

And just like that, I brick housed:

“In the beginning, God was faceless and the word was good
 He made the light, the animals, *us*, knocked on wood
 And said
 ‘Should this place become what it should not, Lot,
 And *rot,*’

He thought.

‘I’ll drop it like it’s hot.’ (No one seems to notice the difference. The poem’s still all religion-y
and passionate, so it must be the same, right?)

Adam and Eve ruined it for the rest of us, God irate
So gone Daddy gone, and the two consummated
To start the great chain of pain and fleeting meaning
That lands us, hands up, in the double-half-full chapel on Pat’s street meeting each other with half-paper
greetings

Oh come all ye faithful, with your piety and dietary grievances
These seasons change reason-less
No logic, no rhyme
Give back? No time
Feel something, feel the Holy Spirit, feel my Lord and Savior, yeah *right*
Far right, in fact
IRAQ!

No Child Left Behind unless the kid’s flaming or one of those Mus-lams
Wearing those tur-bans and exploding the subur-ban landscape
Heaven forbid we’re accepting,
Respect me, I’m Christian and He’s risen
The Bible told me so
O-H!
Oh no [pause]

No Amen left for gay men (I look over at Gwick. He notices the difference—*big time*. Must figure

stopping me is worse than letting me go. He stays put. How bad can I
get, you know?)

Jesus taught us to love others,

Or at least that's what they told me

I know a boy who loves a boy, though, is it cool to scold *me*?

It's scary living in a world two-thirds religious,

That's a majority that prefers idle-minded groupthink over evidence in pictures

Of the Pope's bowels bouncing and jiggling

Pitter-pat, pitter-pat, pitter-pat off of Pat Robertson's jewels

There's beauty in divinity, but your Sunday best is testing it

Arresting it for the sake of investing in a god who's his own son's father

Why not throw in a daughter, who's next in line for the slaughter?

Holy water!

Don't you get that S-O-N is actually S-U-N and that S-I-N is N-sanity?

They call Sunday the day of rest

Because while you sit here, the *rest* of us are out living

And loving, not shoving psalms and proverbs

Into the palms of small birds otherwise known as innocents

Repentance is futile when god always forgives

Repentance is useful when little Johnny leaves this parasitic hellhole and chooses to live

I would say un-converting you is my cross to bear if it weren't so appropriate

Hello masses, open your Bibles, smell the opium

Every-other-week Sabbatical radicals leading another generation of thoughtlessness

Stop all this, you kiss the lips of pithy myths and lists of sins and pick at kin and friends who sip on gin
and sit and grin and live and win in a world that allows them to do so

I-O! —

You nothing

Christ!

(Maybe I should reconsider my thoughts on
religion, because the fact that no one stopped me
by now was a miracle.)

Atheism's a parasite, too. *BOO*, stop your cheering and hear me:

Dawkins got the middle class lonelies gawkin' and telling zealots off like they just clocked in

It's not your job to say God doesn't exist

When you're only one NDE away from a shaky agnosticism

Science can be a real prison

When it cuts off all ability to be faithful

Humans need faith, even if it's in faithlessness, you get that?

Yeah I'd hit that, if by 'that' you mean the high note!

Where'd the love of life go?

Today, it's all about keeping up with the Jones'

Well, I *know* the Jones', and they're just as alone as the Smiths and the Johnsons,

The Stevens, the Bronsons,

In Utah, Cali, Texas, Wisconsin

We're depressed, thus depressing

We spend these Sundays dressing, congesting, not resting

Arrest me for observing the human condition

The lack of political progressive fruition

The inability to learn cause the price of tuition

The weakening trust in our own intuition

It's been far too long that we've looked to religion

When it's the source of the useless competition in the first place

You don't have to listen to me, you have to listen to you, but SHOO

Get out of the chapel,

Should have stopped trusting the man with the beard when he made a talking snake with an apple

Who forced a dumb braud to lay with a lasso [say in Cockney so it sounds like asshole]

Just so her descendants could grow up to be pastors

Who worship the word of the same guy who screwed her over

In the first place!

The meek will inherit the earth,

That is, if there's any left to inherit

'The devil's got a hold of you, boy!'

Spare it

You're barren

We need more real love, like that we give Lucy

RELIGION IS CRUCIFIXION MINUS CRUCI

(They finally cut my mic off. I hear the difference in the volume and adjust. I look at Gwick, and yell the rest.)

Why decide to lead a life already written

When you've got a pen and a pad and intentions?

Now *listen*:

We are all one substance, existence's inseparable parts

Press restart, we're

Bound by Energy, bound by the Sun (the star, not the man)

Bound by love

Love is the revolution!

And to think: it all started with an *atom* on the *eve* of evolution.

Praise be to Allahya.”

I walked off, shaking.

I walked off, happy.

/// “The Futile” – Say Anything /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfOL8VfC7kk>

\\\\\\

Rey glided up the steps of REIGN with his receding hairline and harelip. The streets, eerily empty. Gray.

The sun was set.

He skipped across the lotus. A handful of aces paced through the lobby. Zeke stood in the middle of the lotus, waiting.

“Is everyone lined up?”

Zeke nodded.

“The northwest portion of the Point,” he said. “They’re just—they’re just waiting for the word.”

“Then—let’s go be the word.”

Zeke nervously eyed the nearest ace. He swallowed. He nodded.

The two men headed into the belly of the beast in order to rip it open.

+++++

Regal beckoned Boss to the podium—now nestled between his own gargantuan copper legs—to accept his permanent likeness.

The two men smiled into the endless cult.

+++++

Virg shuffled past his row of cheerers and made his way to the aisle.

He couldn’t hear himself think. The circles exploded with applause.

“If she shows, she shows,” he said under his breath. “If she doesn’t, she doesn’t.”

As the two men shook hands behind the podium, Virg rushed the stage.

+++++

After swerving through the REIGN's labyrinth, Rey and Zeke finally entered the control room. Betsy stood near the door, picking at her nails, aimlessly smiling at the wall opposite her. A series of large screens on the far wall: a live feed of the retirement. Each screen, the home of a floating camera's feed.

Tens of aces, maneuvering what Ellis might have called future-y switchers.

Betsy's smile faded as the two men opened the door.

The largest, center screen: Boss walking toward the podium, en route to accept his gift.

"Calling it *close*," Betsy spat.

Rey laughed.

"Right on time," he said. "Are you ready?"

She nodded and Rey put the gun to her head.

+++++

Virg effortlessly pushed the aces out of his way and jumped onstage.

He searched for her.

And he found her, holding a machine gun, a revolver and a devilish smirk, climbing the opposite side of the stage.

Her presence was joined by undefined outcries from thousands of The Confused.

+++++

Boss and Regal shook hands onscreen(s).

Virg

Tanker made his way onto every screen in REIGN's control room. H'lu joined him, wielding two guns. Rey watched as she tossed the revolver to Virg, who shot into the distance.

"These people are liars!" he yelled. He pointed center stage. "All of them! Liars!"

The circles erupted with terror, disgust, intrigue, amazement, etc.

Boss's voice swam through the control room: "Turn them off!" On screen, he screamed into his wrist. "Turn them *off!*"

Betsy screamed from the back of the room, and every ace spun around from one catastrophe to see another. Rey held a revolver to her head. "Focus on the finger or she gets it!"

"Do what he says!" Betsy screamed. "Do what he says! I *order* you! They've lined the stage with explosives! If I die, they'll go off."

Rey had told Betsy to improvise.

"The detonation and my respawn are lined up," she said. "If I die, so do the Geezers." (Boss: "Turn them off!") "*No*—Boss has no idea. Do what this guy says! Do it or risk killing everyone on stage!"

Onscreen, Virg concluded.

"The real hero sits above us!" he yelled.

"*NOW!*" Betsy shrieked.

And like that, every camera in the Point zoomed higher and higher and higher until they landed on the new man of the half hour, balancing on the tip of an outstretched finger.

+++++

Hundreds of wide-eyed revs lined the northwest portion of the Point. They'd waited years to cahoot.

They stared at their leader and waited for the word.

+++++

"Aim," Dwyng started. "I have spent fifteen years being tortured by the very people you celebrate."

Dwyng's voice echoed from the face of a stoic man with a leather jacket and a brown-orange beard. The crowd, overloaded with happenings.

A brave ace stormed the stage. Virg shot it down. It disappeared after four seconds. The sounds of public outrage.

"Spare it," Dwyng said. "You're barren."

He thought.

"But I don't blame you for your ignorance," Dwyng continued. "I blame REIGN's exploitation of your ignorance."

Regal attempted to sneak Boss from the stage, but was swiftly greeted by a near miss from Virg's barrel. The two men stayed put. H'lu stood guard over the other Geezers, who sat in their chairs, frozen with fear.

"Boss said it best," Dwyng said. "People are people. We accept. We confide. We *trust*." Pause. "But in a world brimming with answers, it seems we have lost the ability to *question*."

Dwyng began to rip off his face. A goopy heap of fake skin and hair fell to the stage. Gasps.

"It's time to question again," he said. "But be wary. Don't expect your questions to lead to the future's truths. No, no, no. Expect your questions to lead to a better present. To a smoother journey. *To better questions*."

He thought.

"Not knowing begets existence. Ignorance—that is, acknowledging that not everything is knowable—is divine."

He thought. "And those sitting before you recognized this divinity and used it to their advantage. They took away your ability to *ask* by filling you with *answers*."

Dwyng ripped off the last remaining bits of his face and threw them to the wind. The Silver Fox was back.

+++++

cut-to: falling action.

Of course everyone was mad. They were so mad they didn't know how to handle the situation, like robots when confronted with a paradox. It's not like they could send me to my room. After I walked offstage, a children's chorus sang "For the Beauty of the Earth" and the show pretended like nothing happened.

The shuttle ride back to the condo was silent, sans Phillip. He was sitting behind me on the bus and kept trying to console me by nervously laughing and saying stuff like, "Yo, *I* thought that was funny as hell." I don't think he even got the point, but he's a good guy.

When we got back, Mom had Dad talk to me. He took me into the all-white wicker room. I was on the green-and-pink floral-patterned bed, and he was in the big-backed white-wicker chair across from it.

"What were you thinking?"

"..."

I stared out the glass door to my right. Finally:

"Do you believe in everything you said up there?"

"Yes."

"Well... ..that's all I ask."

"Shouldn't you yell at me? Mom will yell at you if you don't yell at me."

"You think?"

I nod.

"Well, if you really believe in what you said, you better yell back."

I nod.

"YOU'VE EMBARRASSED THE ENTIRE FAMILY! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING,

SOL?”

“THAT I WAS DOING THE RIGHT THING!”

“THE RIGHT THING? *THE RIGHT THING*? YOU THOUGHT RUINING YOUR GRANDPA’S TV SHOW AND EMBARRASSING YOUR WHOLE FAMILY WAS THE RIGHT THING TO DO?”

“YEAH, I *DID*!”

“WELL, YOU ARE GROUNDED AS SOON AS WE STEP OFF OF THAT AIRPLANE!”

I smiled.

“SO ARE THE REST OF THE PASSENGERS!”

He tried not to laugh. I wondered if someone had taken Trace for a walk.

“THAT’S IT, SOL. YOU SIT IN HERE AND THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU’VE DONE!”

He gave me two thumbs up, and I gave them back. He smiled.

And then my dad put his hands on my head and kissed me on the forehead. I could feel where his lips had been for a long time after he’d left the room. It was like a paternal *gedwëy ignasia* between my temples for the rest of the day. I fell asleep in a surreal Californian oasis-of-a-wicker-room.

When I woke up, DiGiorno was sleeping next to me. His little white kitten chest went up and down, up and down, up and down.

/// “November Was White, December Was Grey” – Say Hi ///

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfOL8Vfc7kk>

\\\\\\

Judith sat in the northwest portion, grinning.

+++++

“When he’s finished with his speech,” Rey yelled. “You *drop the field.*”

The control room aces covered at their stations.

+++++

“I’m Aldwyn,” Dwyng said. “The Silver Fox. Winnie the PUH. Your former leader. Your old friend. Fifteen of my finest years were spent within REIGN, being rewired to feel pain.” Gasps. “REIGN hid the truth I represented because they were afraid it would affect their power—power fueled by *your* ignorance—or lack thereof.

“After tonight, it’s going to be hard to trust again,” Dwyng said. “But, hey...*that’s the point.*”

(Hundreds of feet below, Virg Tanker looked out at the disgruntled crowd and said, “So is this.” He laughed at himself.)

“Life is a paradox,” Dwyng said. “You have my *word.*”

+++++

Virg shot.

The retiree fell to the ground.

A leaking bindi and dead eyes.

+++++

Dwyng ran up Boss’s arm and stationed himself against Boss’s giant copper head.

+++++

“*Drop the field!*”

+++++

H'lu unloaded on two rows of eleven.

One by one, the Geezers fell.

+++++

“DROP IT *NOW!*”

+++++

The Northwest Portion.

Hundreds of revolutionaries with closed eyes, concentrating, cahooting—years, waiting for the field drop.

And finally, it came.

The statue vanished.

+++++

Thousands, waving goodbye.

+++++

Aldwyn's body fell through the center of Azna's Point for four seconds before smacking the stage floor.

Thud.

Dwyng's back snapped against the Geezer-lined platform.

+++++

Chaos, confusion, concentric circles.

+++++

thumbs up.

Dad grounded me for real to maintain the illusion, so I've spent my time either at camp working or looking through old schoolwork. I found a short story I wrote in fourth grade—and I can't stop reading it. It's the funniest thing anyone has ever written in the history of history.¹⁸⁰

Time Conspiracy¹⁸¹

Part I

One evening, an eleven year old, in Annapolis, Maryland, named Victer Irgle, was sitting in a classroom, listening to his teacher Ms. Judith. She was talking this and that about how America came to be. BORING. She also said that they had a field trip to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. on Friday the 13th. Maybe it would be fun. Maybe. At least his friend Henry Luper would be there.

After school he caught up with Henry, asking him about the D.C. trip that was supposed to be so amazing.

“Man, I have to go to my bummed-out Grandma’s house on Friday,” Henry stated sadly.

“OK, then. Well, I guess I’ll see you on Monday,” Victer replied.

“BYYYYEEEE,” Henry yelled as he walked on his bus in the distance.

Victer didn’t have to ride the bus, he walked home. He lived two blocks away from his school, North Polis.

“MMMMOOOOOMMMM,” Victer yelled cracking a mirror or two, when he walked inside the house.

“WWWHHHAAAAATTTT,” she screamed back downstairs.

That was a kind of language for the Irgle’s. Screaming from a whole different room, instead of waiting to talk to someone until you see them. Well, finally his mother walked downstairs to greet him.

“Can I go to Washington D.C. on Friday,” Victer asked.

“I guess. But, you know how I feel about Friday. Friday the 13th. You better be very careful

¹⁸⁰ INARGUABLE

¹⁸¹ This font is enough for the Pulitzer alone.

when you're so far away, on such an awful day," his mom answered back.

Victor's mom had a thing about superstition. If a black cat is in sight, she runs. If she spills salt, over her shoulder it goes, and she knocks wood a lot and collects horseshoes!

"Okay, mom, I'll be extra careful," Victor went to his room.

During that night Victor kissed all of his beloved posters of his favorite Rock n' Roll artists, brushed his teeth, then took a shower. After all of those deeds he went to bed ready for the D.C. field trip in the morning.

Once he got to school he met up with the bus that was to take him and the kids going to the Smithsonian. On the way there, they passed many colonial times resorts and statues. They stopped at a golden corral for lunch, then pulled into D.C. It was great. When they got to the Smithsonian, they noticed the Smithsonian was eight different museums. Great. Just what Victor needed. Not only one museum. Eight. Victor was the kind of kid who didn't listen in class. He would chew gum, read comics, and joke around, instead of listening in school. This field trip, he thought he thought would be lame.

Part II

"Class. This is your tour guide for today. Her name - what's your name again - is Mrs. Moosum. First, will take off to the Space Museum, then to an old National History Museum. Last, but not least off to the Asian History Museum we'll go," their teacher screeched with her ragged voice.

"Yes Ms. Judith" the class attempted to say happily.

They passed into the Space Museum and saw a couple of real-life rockets and got to touch a real, yea, a real moon rock. Even though they got to see an IMAX THEATRE presentation, Victor wasn't having a very fun time.

Next, was the Natural History Smithsonian. Down the walls of the Museum, were pictures of pretty much every country leader in the world! It seemed like there were billions of statues, and quadrillions of anything possible you could find in the whole world. Many of the other kids looked at the ancient stuff, amazed. Victor yawned in aghast.

Finally there was the Asian History boring-fest left. Then things got suddenly better. Victor saw a donut shop! HURRAY!

“I’d like a jelly donut, and a strawberry milkshake, please,” Victor said to the girl behind the desk.

When Victor turned around with his donut and milkshake he noticed no one was there. He started to run every which way. Upstairs, downstairs, left, right, he searched for his long-lost class, when -

“TTTTTHHHHHUUUUUGGGGG,” a huge weird, heavy wizard statue had fallen on him when he ran into it. All of a sudden a colorful beam stroked from the statue’s eyes. They beamed at Victor. He was so petrified. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again he was somewhere else. One of the people he saw looked like one of the statues he saw on the ride over to the museum. Now, only if he could remember his name. Oh yeah! George...George Washington. The first president of the United States! I guess school does pay off.

“WHERE AM I?” he yelled in a high, frantic voice.

“I’m sorry,” George Washington said to Victor, “but you’re at the execution of a guy who tried to kill someone else. Hi, I’m Washington, George Washington. What’s your name, sir?”

“Hello, George, aren’t you president.” Victor asked.

“What is a pres...i...dent. I’ve never heard of such a being.” Washington stated.

“Well,...George, is it true that that’s a wig.” Victor wondered. “Well, never mind. What year is it?”

“It is the year 1769,” George answered.

“Thanks. Do well in the Revolutionary” Victor shouted as he ran away from the crowd at the execution area.

Part III

As he was running he heard a crying snap. He turned around to see what it was then -

BBBBAAAAAMMMMM!!!!!!

Not again. He saw a tiny clock floating above his head, and a annoying tick-toc was going off in his ear. He plugged his ears and closed his eyes. He opened them again, and was at a train station.

“FOUR SCORE, and seven years ago,” he heard coming from a tiny podium by the entrance of the train sitting on the train tracks.

“ABRAHAM LINCOLN!!! That boring dude from the 1800’s. Weird,” Victer thought to himself in disbelief, “I got to talk to him.”

As Victer said that, he saw Abraham Lincoln walk on the train. Then the train started to leave in a slow gesture. Victer ran fast as he could and caught up with the caboose, and jumped on. He opened the back door to the train. There in the caboose, was a very tall man with a mole and a tall top hat.

“Mr. Lincoln,” Victer said lightly.

“Yes,” President Lincoln said in a low, masculine voice.

“Was that just the famous speech, The Gettysburg Address,” Victer asked trying to be polite.

“Oh, that little thing, that probably won’t be famous any time soon,” he said itching his mole.

“Sure it won’t. Mr. Lincoln, I just want to tell you, don’t go to a theatre called Ford’s Theatre, and stay away from anyone with the last name Oswald. Also, don’t let people carve your mole on Mt. Rushmore. That would just look weird.” Victer stated uptightly, because he thought he knew something.

The train suddenly stopped with a jolt that flew Victer on the ground, unconscious.

TIC, TOC, TIC, TOC, Victer was spinning in circles in a vortex traveling through time. When he awoke from his long sleep he seemed to be in a whole new generation. The 19th Century! He walked a long way until he found a drug store. He walked up to a black man with a name that said Martin. He looked sort of raggy and poor.

“Excuse me, mister. What year is it.” questioned Victer.

“Don’t you know. It is the year of 1957, sir,” Martin stated.

“Thanks. What’s your name, Martin?” Victer questioned a second time.

“I’m Martin.....Martin King,” he said.

“What are you doing here. You’re Martin Luther King, Jr. You’re one of the most famous people

of all time. You had a dream. Remember.” Victor said quickly, trying hard to breathe.

“A black man could never become famous. That’s what I hate most about America. Blacks and whites should be treated equally, not unfairly. One day, I did have a dream, a vision. I suppose I could share it with other people someday. Thanks, sir,” King said with a humungous smile on his face.

“Yes, you should,” Victor smiled with him, “I guess I should be going now. See ya.”

Part III

SSSWWWIIPPPEEEEE. Victor slipped on a puddle of water that had just been mopped by Mr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was yanked through 30 years at least. He heard a sound. Not a tick-toc. A singing voice. The tune he heard went...

Microsoft, Microsoft, A-O-L
 Making billions, I’m doing swell
 Microsoft, Microsoft, In-ter-net
 Haven’t lost any money yet

“Not again,” Victor whispered, as he stepped up on to his feet.

He walked around and noticed many computers. At one of the computers there was a stout man with glasses. Victor knew who he was at once. Finally someone he could relate with. A rich, hip guy with many wicked ideas. He was Bill Gates. Maybe Victor could get some cash off of him.

“Hi, Bill,” Victor said, “ what are you doing!”

“Oh, I’m creating something called MIC-RO-SOFT. I hope I can make billions off of it,” Bill replied.

“You probably will, since you’re already a huge millionaire,” Victor stated.

“True, true,” Bill said, “Here, have a dollar. If I ever become a billionaire come back to see me and I’ll give you even more.”

Victer stared at the green paper like it was magical. A whole dollar - from Bill Gates. He could treasure it forever. But, for now, he just wanted to get home to his mom in Annapolis. But, how? Maybe another knockout could send him back to 2003.

“Bill, will you punch me, PPPLLEEAAAASSSSEEEEE,” Victer sighed.

“Sure, I need to release some stress. I’ve been on the keyboard all day,” Bill replied.

And WAPOW. Victer’s lights were knocked out. This time he woke up in a place that was not very familiar. There were flying cars, robots walking around, and everything seemed new to Victer. He walked into a shiny building. They were having a convention. A convention of the first time portal ever made. He asked a titanium robot next to him what year it was.

“This is the year of 2020. Look. He is about to turn it on.” the metal creature said.

“NOW, everybody, I am Dr. Von Brains. I am about to turn on the very first time machine ever.” the crazy haired scientist said intelligently.

Part V

BLING, BLANG, CHOO, CHUNG. The machine ripped and wrapped, skittled and skattled. Victer ran at his best pace into the transporter, pressing 2-0-0-0. The trip through it was insane. There were colors outside of the color spectrum beaming, clocks ticking, and then.....all of a sudden he looked up at eye view. He’d seen the place before. It was THE SMITHSONIAN!

There he lay, under a heavy statue in the middle of the room. Strawberry goo was all over his shirt and pants, and he had a jelly donut to his right. All around him were his classmates, and Ms. Judith, too. He had to tell everyone about his long amazing trips through time.

“EVERYBODY, I was just in an execution area with George Washington, then in a train with Abraham Lincoln. After that, Martin Luther King Jr. talked to me, then Bill Gates. It was so exciting. I actually got to see the future.” Victer shouted so everyone could hear him.

“You must have had a huge head wacker,” Mrs. Moosum laughed out loud.

Was it only a dream Victer thought to himself - only my imagination? That just couldn’t be.

After all he went through to get back. He then remembered about Bill Gates. He stuck his hand in his pocket, and pulled out a wrinkly, old dollar. He knew it wasn't a dream. After all that commotion at the museum, the class got ready to live.

Once they got back to school, back in Annapolis, Victor talked to Henry Luper about the trip.

"So how was the trip," Henry asked in question.

Victor laughed. "You could say I had the time of my life!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

T
H
END

...

Okay, so it isn't that historically accurate—or accurate in any capacity at all. I'm sure Washington had a better vocabulary and I'm sure King wasn't a janitor six years before "I Have A Dream." Regardless of its inaccuracies, I think we've all learned a very important lesson: don't ask Bill Gates to punch you in the face because he totally will. Also, it's super unfortunate that Victor didn't tell Lincoln to look out for Booth instead of Oswald. Abraham Lincoln had *potential*.

...

I remember writing this story in the midst of my epileptic early-life crisis. Writing helped me out quite a bit back then. I'm posting the story here b/c I'm slowly realizing this is all for me anyway. *word*. 's a fucking scrapbook.

Sup Solon, how's it feel re-reading this after all these years? How old are you? 30? 70?

One billion?¹⁸² How's life?

183

...

¹⁸² I'm really bad at guessing.

¹⁸³ (This is where you fill in your answer, future me.)

The pen is mightier than the sword

s

s

s

The pen is mightier thanks to words

(You were always so good with words, weren't you Sol? I hope you're doing well,
buddy. I really do.

I really fucking do.)

/// "The Breeze" – Dr. Dog /// http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PO_-E4_BO8

\\\\\\

Dwyng’s corpse stayed put for two seconds. Three seconds. Half of the Geezers had disappeared. Tubz—bullet-ridden—struggled to find air. Four seconds. Six, seven, eight more Geezers: gone. Five, six, seven seconds. One by one, the remaining Geezers vanished. Five Geezers, four Geezers, three, two. The crowd, dumbstruck. Uproar. Eight, nine, ten, eleven seconds. Tubz’s and Dwyng’s broken bodies refused to move. Virg approached Tubz’s body, confused.

Suddenly—a death rattle echoed through the Point’s mics. Virg and H’lu looked back and forth between the two remaining Geezers—the two old friends—immortal enemies.

Four seconds later, Tubz joined the others. He was Home.

(...)

H’lu leaned over Dwyng’s body and screamed.

When Sidd “Covered in Blood” Regal ordered the aces to reprimand her, they stood still.

H’lu turned toward Regal, lifted the gun and shot him through the throat.

The screens showed Regal disappear.

Dwyng lingered.

H’lu screamed.

+++++

Thirty seconds.

Thirty-one, thirty-two.

H’lu looked at her crowd. Some had fled. Some stayed to stare in disbelief.

“The statue should have been of *him!*” she said, pointing to Dwyng. “They tortured him to *death*. He—he sacrificed himself—” Her voice echoed across the opening. She heard her own

echo bounce off of the closest ring of trees. “He sacrificed himself for *nothing*.” She paused.

“Because nothing was all they *gave* him.”

Inhales, etc.

“REIGN has been lying to you.” More gasps. Murmurs. She spoke over them. “They lied to make you feel safe. To make you feel content. To make you stop *caring* about their lies. They gave you nothing to fight for.” The murmurs grew. She spoke even louder. “*We*—we fought for the right to fight for something again.”

Virg fell to one knee and embraced H’lu.

The two revs loomed next to Aldwyn’s body, which refused to disappear.

Virg put the revolver to his temple, and pressed his temple against H’lu’s. He shot, and the two revolutionaries slumped to the stage floor, dead. Their bodies disappeared, leaving Dwyng alone at center stage.

The Silver Fox was dead.

+++++

collage lyf.

Overwhelming is the right word. It's one thing to scratch down notes on your bedside notepad in those universal moments of sleep-depraved grandeur and hope, and another thing to sit crystal-clear sober and try to make your story sound like you want it to. When you wake up, the blinding confidence you hold in your obscurest beliefs and dreams dwindles until it's gone. A second awake, you can take on anything. A minute awake, it starts to fade but the potential still weighs you down to the pillow; ten minutes awake, you convince yourself once again, once again, once again that you were up in the clouds for a stupid, if not for no, reason. By the time your feet touch the crusty Gusher-stained carpet beside your bed, nothing is possible and anything isn't worth it and never was.

...

It's February 8th, 2010. I made it out of the aughts alive.

Noor had a daughter. She wanted to name her Layshawn or Rozelle or D'Tiffany or Ghetto Fabulous McTerriblename, but my parents got her to compromise, so the baby's first name is Cooper. Cooper Rae-Rae Collins. (Did I mention Phillip's name is Phillip Collins? No, *really*. My brother-in-law's name is Phil Collins.)

I have two roommates and I'm fairly certain their names are Kyle and Tariq. I say "fairly sure" because they're usually too busy degrading Nazi Zombies to speak. They're alright guys. Tariq's Middle-Easterny, and I'm not good enough friends with him to jokingly call him a terrorist yet. I'm working up to it, of course. It's been several months, so maybe I'll pop the big slur soon.

I've got a healthy twenty credits this quarter. I walk across campus in the snow with my iPod cocked and loaded. I have a playlist called "The Freshman Playlist" and it's been

serving as my personal winter soundtrack. I skype with Jonesy, Pete, and the others. I plan on skyping with Mom and Dad whenever they figure out how technology works.

...

I've headed home a few times. I attended the annual Halloween barn party, and, as per Halloween, Jonesy & I showed up in our co-op costumes. Freshman year, we were Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield (Jonesy's puberty-fro was perfect); sophomore year, Jonesy brought Elijah along, and they, both wearing all black, stood on either side of me, wearing all white, and we told everyone we were an Oreos (all the white people at the party [which is to say, the other people at the party] jumped in the middle with me so they could take a picture as part of a double stuf Oreos); junior year, we were Arnold and Gerald; senior year, we were Obama and Biden (Reed and Scar were McCain and Palin). This year, we were Andy and Red.

This year, I ate all of the Fast Breaks and drank Dead Guy Ale.

...

Sitting on the Ramp with Jonesy and Pete. The last time I saw them. Our conversation got deep, as per barn parties, and I hit a post-mature going-our-separate-ways-again downer, and the downer shook hands with stone-cold, profane Halloween drunkenness. Pessimism finds me and I blurt:

"Fuck this man. We're stuck in fucking nothingness. Nothing's worth anything and, and, and it's all worth shit. We're halfway through the fucking Age of Pisces, floating in shit politics and shit media and shitty fucking shit, and, what do we have to show for it? ... *Lolcats?* Lolcats and what else? Fucking *nothing*. We're forced to laugh our lives away because we know how empty and worthless they really are in context and—"

Then Jonesy punches me in the jaw and says, "Shut up."

Just like the video, Elliot fucking Jones punches me right in the jaw and says, “Shut. Up.”

I taste blood and realize everything ends.

I stay with my face down for a good minute, dizzy, and then Pete and Jonesy lift me up and slump me back in the chair like nothing happened. We take our last trip to Africa and smoke to A.A. Bondy.

Denzel and the Washingtons reprise their rendition of “Heaven Is a Place on Earth,” and I look up at the barn band from my seat with a swollen jaw and I cry. Who cares if anyone fucking noticed? I cried with a drunk&high smile and enjoyed everything about life in that instant.

...

Stop worrying about worthless kitschy booshwa and luh-*hiv*.

...

We could all die tomorrow in a fiery hellbath of meteorites, a freak contagion outbreak, a solar flare meets gamma ray meets nuclear fallout clusterfuck apocalypse. Thing is, death is the same no matter how it happens. Whether I get smashed by an asteroid, or I off myself in Africa, I’m still dead, and then it’s *hakuna matata*.¹⁸⁴

...

Jonesy recorded my live performance on the *Divine Hour* and posted it to YouTube. Somehow, the entire charade got press and CNN caught wind of the clip and showed it on television under the headline “Pastor’s Grandson: Atheist Tirade.” They did a poll on the show about the dwindling support of organized religion and I’ve received hate mail and some like and love mail, too. One guy from Iowa ripped me a new asshole, and a girl from Nevada sent me a very impressive painted version of myself. People are people. CNN requested an interview, but I declined. I’m all about words, but sometimes they’re just, eh, *unnecessary*. 47456974. 1088.

¹⁸⁴ Get it? Cuz Africa.

The YouTube view count is currently 1,342,538. I've stopped reading the comment section because it's turned into a convoluted bumblefuck of terrible arguments about nothing.¹⁸⁵ The view count on Jonesy and I's other videos has gone up as well. A *lot*. I'm waiting for CNN to find "Niggard" and take a new poll on how racist I am.

Life is scary but good scary.

...

So, my other project.

It started out as a scholarship opportunity early senior year, when Mom was shoving scholarships on my desk every few days. There was a sociology-oriented one that required a video submission that dealt with death and dying. I liked the idea of doing a video instead of filling out paperwork for hours, and ASA I read the prompt—*Death As a Celebration of Life*—I had an idea:

Get footage of friends, family members, teachers and strangers saying portions of something I'd written, and then edit all of the material into my own eulogy. A montage eulogy.

Well, I got some footage—some of Fritz, some of Bruce and the racquetball squad in Cleveland, some of Kat & Theooooo, of Noor and Doc and Jonesy and Pete and of Earp's in-town AA meeting—but the whole thing fell through because schoolwork and other scholarships got in the way, and the deadline passed before I could finish it.

After Nate died, I thought about death more than Death himself. There was all the suicide garbage I wasted your time with, the depression—all that futile bullshit. It all reminded me of the unfinished video. In the heat of my poor-me summer, I decided I'd revisit the video with a reestablished vigor, and instead of using it for a scholarship, I'd use it for my actual funeral (which I'd determined could be sometime very soonish). The old footage became The Project,

¹⁸⁵ Oh, wait. I was just reading *word*.

and I got new footage whenever I could: at the parties, in Cali, etc.

When I got back from Cali, I dropped the whole doing-this-because-I'm-going-to-overdose shtick, and finished *The Project* in good spirits. Got footage @ camp and @ college. I considered it my *The Last Lecture*. Winter quarter of my first year of college is pressing on and I've got the footage all spliced and mashed back together. I figure only one person's good enough to give your eulogy and that one person's the person figuring only one person's good enough to give your eulogy.

Yule, a G

People on film

Mom/Dad:
 Becca & Quinton on beach (when we three got back):
 Morpheus:
 Gwick (stock sermon):
 Pete:
 Doc (reading from script):

 Grandpa (from random sermon):
 Grandma (in hospital):
 Old Asian movie with bad lip-syncing:

 The Washingtons (at party, after show):

 Gwick (stock sermon):

 Jonesy:
 Earl:
 Denzel and the Washingtons/Berlinda Carlisle:

 Two racquetballers on bus:

 Grandpa (old stock sermon):

Eulogy

Hi Solon.
 Welcome back!
 Welcome to the real world.
 No one's perfect here.
 No one.
 Some of us are in it for the money, (hey f**k you man) and if
 "The Price is Right,"
 some of us are in it for the power.
 (1) People fight. (2) People kill.
 Some people get scared and blindly follow the people in it for the power.

 But it's not all bad.
 If you know where to look...
 "Ooooh, Heaven is a Place on Earth."
 There are plenty of us here who are (hands the note card to other, who finishes with) fine with imperfection.
 We are the meek. We know in our hearts that the journey is all there is. There is no destination, only journey.

4-Hers:

Me:

Homeless man in San Diego (in exchange for the \$2):

Random at party:

Noor:

Woody Allen (Annie Hall):

Mr. Fritz (I had to tell him "it's for a scholarship"):

Random guy at AA:

Dwayne (*Little Miss Sunshine*):

Shan:

Random girl at party:

Mr. Fritz (talking to someone in class [secretly taped]):

Lucy:

Bruce (speech before quals):

Trace (on the beach):

Random guy at party:

Murder of thick country girls at party:

Barack Obama:

Racquetball team:

Jonesy (as Denzel):

Random girl at party:

Helen:

Murder of thick country girls at party:

Doc (candid):

Ohio State People:

The Yogles, holding Cecelia:

Mom:

Dad:

Me, giving speech in Cali:

Reed & Scar:

Physics teacher (explaining experiment for class):

Mom:

Dad:

Solon:

OSHO (from random YouTube video):

Mr. Q:

(MONTAGE OF LAUGHTER: On buses in Cleveland, at party, on the beach, crowd at beginning of church

To make the best better:
live in the present, and treat
the present like it is one.

To become perfect, accept
imperfection.

Life is a paradox.

Life is a boundless,
scrambled montage. And
"it's all over much too
quickly."

So stop brooding, Brood.

Look in the mirror and say...

"If I want to fly, I'll find a
way to fly. You do what you
love, and fuck the rest."

Don't look around and say,
"What is this for?"

Answer the question
yourself!

Go do stuff!

Do work!

Swim!

Eat!

Drink!

Change!

Play ball!

Sing!

Travel!

Dance!

Party!

F**k!

O! O! O!

And just...love.

Just love.

Just love.

Love.

(Reed) It's a complicated
word. (Scar) No one knows
for sure what it is.

But actually, it's quite
simple.

Love

is

Creation.

"Behave as if you are the first
here, and the whole world is
of liberty to you."

And more than anything,
learn to laugh.

speech, in car singing, Calista & friend, and lastly, a long shot of Nate, cracking up):

Me, webcam:

The Sun will always be there for you. If ever the Sun is to abandon you, you will have done so first. To Ra!

/// “Kids on the Run” – The Tallest Man on Earth /// (no link)

\\

outtreaux.

I meet with Dr. Q every Thursday around 3:30, after my last class of the week, and talk English things. He’s a creative writing professor here at _____ University. We typically talk for an hour—in his cluttered office space on the fourth floor—the one with the frog statue in the corner—(here it comes!)—and shoot Drew Brees.¹⁸⁶

For me, he’s one of those people that come off as really familiar ASA you see them. Like Jesper. When he walked into our creative writing workshop the first day, before he opened his mouth, I knew what he would sound like. He’s kind of nasal-y, but the right amount, so it’s not annoying—like Physics TA nasal-y, but obviously intelligent-nasal-y.¹⁸⁷ Seeing him was surreal. I went to his office hours autumn quarter to get help with one of my short stories (a dark comedy about Bobby Horisette, a fat kid who unintentionally kills his elderly grumpy neighbor Mr. Smith during a friendly game of baseball), and ever since, he’s helped me out with writing, thinking critically, editing, theses, and also et cetera.

word. came up in one of our conversations early on (basically, “Have you ever undertaken any bigger projects, Sol?” “Well, there is this one thing...”), and he convinced me to let him see it.

He’s my new muse (—please don’t cry, Melpomene). He’s forward as a forward-thinking

¹⁸⁶ I’m pretty sure that’s the saying.

¹⁸⁷ ...aaaaand nasal is no longer a word.

fort ward driving on a one-way street. “Whiny,” he told me when he read it. “You come off as a whiny little prick in some of the parts.” I told him the whole thing was true, and the whole thing was mischievously re-edited to seem less and more than what the reader will and should suspect, and he looks up from the manuscript and says, “You can be a whiny little prick sometimes.” All in all, he gave it good remarks, and all in all, he’s a pretty cool pedagogue. He’s like the younger, second father I never had. I imagine he’ll be writing my recommendation letters for the next four years.

I’ve only shown him the me sections, not the afterlife allegory stuff that’s vaguely based on him.

Yeah, so here it is. This is where, if you’re reading right on through, you’ll realize my story is Ellis’s story. One of my many projects.

You probably already realized that, so this isn’t really a surprise.

The whole point was to make you think the whole Ellis bit and my bit were two separate things—two things written by the elusive SRB that make up *wyrd.*, instead of *word.*, and then, near the end, pull them together and make the whole thing just about me, a kid elaborately writing his pain away. Or whatever. Like Pi, but way more explicit.

I had several options when it came to ending *wyrd.* Aldywn could have lived, and the story would have been about overcoming the odds. Aldywn could have been jailed before the fall and the revolution could have failed entirely, and the story could have been about failure, defeat. As is, the story is about nothing and I like that. Of course, it’s about a lot of things, but at the end of it all, the message is entirely ambiguous. It’s frustratingly counterintuitive. It’s tragic, but hilarious. It’s lyf.¹⁸⁸

It gets its points across without its biggest point being either end of a continuum labeled

¹⁸⁸ Putting y’s where they don’t belong is sort of my thing now.

“happy ending.”

It sort of takes the juice out of it to say writing Aldwyn’s story helped me cope with my own, but it’s true.

I don’t need the Crucifixion to get by, but I—I might just need the Fixion.

You’re wondering: if he lied about Ellis and all that,¹⁸⁹ how can I trust anything in here? How can I trust anything he’s written? For all I know, he’s a forty-something woman wishing the youngsters would listen—he’s a twenty-year old, hiding in his dorm room overseas, writing his ideal life on post-its—he’s an elderly Pentecost trying to take the sin-sational opposition down a peg—something, anything—he could be a group of people hired to write a contemporary masterpiece and get it sold, get it sold, get the new message out there for the new kids on the blockade to digest.

Die, jest! Die! Possibilians unite!

Maybe Jonesy isn’t even real. Maybe Sol created him because he thought having a black friend would make him more relatable, hip, and worldly. Maybe pretending to have a black friend made him feel diverse—metropolitan, even—which excited him, considering he’s stuck in a one traffic light village with no minorities and has a crippling fear he’ll spend the rest of his life being sucked back into a Midwestern mid-life crisis.

And maybe he doesn’t drink or get high, and he fabricated the weekly parties to make you think he was cooler than he really is. God knows if he just read books on the weekend, alone, without his black friend, his journalbook would have been too honest to get through.

And maybe he’s not in MENSA and only used that to make you listen harder.

And maybe Nate didn’t die because he never existed either, and is just some sort of allegory for organized religion. I mean, ‘Sol’ does mean ‘Sun’ in Spanish. Maybe Nate and Sol’s

¹⁸⁹ *All That* was a popular TV show broadcast on Cartoon Network in the 1990s.

friendship represents the constant struggle between religion and science, and the death of Nate symbolizes the downfall of religion. Sol and Nate once got in a fight, and Nate came out on top. Several years passed where the two had to deal with co-existing until finally Sol, well, *killed* Nate once and for all. All I'm saying is: telephone poles look a lot like crosses around here.

And maybe Jesper is a figment of his imagination, and he really lost his virginity to a drunk girl his first week of college.

And maybe he's making up these elaborate false explanations—that could very well be true—not to pull you out of the reality that is called his life and convince you he's an unreliable narrator, but to show you that he can function on a level that is so neurotically chaotic, unmercilessly self-acknowledging and constantly competing with itself, it makes nothing worth putting stock in.¹⁹⁰

...

I'm not great with goodbyes (*you* know), so, um, yeah, I'll write the rest of this sentence as, uh, you know, purposely awkward and, geez, I don't know, tell you to just read the, the next, uh, final sections, so, haha, um, so this anticlimactic bullshit (that I may or may not think is actually quite profound [and junk, haha, whatever]) doesn't overshadow the book's other two-thousand and fifty pages.*

*approximation

/// "God & Suicide" – Blitzen Trapper /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjdYmOreoVw>

\\

¹⁹⁰ And maybe this recent slew of paragraphs starting with 'And maybe' isn't enough to make up for the time you spent skimming hundreds of pages dedicated to *a story that has nothing to do with anything*.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ Just the way I like it.

Jesper showed up to another barn party and avoided me. She tried to blend in with the Ravinsters. I never had the chance to talk to her.

Yesterday, I received a letter in the mail, reading:

Dear Green Eyes,

I secretly despise my best friends. I like people I don't know a lot more than them because with nameless people I can make up good things, like oh I bet he's kind at heart or oh, she sure looks honest, but with close friends I already know their flaws. And there's no unknowing them. I don't want to know you any more than I do because it would ruin the illusion. Right now you're a good guy in my mind's eye, and I can't risk letting that go. Letting go of the thought that someone worth it might exist. That feeling's the only thing that keeps me going and you'd be selfish to take it away from me.

-Jesper

There was no return address.

/// "Fast Car" – Tracy Chapman /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfqEisOIMJc>

\\

Footnotes on organs,
 long drawn and drawing on
 something
 bigger than all of the blue hats with big rims
 and young kids with slates clean;
 bigger than the pews stained with hymnbooks;
 bigger than the organist,
 somehow not losing her mind to melody,
 somehow still sober under thick eyes;
 bigger than the words of a sermon bouncing off of
 poinsettias and through floor mikes,
 resonating deep and knowingly-like,
 like
 the psychic second before an alarm
 for tornadoes;

by Sol Brood

bigger than the saints and their marching boots,
 muddying the welcome mat;
 bigger than their number;
 bigger than the atheist
 smirking into Proverbs,
 rolling eyes to Psalms now;
 bigger than a punk with a grey beard and gay son;
 bigger than the preacher's ring and hair part;
 bigger than the sins that got the
 freshly-guilty
 to hop on the highway and exit when they saw a steeple big enough to please them;
 bigger than the steeple big enough to please them;
 bigger than a blood clot;
 bigger than piety and quiet dietary grievances,
 bigger than inconsistency;
 bigger than self-
 awareness;
 bigger than self, bigger than awareness;
 bigger than an atom on the eve of evolution;
 bigger than "and yet";

and yet

and yet

smaller than the muscles of a woman's nylonic undertoes pressing down to bring the people up;
 smaller than the time it takes for her to lift her foot.

/// "Nightmares" – Billie the Vision & the Dancers /// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5U8ABQeEvI>

\\

A skulk of partygoers played car tag the night I got punched back into actual sanity. After
 Denzel and the Washingtons wrapped up their set, Pete, Jonesy, Doc, and I hopped in Pete's car
 and waited fifteen minutes while the runners ran through town.

We took off.

Backseat, my life was gray & yellow. My life was blue & black. A song I'd never heard
 was playing, and I moved in slow-motion back and forth, back and forth, back and forth across
 my half of the backseat, bruising jaw, my hair always a step behind as Pete swerved to find the
 runners. If Jonesy had planted a camera on Pete's dash, it would have caught me in the back,
 smiling.

The young man looked down at his syllabus and cringed.

History 591.01

The Downfall of REIGN: the Silent War

In this course, we will analyze the series of events that ultimately lead to the downfall of the Reincarnation & Growth Network (REIGN) and Peoples' Union for Humility (PUH). More specifically, we will be reading the Fates of one of the Silent War's biggest players, Aldywn "The Silver Fox." All required readings can be found at the Hall of Information.

The young man skimmed the list of required readings.

"Sarge Isotov," he read from the list. "Russian tennis player."

He looked through the pile and found a thin red Fate.

"Check.

"Georgie Young, British nanny," he said.

He looked through the pile and found a thin yellow Fate.

"Check.

"Solon Brood," he said. "A teenage nihilist. The first life in Aldywn's last trifacta."

He picked up Brood's blue Fate, and aimlessly flipped through its screen.

He exhaled.

"Kryste. This fucking *blows*."

+++++

epilogue.

INT. CANADA LIFE BUILDING, TORONTO - DAY

ELLIS AUGUST QUALM saunters into the Life Building, indifferent. He wears a nice tweed jacket.

People fill the lobby, chatting, working. Ellis looks around, nervously, but continues to walk toward the elevator.

Elevator ride. Jam-packed. MAN #1 stands beside him.

ELLIS

Did you know this building is roughly eighty-seven meters tall? Ninety-eight if you count the weather beacon?

MAN #1

I didn't.

ELLIS

The building has fifteen stories. Fifteen! If you do the math, that means every story is about 5.8 meters tall. If someone fell, two stories alone would prove enough to be fatal. Did you know that? Two stories?

MAN #1

How about that.

ELLIS

If someone fell from the top of all fifteen floors, it would only take a little under five seconds to reach the ground. That's it. Five seconds.

MAN #1

May I ask why you know all of these facts?

Ellis stares at the man, intently.

ELLIS

I plan on jumping from the fifteen floor.

Awkward silence. Man #1 appears extremely perturbed. Eventually, Ellis laughs and Man #1 joins him, relieved.

Man #1 finally exits the elevator, leaving Ellis to talk to himself.

ELLIS

That's it. Two stories.