

THERAPY

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I suddenly realized I must have passed the address on the directions the doctor gave me, so I made a left into a residential neighborhood. I didn't assume the office I was looking for was in a strip mall—a place I probably passed dozens of times when I used to live out here, the place I now lived again. At the first opportunity, I K-turned into a driveway defended by a man holding a rake. Why he scowled at me, I did not know, but I quickly returned to the main road. I didn't want to be late for my first appointment.

“Park by animal hospital—go under big clock,” I had scribbled on a sheet of computer paper. I never knew there was an animal hospital on the other side of the strip mall, but there it was, along with other professional offices, tucked behind a daycare, karate studio, and liquor store.

I pulled into a parking spot in front of a tree whose trunk hid behind a wooden fence. My car faced all of its fallen, yellow leaves. The realization that

it was the back end of autumn made me sad. I think it was the first honest emotion I had had in weeks.

I nodded at a wolfhound who pressed his snout against the window pane of the animal hospital. Although I didn't see the clock, the name on a sign—a Dr. Munson—was the one I had written down on the directions. I wasn't meeting Dr. Munson though. I was meeting a Dr. Belkoff, who rented space inside Dr. Munson's office. The sign led me up an outdoor staircase, which made me feel like I was ascending a caged warren. At the top of the stairs, I realized I'd left in my car a notepad with the list of things I was going to tell him. For the economy of time, I'd stay on point—edit out all the childhood stuff and go straight to the present. In the notepad, I bulleted everything I was willing to surrender.

The hallway's musty carpet seamlessly delivered me to the musty carpet in the doctor's office. I sheepishly smiled at the receptionist and told her whom I was there to see. She asked if this was my first visit and slid open the glass window, handing me a clipboard full of forms when I said yes. I took a seat to fill them out in front of a pillar with a rack of outdated magazines.

Soon, a little old man gazing over his glasses said my name. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," he added.

Glad I wasn't the one who was late, I stood and shared a limp handshake, before he asked me to follow him. The fact that I towered over him brought a hopeful feeling that I had discovered my sage—an undersized mentor with unassuming strength and wisdom who would set me straight.

I took the chair near the door and placed the clipboard down.

“The insurance people still haven't responded to me,” he said, picking up where we left off on the phone when he discussed the difficulties the insurance companies give him. He interrupted himself. “Can I have your driver's license and insurance card?”

I handed him both, along with my referral, which was embarrassingly soggy and crumpled. While he fiddled with a contraption on his lap, trying to scan my information, he continued to deride the insurance industry. In the meantime, I scanned the room. It was lit by a gross fluorescent light and whatever pale autumn glow crept through the slats of the blinds. I would have preferred a desk lamp. A dim room with earth tones. Perhaps with eastern accents. Instead, there was nothing even on the walls. Not a single platitude about not taking life too seriously or believing in oneself.

“Well, there's nothing you can do about it,” he said, which I assumed was still in regard to the insurance industry.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I said.

“What’s your copay?” he asked.

“Ten.”

He put down the scanning contraption and picked up a laptop.

“They’re just so ridiculous though,” he said, taking another jab at the insurance industry.

Oversized glasses slipped to the tip of his nose as he buried his chin into his neck and tapped on the keyboard.

“Have you ever been to a therapist before?” he asked.

“About ten years ago,” I said.

“Are you on any medication right now?”

“Yes.”

I waited for him to ask before I told him what it was.

“How’s that working?”

I wanted to say that it was a work in progress. That it was an ongoing experiment that, at best, gave me a floor that kept me from plummeting any further. That the psychiatrist, whose tufts of hair collaborated with his cavalier regard for experimenting with my dosage to evoke the image of a mad scientist, was back in the city, where I used to live, and it was going to be difficult to

tinker with my brain chemistry now that I was in exile. But instead, I just said it was helping.

Dr. Belkoff nodded and took notes on his laptop. “Well, what can I do for you?” he said.

His customer-service-representative formality gave me pause. But I collected my thoughts and told him. Along the way I threw out some self-assessment, wrapping it with erudite language—I wanted to make sure he knew I wasn’t just some regular nut job. He looked up every so often, his chin still tucked into his neck, and then back down, to punch away, focused on aiming for each key. I got nervous when he sensed me watching the keyboard.

“When you write things down, you remember better.” He swatted at the air as if to ward off a pestilence that snatched human memory.

Eventually I was exhausted of myself, of my own story, and stopped talking, but his head was still in the keyboard, scrolling up and down, perhaps adding flourishes to the font. I didn’t mind. I wasn’t sure if the last guy I went to even listened to me; he chewed gum with an insouciance incompatible with what the mood of the room should have been. Invariably, he wore a Yankees hat and kept a neatly-trimmed goatee. I’d walk in, and he’d fold up the *New*

York Times as if I were interrupting his break. And at least once a session, he dug into his pants to readjust himself.

“Have you ever heard of Schopenhauer's porcupines?” he once asked me.

I scrolled through my undisciplined study of philosophy, only to admit that I hadn't. At that point I had thought his carefree nature was not a part of any therapeutic design but rather laziness or apathy; however, a reference to a nineteenth-century intellectual was enough for me to stick with him for a few more months.

“This is tricky,” Dr. Belkoff said, peering above his large spectacles, his chin still sewed to his neck.

“Yeah,” I said and laughed a bit, to once again let him know I wasn't too crazy—that I was aware of the situation. An uncomfortable silence followed, so I offered him something else.

“Well don't do that,” he said.

I was surprised how abrupt he was.

He scrolled through his notes.

“Well, it doesn't sound like there's much in the way of reconciling,” he said.

I agreed.

He was quiet and then said, "You should get a lawyer, too."

I was aware of that, despite knowing I probably wouldn't.

He fell silent again before saying, "Well, moving forward seems to be the only option."

I nodded to accept the unassailable statement.

"This isn't going to be easy," he said.

"I know," I said. I became somber as if finally being forced to acknowledge a death.

"Do you go to a gym?" he asked.

This came out of left field for me, and I immediately felt the need to conceal a slovenly self I neglected to address.

"Yeah. I mean, I did. My gym membership is back in the city, though."

"Then go. Exercise gets the endorphins going."

I wondered if he listened as he typed. "I don't live out there now. I live out here," I said.

He nodded as if he'd just remembered and then typed something else.

"Do you have somewhere to stay?" he said.

In the economy of explanation, I had forgotten to explain why I was even out here and not back in the city. That this was the start of day nine, and how

my house out here, on my own albatross mountain, was currently occupied by a friend.

When I was done, he looked down at his screen and recapitulated my tale. I tried my best not to listen to the playback of my life. He peered over his glasses, perhaps expecting me to respond to the allegations.

“Yeah,” I said, “that’s the bulk of it.”

Dr. Belkoff displayed his most pensive look yet. I anticipated some wisdom.

“Time’s up.”

Surprised, I feigned a pensive look as well, contemplating the wisdom he seemed to hold back.

“Do you think this will work?” I asked.

He squinted at his screen. “The copay is ten, right?”

“Yes,” I said and reached for my wallet.

When I gave him a ten, he gave a noncommittal shrug, leading me to think that was the answer to my question.

I returned his delayed response with a tentative, “Good.”

“Next week I’m booked at this time,” he said, “so I will need to get back to you if something opens up.”

I wasn't sure if I should take this as a rejection. I thought my session was an unabashed SOS.

"Let me give you this number," he said.

His cell phone number in the meantime would be a nice gesture, I thought to myself, as he penned a number on a post-it note.

"Call the insurance people," he said. "Get this all squared away."

§

A year out of college I bought a condo. Four years later, I used the cash I made from the high-octane real estate market to indulge my Thoreauvian moment and move out on the periphery of things.

Who could blame me? I was approaching thirty. I realized working an adult job wasn't all too fulfilling. I was not at a point where I wanted to drop out and wander the earth, but at the same time I wasn't content to keep going on without some sort of a project—both spiritual and material. Through bucolic living, I was going to find myself.

But once I found myself, and got sick of myself, and realized that being left by myself to wrestle with an empty house and an acre of property was something I couldn't do by myself, I concluded I made a mistake.

I was in such a desperate state to break from the romanticized version of what I thought I should be, that I hastily became involved with someone who couldn't share in my Walden debacle.

Unfortunately, this came in the wake of the housing collapse, so when I sought out a realtor to get an assessment of the market value in order to dump the house, to start anew, I learned that I'd need to write a sizable check to rid myself of my own personal Walden. I decided to wait it out, and determined, unconsciously, I'd do everything possible to ignore the mistake I couldn't erase.

I moved in with my girlfriend who lived out in the city, placing me about an hour from the house. For the first few months I periodically returned to check on it, but over time, driving an hour to check up on a perpetually losing investment became tiresome. Soon after, my friend Greg, following a divorce from his college sweetheart after just five years of marriage, decided it was his time to embrace a Thoreauvian lifestyle and moved in, bringing his greatest prize from his divorce settlement, his dog Randall.

Since the best cell reception was out in the backyard, I sat in a lawn chair on the patio, facing the dense skeletons of trees, which diffused into the darkness behind the house, waiting on hold with the insurance company.

As Greg tended to the flames dancing inside the fire pit he had constructed from rocks culled from around the property, I realized I had returned to a life that was no longer mine, but actually was.

Despite an automated voice that said that, due to an unexpected volume of calls, the estimated wait time would only be five minutes, it was far longer. And when a human finally answered and informed me the call might be recorded for training purposes, he asked a similar battery of questions the automated voice had asked me before I was told I needed to wait for a real human. In addition, the real human required me to answer more questions to prove my identity.

“Can you verify your mother’s maiden name?”

After I answered I added, “I also wear a size twelve.”

“Twelve?” he said.

“Shoe size,” I responded.

He didn’t seem to find my joke funny and just continued, “How can I help you today?”

By the time I was given a new referral number, I couldn’t find the pen I brought outside, even though its cap was in my hand. When I found the pen and wrote down the number, I couldn’t find the cap. Regardless, I scratched

“Call Insurance” off the to-do list and then called my gym back in the city to cancel my membership.

“Hey, buddy,” Greg said, while poking at the logs. “I made some soup the other day.”

I pointed at the phone just as someone from the gym answered.

“You can’t break your contract unless you show proof you moved more than 50 miles away,” she said.

I felt compelled to ask her if I could take a picture of my provincial exile but instead asked what kind of proof was needed.

“A copy of your new utility bill sent to your new address or a copy of your new lease or mortgage.”

“This is my house,” I said. “I’ve had the mortgage for almost twelve years. And I pay my utility bills online, so I don’t get paper copies delivered. I could live in Mongolia and pay them. They don’t send bills to this address.”

“Sir, it’s in the contract you signed,” she said.

I wasn’t in the mood to open up about my life for the second time that day, nor did I think a transcript of my therapy session was available, so I asked if there was another alternative.

“A change of address verification from the post office counts, too,” she said.

That was a clerical errand I had not yet thought of. One that would deliver another unwelcomed finality.

“All right,” I said and hung up.

“There’s a big pot of soup in the fridge,” Greg said. “Help yourself.”

“I’m good, thanks,” I said. I was getting hungry, but I wasn’t craving soup Greg had made a few days ago.

“I’m going to start getting mail delivered here again,” I said, with a tone of defeat.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” Greg said, “we don’t have a mailbox.”

As we stood at the end of the driveway looking at the spot where the mailbox once was, Greg said one morning about six months ago, he woke up to find parts of a car grill and fender, but no mailbox.

“How do you get your mail?” I asked.

“I don’t. It’s just junk anyway. If I need to put an address on something, I use my parents’.”

The nub of the former post protruded from the ground.

“I guess we should go get a mailbox tonight,” I said.

“Sorry, buddy, I can’t,” Greg said. “I already have plans.”

§

I went straight to my bedroom and lay in the dark, attempting to take an assessment of my situation. I recognized I was at the point where I needed to convince myself to accept my life, and once I accepted it, I knew I must embrace it. However, lying there, all I could accept was that I couldn’t accept it, so I got up and left the room.

Throughout the house, votives and pillar candles cast distorted images on the walls. The only artificial light came from a green and burgundy stained-glass lamp in the corner of the living room. Greg’s Thoreauvian moment, which included a preoccupation with hiking, birding, and mushroom hunting—all topics explored in his three self-published chapbooks—extended, quite logically, to an ethos to reduce his ecological footprint. He had never hooked up the cable or internet. He never arranged for garbage service, opting to bring small bags of trash to work and building a compost in the yard. No matter how cold, he kept the thermostat set at 55.

“Hey, let’s do that hike you were talking about in the next couple of days,” I said, catching him as he walked out of the kitchen slurping a bowl of soup.

Any time I called to check up on the house, I heard about the trails nearby and Greg's epiphanies during his communion with nature.

"That sounds great, buddy, but I'm taking Lindsey away for a few days. I'm dropping Randall off at my parents' early tomorrow."

I thought about me and the empty house and said, "You don't have to do that. I can watch him."

"You wouldn't mind?" he said. "My parents are old as hell and have nothing better to do than watch him pee in the yard." He laughed.

I looked at Randall for confirmation, coiled and camouflaged in shadows below the flickering light, but as far as I could tell, he was sound asleep.

"I like hanging out with the Ran-Man," I said.

"All right," Greg said, and then pointed at the bowl in his hand before going to his room. "And finish off the soup while I'm gone. It'll go to waste otherwise."

§

I'm not sure why, but I keep a lot of stuff. I'm not a hoarder of any sort—just a habitual keeper and filer. At some point, in a maelstrom of unraveling, unplanned but absolutely inevitable, I will obsess over something I can't find, which in turn convinces me I need to wrest control over the vagaries of life,

and the only way to do that is with a purge. Unfortunately, this is not a compulsion. If this were a true compulsion, these bouts would be more frequent, rendering my life more organized. For me, this action is the closest ritual I have to hitting the reset button on life. It also, in the meantime, serves as a distraction until the tempest inside my head subsides, aiding the eventual restoration of my sanity.

The process, however, isn't all that smooth. I will get on a roll, tearing up what I once thought of as necessary, stacking and categorizing what I still deem necessary, tossing what can be donated in piles and what can't in the trash. As I conduct my purge, though, I will lose my focus. There will be a stack of papers I want to staple, and I will go look for the stapler. When I find it though, it's out of staples. Staples will then need to go on the shopping portion of the to-do list. The shopping list has become way too long, though, which means I should get some of those things. Several hours later, I'll return to my purge, and although some of my ambition might have waned, I'll forge ahead, sifting, shredding, stacking, until another opportunity for digression arises.

A day or so later when I have become exhausted of the purge, sobered to the reality it is impossible to fully "clear the decks" of life, I will conclude that

at least the purge had allowed me to attenuate my excess and take a much needed inventory of my possessions, and finally, thanks to this minor victory, I can move forward. Summarily, I'll put everything away and return to my life a little more refreshed, or, at the least, feeling as if I possess a bit more agency over it.

If there ever were a time to purge, it was now. And since I had decided to take a few days off from work, this had the potential to be my biggest purge yet. So with Randall keeping me company, curious as to why a human who recently inhabited his living space was moving objects about, I began my quest for renewal. My first assault was on a room I once considered my office—a room Greg had apparently decided was a storage locker for what didn't fit his current self. I tore through everything in a great fury.

It took about an hour before I felt completely overwhelmed and decided to run my errands.

It was the middle of the afternoon when I returned with bags from Walmart, ShopRite, and Home Depot. The mess in the house quickly reminded me why I left earlier in the day. Thinking I needed a quick domestic victory, I thought I'd do my laundry, which had piled high atop my duffle bag

and suitcase in the corner of the bedroom. However, when I went to start the washing machine, it didn't work.

I texted Greg, and he texted back that it had not worked in a while. He had just forgotten to tell me. Instead of machine washing his clothes, he now scrubbed them in a basin in the yard and hung them on a clothesline, even though, as far as he knew, the dryer still functioned. I walked to the window and scanned the yard. Lo and behold, there was a clothesline stretched above a basin.

Despite buying more candles to play along with the antediluvian ambience of the house, I wasn't going to start doing my laundry in a tub in the yard, because, well, it wasn't the nineteenth century, and I wasn't about to let the house devolve into a historical reenactment attraction.

I examined the washer for about five minutes, and although I recognized I knew nothing about washers, even I could tell it was too old to be worth saving. At the moment, I wasn't in the mood to go back out and drop four hundred bucks on a new one, nor was I ready to return to the purge, so I grabbed my tool belt and the new mailbox I bought earlier and went out to the curb.

There was no need for me to buy the Cadillac of mailboxes. The black, spartan-styled one I bought would do the job. Most importantly, the box advertised all the parts were included. But when I read to the end of the directions, it referenced cement, which was, of course, not included. I thought I'd give it a shot anyway without the cement, hoping to fortify the post in a way I had not yet determined by the time I began to dig around the stub of the old post.

Surprisingly, the post went deeper than I anticipated. The ground was more gravel and rock than dirt. Ten minutes into my dig, I realized the old mailbox had been sunk in a bucket, whose age had now reduced it to a rusty husk, making me wonder when I last had a tetanus shot.

When I finally felt I had gotten to the base of the former bucket, I wedged the head of the shovel under its edge and used my weight to dislodge it from the earth. The base raised and lowered a couple of times before the shovel head snapped off.

I struck the ground repeatedly with the handle until I remembered I had another shovel in the garage. Eventually, I disinterred the husk and the bed of cement that once held the old post. After I bore a hole wide enough to slide the new post into, I reinforced the area with dirt and rock from other parts of

the yard while balancing a level on top of the mailbox. But each time I stepped away, the whole thing slouched over, as if it planned on lying down in front of an oncoming car.

§

That evening after I fed Randall and let him out, I made my second trip of the day to Home Depot to order a washing machine and buy a bag of cement. Unfortunately, I'd needed to wait several days for the washer. The bag of cement I laid in the backseat of my car once I discarded the trash I brought from home into various cans in the parking lot.

With no internet service and shoddy cell reception at the house, I spent the remainder of the evening at Starbucks. Once I connected to the internet and had a few sips of my coffee, I assessed my surroundings. To my astonishment I concluded that Starbucks' faux-bohemian vibe was an oasis from a provincial world I shopped in all day, where the favorite color of the male denizens was camouflage.

In front of the computer screen, I confronted what I should have confronted all week. I first notified the U.S. Postal Service of my change of address and then did the same for my credit cards. The oil and electric companies were

next. I also contacted the cable company about internet service, which at the earliest would arrive in three weeks, and arranged for garbage pickup.

Since I'm not a social media person, I needed to individually update the people I knew where I was calling home. I wanted to avoid a volley of texts back and forth, so I figured emails would be best. I typed something generic, a boilerplate-memo, leaving out the embarrassing details, and copied and pasted it with slight variations for each recipient. For the good of the order, I checked my work email, replying in the vaguest and noncommittal ways to keep demands at bay. It was only the barista, informing the few remaining souls it was last call, who reminded me I had to go home.

When I got home, my property was pitch dark—no moon, no stars, just a cloud covering, threatening to send the first flurries of the season. The darkness made me realize the motion sensor light was not on, which, I assumed, would require another trip to Home Depot. Before I could retire for the night, Randall had to go out one last time. He greeted me with shuffling paws and tapping nails. I dropped my bag by the door and led him out and around to the backyard. My breath was visible in the cold, reminding me that I abandoned my winter coat at my former life. The darkness did little to calm my racing thoughts.

I tried to empty my head, to hear the loud silence of the woods, but couldn't. I called for Randall to finish whatever he was doing and turned to go back in the house, but I didn't hear him follow. I called again, this time louder.

I moved closer to the rocks that lined the edge of the yard and looked into the dark woods. With each time I called his name, there was an increasing panic and urgency to my voice. The horror of searching in the dense darkness flushed me with anxiety. Randall seemed to be too old to chase after something. I thought if I raced to the house and grabbed one of Greg's hiking flashlights, I could catch him before it was too late.

When I turned to run toward the back door, there he was, waiting for me to let him in.

§

I lit all of the candles that I bought during the day and lay in bed. There was no more liquor in the house, which was probably a good thing. I had finished up the rest of the Jack Daniels and resolved myself not to stock up for a few days.

Earlier, I had stood before my dusty bookshelf, staring at the books I once read or was going to read. It seemed fitting for me to embark on a promethean read while in self-perceived exile. It came down to *Ulysses* and *Moby Dick*,

two books I had started at moments in the past that were usurped by obligatory responsibilities. Perhaps eight hundred pages of maritime solitude scared me off, so I grabbed *Ulysses* along with the used copies of the Ellman and Gilbert commentaries to aid my pending journey around Dublin.

But I did not have the will to start. I blew out all but one candle and watched the ceiling.

§

Over the next couple of days, I juggled indignancy, bitterness, sadness, and guilt. Then I'd feel stupid because I'd remind myself that I wasn't born in the developing world—that I had my health, a job, and was still alive. But soon I was back to feeling sorry for myself a few hours later.

The house was one issue after another. I went to change the motion sensor light on the side of the garage and found the broken shingles where flying squirrels would enter with winter coming. When I tried to tackle the infinite fallen leaves, the blower didn't work, and my rake was missing too many teeth to make it effective. I wound up at the grocery store a couple more times and visited Home Depot more than I cared to admit.

I cleaned the gutters, though, and had someone come over and pump the septic tank. I vacuumed Randall's hair, which appeared in soot-colored tracks

across the area rugs and bunched like black tumbleweed along the edges of the room. I set the new mailbox in a deep plastic pail and interred it according to the height and distance regulations decreed by the U.S. Postal Service. In the evenings, I chipped away at *Ulysses*, finally breaking past “Proteus.”

Aside from my errands, tasks, and purge, I stayed inside myself—within my head, avoiding contact with others. If I listened to music, it was assured a chorus would wind up as an earworm. If it were quiet, I held imaginary conversations I wanted to have.

The day before Greg returned, the washer was delivered and installed. Another day later and I think I would have been at the basin with my dirty underwear in hand. Once the delivery guys hooked it up, I tossed in my first of several loads of wash and walked out to the end of the driveway to check on the mailbox. It was still standing. Inside, tucked among flyers and offers for things I did not want, was the letter confirming that I moved.

I went back in the house to give the purge one last push, in hopes of taming the mess. Garbage pickup wouldn't come for another week. I still hadn't figured out where to donate my old clothes, either. I had a couple of outdated appliances like a tube television and desktop computer, which also needed to

go—two items rendered dinosaurs in less than a decade by the phone in my pocket.

Some of the appliances could be put out with the garbage next week; others might need to be specially disposed of. The computer was different though. It still held parts of me—all my files, my searches, my keystrokes. Other objects are not made to hold memories. With a TV, none of your viewing is logged. As far as it is concerned, you have no past. If you donate clothes or shoes, wear and tear of experience is obvious; however, no one knows who did the wearing and tearing—nothing is confessed as to the experiences in those items.

I couldn't find the plugs to power the desktop, and I was pretty sure I didn't have a giant magnet. Maybe I could have looked online to see how other people disposed of desktop towers, but in the throes of the purge, impatience prevailed.

I found the sledgehammer leaning against the wall in the corner of the garage. In the driveway, I laid the hard drive on its side and took a weak whack at it, hoping that the weight of the hammer would do the job. The encasing didn't dent, though. I summoned the strength I once had and whacked the hell out of it as if I were in a carnival contest. From a distance, I could hear the

echo come back at me. It took a good five hits before the outer shell cracked and sundered from the metal enclosure that held the computer's brain or soul.

I kept at it. Shards of green plastic spit out the sides of the metal encasing, which was now dented into itself. I closed my eyes with each blow to avoid shrapnel. When braided rainbow wires and wide plastic belts became exposed, I yanked them from the circuit boards. I wasn't sure what part held the memory, so I flattened and mangled the disparate pieces indiscriminately until it was unrecognizable, ready to be cast to the four winds.

I left the remains of the former computer in the driveway. I wasn't in the mood to clean up. I was in the mood to destroy. Heartless abandon of the past was the only remedy. I wanted it—whatever *it* was—to all go away. I lived life in a sustained holding pattern—not just since my return, but over the past few years. I had aged physically, but at times still felt like a child.

I rode the wave of cathartic aggression to make a decisive break with the past. Anything made of paper would get shredded by hand. Magazines, instruction booklets, college essays, you name it, torn into squares. The greatest repository of the past me was in my filing cabinet—a record of a portion of my adult life. I emptied file folders and tore papers down the middle. I turned them sideways and tore again.

Behind the hanging file folders, I discovered small boxes with carbon copies of checks I had written dating back to when I started my career. I wasn't sure how these things slipped my previous purges. I flipped through the tissuey pages. The handwriting was mine. Every slip was a payment for something so mundane I didn't have the slightest recollection of it. A parking ticket. A phone bill. Primary source documents that an anthropologist or historian would use to extrapolate the mores of a human at the onset of the twenty-first century.

The sides of my index fingers were already getting raw, but the catharsis felt satisfying. In defiance, the spines of the checkbooks didn't want to let go their pages, forcing me to wrench with more effort. I sliced a finger on an unexpected staple. Little dabs of blood streaked the carbon paper squares. I pricked another finger just as my phone rang.

It was an unfamiliar number, but my curiosity made me answer it anyway. It turned out to be Dr. Belkoff. His voice kept cutting in and out until I lost him. Instead of taking my chances on the reception in the house, I went into the yard to call him back.

"I have an opening later this afternoon at 3:45 if you are available."

"Yes," I said, "that will be great."

“I’ll see you then,” he said and hung up.

The sky was clear, and the day seemed warmer, at least in the sun, than it had been all week. I had said yes to the doctor without knowing what time it was, so I checked on my phone. I had two hours before the appointment. At my feet was the fire pit. Because of the bright day, the colors of the rocks on the inside of the fire pit contrasted against the black and grey ash at the center. It was in that moment I determined everything else that needed to be purged would be burned.

§

In the beginning of the relationship, we had gone camping about a half a dozen times. Since she came from a family of money, as a kid she spent part of her summers at a sleepaway camp that took them on rock climbing tours throughout New England. They camped at the base of their climbs, so she learned all the ins-and-outs of camping.

I did not know how to make a campfire, which made sense because I had an irrational apprehension about starting fires, so I gladly turned the job over to her.

“You make the logs into a teepee,” she said, “so the fire can breathe.”

She ripped a few pages of newspaper and placed them underneath the canopy of logs for kindling. She struck a match and lit the end of a rolled-up page and guided it into the nest before leaving it to burn. The memory of those nights was always evoked weeks later by the hints of smoke left on my sweat-shirt.

Under the crisp, blue November sky, I knelt over the fire pit. I arranged the logs in teepee formation and stuffed more papers from the purge underneath. A faint breeze blew out my flame before I placed it to the kindling, so I lit it again. This time it caught. I added more and more paper to encourage the flame until it needed no more encouragement. The flame moved gently up and down the logs before seizing them entirely.

Thomas Genevieve is a writer from New Jersey. His fiction appears or is forthcoming in the *Baltimore Review*, the *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Hobart*, *Crack the Spine*, *decomp magazinE*, and the *Dime Show Review*, among others. When he is not writing, he maintains a steady diet of the cultural arts.