

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

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Joe C. Jackson Graduate College

89TH AND PINE

A CREATIVE THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirement for

the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

WITH CREATIVE WRITING EMPHASIS

By

BLAIZE DICUS

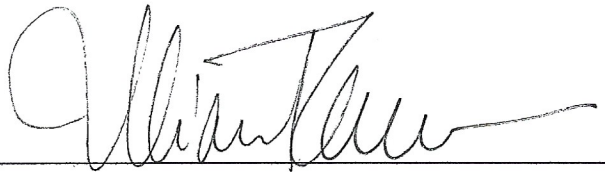
November 28, 2018

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

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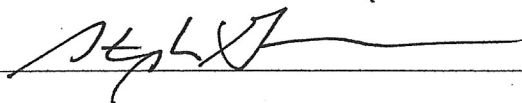
By

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Iliana Rocha", written above a horizontal line.

Dr. Iliana Rocha, Committee Chairperson

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Timothy Petete", written above a horizontal line.

Dr. Timothy Petete, Committee Member

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Stephen Garrison", written above a horizontal line.

Dr. Stephen Garrison, Committee Member

89th and Pine

Thesis Summary

89th and Pine is a creative project that challenges the conventions of genre. While this work is labeled as a collection of poetry, the ultimate goal of the project is to subvert the norms of the genre, appropriately honor the grand tradition of poetry, and to enter into discourse with the current themes of 21st century poets. The work is a direct communication between the forms of prose and poetry. The pieces very deliberately shift from prose to poetry with every other entry in the collection, all while maintaining a unilateral narrative from beginning to end. The structure of the collection follows the traditional three-act format of a novel, mimicking the escalation of plot and the addition of characters, but also retains the thematic divides found in poetry collections with multiple sections.

Poetry today is well-saturated with poets embarking on various forms of mixed genre experimentation. The forms found in *Iteration Nets* by Karla Kelsey is directly referenced in the closing three-piece unit of 89th and Pine. *The Most of It* by Mary Ruefle assisted in the argument of what is prose and what is poetry, which is found here in such pieces as “The Barista,” “Family Circus,” and “Gallon Jugs of Water.” However, this creative project found much inspiration from Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman, as well, favoring the usage of many long lines. *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine is another collection that features mixed genre material; her pairing of verse and prose with numerous photographs and artistic visual cues, assails the reader into pondering what exactly is poetry or prose. Cultural icon and prolific rapper Post Malone said, “What I’m not into is

boxes. I don't put people in boxes. There are no genres anymore." He is, of course, speaking of the music industry, but a similar trend is arising in the written word, too. Writers such as Rupi Kaur and r.h. sin are forsaking traditional form altogether and have created works aimed to just make readers feel something.

The objective of 89th and Pine is to further progress the argument of whether genre distinction is at all necessary, or if today's readers just want to feel connected to what they're reading.

Here lies the great challenge of this work: removing genre stigma. Readers are often resistant to poetry because it is seen as hard to grasp, and often are more drawn to the familiar world of fantastical fiction. 89th and Pine seeks to entertain the reader with a novelistic experience, but provide enough poetic dynamic to challenge the reader to seek further meaning from each piece.

The key to the success of the project was to develop a convincing narrator to become the vehicle for the work. Without Oscar's sight, or lack thereof, the project would fall flat. While each poem, and each section of prose, is meant to stand alone, when compiled together they create a fluid narrative from beginning to end. It was necessary to divide the poetic elements into thematic sections, but also group them separately by form themselves; several shorter, prose-like poems are grouped together early on, and the later sections contain many image-driven organic poems. The evolution of the narrative coincides with the destruction of genre-lines, while maintaining a strong sense of story and plot.

89th and Pine, while not revolutionary in its mixed-genre conception, does present a fresh challenge to the current market of poetry collections. By the end of a reading, the debate should still exist whether this is a collection of short prose scenes enjambed with poetic pauses, or whether this is a poetry collection framed by a deliberate narrative arc. With this project, the hope is to imply that today's reader does not care whether this book is found in the poetry section or in the fiction section of the local bookstore. Genre is not just changing, it is vanishing.

1. Carry-on Luggage
2. 9:08 a.m.
3. Stained Linens
4. 9:44 a.m.
5. Megaphoning
6. 10:07 a.m.
7. Steven
8. 10:25 a.m.
9. We Tried
10. 11:15 a.m.
11. Weight/Wait
12. 11:42 a.m.
13. Stephanie
14. 12:05 p.m.
15. The Bastard
16. 12:41 p.m.
17. Error
18. 12:46 p.m.
19. Break-fast
20. 12:58 p.m.
21. Family Circus
22. 1:03 p.m.
23. Gallon Jugs of Water
24. 1:12 p.m.
25. Barista
26. 1:15 p.m.
27. Point of Interest
28. 1:19 p.m.
29. Wedge
30. 1:25 p.m.
31. Tenure
32. 1:31 p.m.
33. Getaway
34. 1:38 p.m.
35. Fawn
36. 1:46 p.m.
37. Miller's Sonnet
38. 2:00 p.m.
39. Dis-chord
40. 2:05 p.m.
41. The Writer
42. 2:42 p.m.
43. Heroes
44. 2:44 p.m.
45. Waiting
46. 2:52 p.m.
47. The Packers Won on Sunday
48. 2:58 p.m.
49. Watching Movies with the Sound
ON
50. 4:21 p.m.
51. Parking Lot Lawn Chair
52. 4:45 p.m.
53. Vision of 2020
54. Thursday
55. Oh Captain, My Captain
56. Friday
57. Schoolhouse
58. Saturday
59. The Part Where the Moon is
Bright
60. Sunday
61. Oscar's Eulogy

Carry-on Luggage

It haunts the beige-tiled hallways of a dilapidated elementary school, where lockers bang, papers flutter, and the victim winces.

The smell of garbage, memorable as the first time coffee grounds tickled his nose, the sharp corner of the door leaving (in)visible bruises.

Laughter, ringing in his ears like the bell before a boxing match, blood dribbling from both nostrils, panic lacing both eyes.

Seven years later—religiously locked in a room with books, ogling over the words of dead geniuses and prophets,

wondering if words even matter. Words do nothing to stop the daggers, shooting through every cell, singeing the tips of every nerve ending, never-ending.

He sees the stranger with her three kids: two drooling, one pooping. A cellphone ringing, a drunk husband on the other line.

A thank you, with a smile, from an elected-leper, assures her that hope exists. If only she knew the infuriation behind his guise,

hate for the man who left him. Rage swelling for the wife betrayed, the mother maimed, and the other woman fucked, the son left thinking

a remote-controlled helicopter from K-MART was the last he'd see of the man he'd one day become: gray mustache, balding head, charm inescapable.

His mom says, "You walk like him."

9:08 a.m.

“Do you know why I sit here?” I ask.

“I don’t,” replies the young man.

“This is my favorite bench. Out of all the benches my wicker-boned body has sat on, this is it.” The wood gives a little as I shift my weight to the left. Why do I still keep my wallet back there? I’m seventy-seven years old. I should know better.

This bench. The one across from the park on 89th street. The park with the billowing and the spewing fountains. I love it for the fountains. The little ones gargle all day—harmonious with the hiss of the wind through the dry, green leaves—casting a pulsating shield of ripples. The ducks avoid them. But the spray from the geysers splatters the surface of the water—the ducks bathe in them.

“Oscar?” the boy squeezes my forearm gently.

“It’s the day before Fall, so the calendar says. The fish know.” I point out an orange one. “I’ve seen more come up to the surface to nip at the unlucky insects than I’ve seen all week. They’re excited. Soon, the top layer of the lake won’t feel like the bottom of a dishwasher after a cycle. Park patrons will bring them popcorn.”

My knees needed an extra three practice bends before I clambered out of bed this morning.

“How old are you, son?”

“I’m nineteen,” the boy says.

“When I was twenty-three, I moved to Montana. A buddy of mine—now, mind you, this was 1969—had this crazy idea: buy some land, buy some cows, make some money. Neither one of us knew anything about cows, but we knew we wanted money. So off we went. It only took about three weeks for him to realize he wasn’t much of a rancher—too much lotion on his hands. He couldn’t grip the reins.”

I scratch my emerging facial-stubble. “I met Guinevere, so I stayed. She was being kept, well-fed, clean, and trained on a modest ranch outside of Whitefish.”

“You fell in love.”

“With the mountains, with the animals.”

“With a girl.” The boy elbows me.

“With a bird.”

“Excuse me?” The boy put down his lunch sack.

“I became apprenticed to a master falconer. When the ranch went under, and I refused to leave, I took a tent and blanket roll into the hills. It was summer, so I lived reckless but frivolous. Guinevere introduced herself to me when I tried to steal her catch.”

“You met a woman hunting?”

“Of course not,” I reply. “Don’t be absurd. Guinevere taloned her prey, then began shrieking, calling her master to her. It only took about thirty seconds for Abraham to come pounding in—that man wore his size tens like they were Navajo moccasins. He identified me immediately—a deserter.”

“I was in love once.” The boy was looking across the perennial garden at a young woman. A blonde. Her shoes squeaked, her jewelry, sterling, but the way she was talking to her class of third grade students had me listening.

“What was her name?” I ask.

“Elizabeth.” The boy’s voice doesn’t change.

“Why have you never mentioned her before?”

“Why would I bother you with that, Oscar? I’m here to discuss Chaucer’s ideas about women, not mine.”

“So her leaving you wasn’t the reason you hated the Miller’s Tale?” My head remains motionless, but the corner of my mouth sneaks in a quick grin.

“If you knew, why didn’t you ask?”

“Because, Levi, why would I trouble you with that?” I can’t see his eyes, and my sunglasses are on, so he can’t see mine. I imagine he’s shoved his eyebrows together.

“Sir,” Levi says. “Have you ever loved a woman?”

“I hardly think that’s an appropriate question.”

“Last week you made a joke about assholes and peanut butter, so I think I can ask you anything.”

“You shouldn’t have come over to ask what I was reading.” I use my right hand to fumble for my bag. My fingers feel for the metal clasp to undo the leather strap. Every book in my bag feels different—some are leather, some vinyl, and there’s a graveyard of half-full pens at the bottom. “Tell me about Elizabeth.”

“Oscar . . .”

“Chaucer has been dead awhile. He’ll still be dead later. Talk.”

“What do I say?” Levi asks.

“What would you say to her?”

Stained Linens

I ruined my favorite hoodie, once
With ketchup or ranch, the narrative doesn't
care, because I in-hesitantly bought a new
one, a green one, and had to decide why the
previous wasn't my favorite.

I bled into the new, sweated into, lived into
heated the new cotton with my body heat and
ambitions. I called the purchase a new
chapter, but forgot I picked up a new book
about cowboys in Florida. I've never been to
Florida. But I've climbed that pile of rocks over
there and my elevation did little to answer the
lower questions. That's all right.

I've started taking photos with the other
camera.

A spider here, a spec of dust there, new ink
scribbled into scarred skin. I'm not scared
anymore.

I went to bed with a lotus, made her bloom,
caressed the petals until she folded into me.
And in the morning we watered each other,
with a bucket and a tongue.

The paint is chipped on the window-sill, and
the nails should be hammered or maybe
repainted, but I don't go into salons anymore
because I can't. And I'm done explaining the
difference.

On Wednesday the woods called me, so I followed the whisper into Walden
and hoped to

find a tree with a carved heart to show me it
exists. Turns out it exists outside me.

I stabbed my arm with initials to remind me.
Turquoise and silver.

9:44 a.m.

“When I was twenty-six, I got a phone call.” I pause.

Levi doesn’t respond.

“Turns out my buddy, Roger, the shitty rancher, well, he went and got married back home. Yeah, found himself a great wife, I suppose. One kid. A boy.”

“Did he say anything else?” Levi asks.

“I never did talk to him. His wife was a wonderful woman. She raised that boy just right.”

“I don’t think I get it, sir.” Levi smacks his lips together; the wood bench creaks as he tightens his grip.

“Leukemia. Nobody that loved him, and nobody he loved could’ve saved his body.” I sigh. My head remains straight ahead; I can sense Levi staring at the ground. “Can’t be sad, though.”

Levi snuffles. “Why’s that sir?”

“Cause it’s our love that saved his soul.” I reach into my back pocket and retrieve my wallet. Fingers shaking, I flip through to the third flap on the left pocket-sleeve. Pinned between my fingernails is a folded up memory. I hand it to Levi.

“Open it, son.”

The paper crinkles as he opens it.

His lungs expel all their air in a matter of milliseconds; followed by a sharp inhale.

“Read the inscription,” I say.

Levi coughs a couple of times, then reads, “Flying for you.”

“It’s a term my old mentor taught me, and Roger may have heard me say it twice. It’s the call I gave when I let Guinevere fly untethered, to watch over me. That’s also what we promised to do for each other—he flies with me everyday.”

“Is this you and him up in Montana?” Levi asks.

I can hear him straightening out the creases in the film. “The day before he moved home. Last time I saw him.”

“Man, Oscar. Why’re you showing me this?”

“He was more than my best friend; save for blood, we were brothers. Not a day goes by that I don’t wish I’d been there at the end.”

I let the silence sink into Levi. Except it isn’t silent; a blue jay calls to its companion, a duck quacks, a dog barks and flings slobber as it runs through a pile of dry leaves. I wipe a dot of drool off my pinky-finger.

“If you love that girl, and you let the relationship die, you’ll never get to tell her how you feel,” I say.

“What if she doesn’t love me?”

“If you fly for her, she will.” I turn my ear toward the center of the park.

Megaphoning

When I wrap around yours bodies, I wrap around yours limestone boulders, yours mossy
riverbanks, and yours trees
 sheered limbs that leave daggers

The rivers evaporate, fill the sky with water, then fall again to soak the soil. Trees grow,
pines cedars, sturdy. A system designed to give what is needed; a system that burns when
poisoned.

When I survey yours naked skins, I catalog the colors of yours shedding maples, every
boisterous feathered-soloist, every
 howl erupted towards the blood-soaked moon

 There's a seismic difference between the footprint of a squirrel and the tread of
 size tens—
200,000 pounds.

When I inhale yours perfumes, I inhale twice. Yours air, invading at night, retreating with
the sun; I sip yours
 cindered blessings

If burning trees is a crime, there are thousands of wanted men on the loose; if he's
wearing a hardhat, he's a
murderer.

When I harvest yours gardens, I praise my good fortune. Reaping what I sow, and giving
back again; digging trenches will make
 corn grow in rows

The orange (sky) faded in '41; it's been black
since '42.

10:07 a.m.

“Levi,” I say. “What is that over there?”

The shouting sounds like it’s coming out of an elementary school’s lunchroom speaker system.

“Looks like some guy with a megaphone,” Levi says.

“Let’s take a walk over there.”

“Are you sure, sir?” Levi asks.

“Yes, of course. He has a lot to say.” I wrap my skeletal fingers around the bone pommel of my cane. Using Levi’s shoulder to steady myself, I command my knees and toes to maintain my balance.

“You good?” Levi wraps his arm around me.

“Did Hamlet see a ghost? Let’s go.”

Levi and I strike out together, cane tapping the pavement like an oar coasting through water. The trek across the park to the hill is not a direct route. Levi seems to think it’s necessary to keep me on the path; he ignores every attempt I make to lead us under the shade of the cherry trees. I’m thankful for the corduroy jacket I have on—the one with the elbow patches. However, I neglected to put my hat on this morning, and the mid-day sun is making an impression on my balding scalp.

Sticking to the path, we weave our way around the playground equipment; the laughter of children playing Duck Duck Goose drowns out the sound of the soap-box-hipster. As the squeak of the teeter-totter fades, the reverb of the megaphone returns.

“Pay attention, people! Recycle! Don’t let them take your forests! Where will the squirrels go?” the megaphone-man says.

Levi and I stand a few feet away, listening.

Levi shifts his weight from foot to foot; I can feel him glancing around, wondering what my next move is. I remain focused on the protestor. He is alone.

“Excuse me.” I wave my cane in the air.

“Bulldozers roll out every day! Manifest Destiny! The bison are gone, and now they’re taking the trees!”

“Excuse me.” I rap my cane on the wood crate that the shouter is standing on.

“Yeah? What?” He doesn’t speak through the megaphone.

“I’d like to talk to you,” I say.

“Yeah, well, you and your grandson should just move along.”

“He is not my grandson.”

“Whatever.” He raises the megaphone and returns to shouting.

“Why do you assume he is?” I ask.

“What?”

“Why do you think he is my grandson? We don’t look alike, I don’t think.”

“Look, man, I’m just trying to get a message out. All right?”

“And I’m trying to get my message into you.” My shoulders remain square to him. Levi remains silent.

“Dude, what is this guy’s problem?” The protestor’s question is directed at Levi.

“I don’t have a problem,” I answer.

“I’m just trying to spread awareness, man.”

“So am I,” I say.

“Of how much of an asshole you are? Dozers are rolling as we speak. The forest is being ripped down. People need to know.”

“They know. They just don’t care.” I tug on Levi’s arm, asking him to walk me back to the bench.

“That’s what I’m saying! They need to care!” He switches the megaphone back on.

I stop. Levi and I have taken only a few steps away from the guy. For a moment, I wonder if I should say anything else to him. Then I hear it.

“Mom,” says the voice of a young boy. “I just want to play a bit more.”

“No. Park time is over. You have work to do.”

“But—“

“I said no. Let’s go.”

I only hear a little bit more of what they say, but the mom and son walk by us, Levi and me, still bickering over how much time would be allotted later for video games—none.

“Oscar?” Levi says.

He was so silent I nearly forgot he was walking me around. “What is it, son?” I say.

“You kind of zoned out for a second.”

“I did? Oh.” I can hear the megaphone-man again. “Take me back to him.”

“Why don’t we just go sit down?” Levi asks.

“Take me back.”

Levi doesn’t say anything else; we turn and walk back to the man.

“You again?” the megaphone asks.

“What is your name?” I ask.

“Jacob.”

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Seventeen,” Jacob replies.

“I’m Oscar. Let me tell you about Steven.”

Steven

The bus ride home takes fifteen minutes. His walk up the driveway takes twenty.

He,

pulls on his backpack—a Captain Kirk pin attached.
carries AP Chemistry hardbacks, a halfway complete robo-gizmo.

tiptoes inside.
sees six fingers missing, one dirty glass on the coffee table, one bottle
remains in the kitchen.

waits until nine o'clock. The (empty) bottle sits next to the empty glass.
hears the lawnmower on the sofa.

awakes in the morning. The envelope is ripped open. She is sitting at the table.
eats pancakes with tiny air-craters.

She asks, “Bs?”

He,

quakes
sweats
says “I’m sorry” and “my best”

She says “Unacceptable” and “You’re grounded” and “Worthless”

He,

cries in his room.
wants to know why his words aren’t good enough.
believes he isn’t good enough.
finally takes action.
cuts his wrists—vertically.

10:25 a.m.

“Dude, I don’t know what you are trying to get at here.”

“Look around you,” I say. “Tell me who you see.”

There’s silence while Jacob surveys the park. “Lots of families. A couple walking with each other. A few old people.”

“Are any of them listening to you?”

“Well, not now. You got me talking to you.”

“Stop that. Pay attention. You can stand up there all day shouting, but it isn’t going to do anything,” I say.

“Oh yeah? Why?” Jacob asks. He steps off his crate; I can feel his breath on my face. Levi shifts to prevent Jacob from stepping closer.

“Oscar, let’s just leave this guy alone,” says Levi.

“You should listen to your grandson. Why’re you walking around the park telling stories about kids killing themselves?”

“Nobody knew what Steven was going through. His teachers all loved him. He was a bright student. But mom drank every night, and acted sober every morning.”

“We all have problems.”

“That’s my point,” I say. “And you still assume to know who I am. A grandfather, I am not.”

“Whatever, man. I’ve got work to do,” Jacob says.

“Shouting from a crate never saved anybody, and it’s not going to save the trees. If you want some change, go take action. These people are all fighting silent battles, and that’s what you should be doing.”

“You just don’t care about the environment.”

“On the contrary, I care about the people in my environment. There is a time and place for protesting, but this park is not one of them,” I reply. “When was the last time you planted a tree?”

“Um,” Jacob says.

“I just had a new Japanese maple placed outside my living-room window.”

Jacob doesn’t say anything.

“Steven, my little brother, loved those trees.”

“Look, sir,” Jacob says. “You saying I should be working at a homeless shelter or something instead of fighting for clean air?”

“No. I’m saying you should spend your time taking action, not asking others to do it for you.”

“Protesting deforestation has nothing to do—“

“We protested mom’s drinking. Our words didn’t do anything. She died an alcoholic,” I say.

Jacob remains silent.

“I just want you to look around, see these people. I’m sure they all have their own protests. Some may be taking action, and some are living in distress. If your method of fighting injustice is grabbing a horn and yelling really loud, I feel sorry for you. I can see

you care; your words are eloquent and passionate. Who told you that you can't do anything more?"

"Excuse me?" Jacob asks.

Levi tries to pull me away. I think he can sense a delicate subject coming, but for now I'm thankful he's here to lean against.

"We're getting out of here, man. Sorry to bother you," Levi says.

"Hang on, Levi," I say.

"Oscar, I thought you just wanted to hear what this guy was yelling about. Why'd we come over here?" Levi asks.

"I'd like to know, too. So far this isn't making sense," Jacob says.

I say, "Fine Levi, let's go back to the bench now."

"What? That's it," Levi says.

"Yes. I just wanted this young man to know he can do more than shout."

"He wasn't doing anything wrong," Levi says.

"I know that, but he could be doing more. And he didn't know it. Isn't that right, Jacob?"

"Actually, yeah," Jacob says.

"You're scared to do more because you don't think you can," I say.

"What am I supposed to do? I can't fix life on my own. That's why I'm out here with this." Jacob raises his hand to show me the megaphone; I don't see it.

"Put that away. People will listen to what you do."

"Nobody listens to me," Jacob says.

"I'm listening."

I say goodbye to Jacob.

Levi helps me back to the bench. My rickety body is thankful for the support of the wooden seat. I wonder if Jacob understood me.

"I'm sorry about your brother, sir," Levi says, breaking the silence.

"It's all right. I wanted to get Jacob's attention."

"Why tell that story?" Levi asks.

"I believe Jacob, too, didn't feel good enough to take action. He was screaming frustration into that megaphone the way Steven screamed into a pillow at night; nobody listened. Nobody knew. Nobody told either of them that they were more than words," I say.

Levi sits next to me on the bench.

We Tried

I wonder if anyone was worried about that pregnant twenty-something year old—her purple, knit sweater hanging loose over her famished frame—who is begging to begin another descent—
or rise

I wonder if anyone else noticed the dealer short her a gram and a half—she noticed, but tucked the product into her sock anyway—unwavering in her mission to escape the turmoil of 87th street—
or 89th

I wonder if anyone was there when she got home, when she lit the stove, when she sat down on her sofa—hole-y and grey from years of ash burns—preparing a new spoon—
or chalice

I wonder if anyone realized her skin was deteriorating, her belly aches; her veins itching for medicine—
or poison

I wonder if anyone saw her throw away the HELP ME pamphlets that the (good) Christians outside First Methodist handed her every Sunday; she's met by "is that her?" and "slut"
or rape

I wonder if anyone was there during the last seven days, holding her hair back as the vomit and blood swirled away down the drain—all the truth and answers drowned—
and forgotten

11:15 a.m.

“She passed away last year. Mom and I got a call from the cops; they’d found her body in her apartment. Said she’d been dead for three days,” Levi says.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“We didn’t even know she was pregnant. When she left for college, she met some guy. We didn’t like him.”

“So you stopped calling,” I say.

“Mom was convinced that Sadie, my sister, was just being dramatic,” says Levi.

“You shouldn’t blame yourself, Levi,” I say.

“If we had known that guy was stabbing her arm with heroin, then maybe we could have done something. But we didn’t even know she had dropped her classes.” Levi leans against the back of the bench. He exhales, then says, “Can we just talk about something else? This wasn’t the conversation I had in mind when I came out here to study, Oscar.”

“Would talking about literature be much better?” I ask.

“If I don’t understand this shit, how can I write this stupid paper?” Levi says.

“Let’s talk about what’s really frustrating you instead,” I say.

“What do you mean?” Levi asks.

“Do you feel like you can’t help people?” I ask.

Levi shifts his weight.

“Elizabeth didn’t leave you, did she?” I continue.

“No, I left.”

“Because you didn’t feel like you were good enough for her.”

“Yes,” says Levi.

“And that was right after your sister died?”

“Yes. What are you saying, sir?”

I pause, wondering what I am trying to say.

“If you weren’t there for Sadie, you might’ve disappointed Elizabeth, too. So you left before that could happen.” I say. I know my words may sting. The wind, from the south, blows a cold gust across our faces.

“That’s right.”

I’m surprised he doesn’t fight my probing. “You are defining yourself by a situation you couldn’t control.”

“Look at me now. You said yourself, if I want her back, I should go get her. But instead, I’m sitting here, thinking about school, being selfish—just like I was with Sadie.”

“Is that what your mom told you?” I ask. The spitting fountains take a break. The park is quiet; everyone must have left for lunch.

“Yes. And now I’m proving her right.”

Weight/Wait

I missed the game winning free-throw
I didn't scrape the Pyrex before it went in the dishwasher
I forgot to feed the dog last Thursday
I couldn't figure out question number thirty-seven
I won't be able to make your birthday party
I should've remembered you hate almonds
I would've made the honor roll

I'm sorry

You suck
You never pay attention
You can't remember anything
You're so dumb
You only care about yourself
You never listen
You'll never be good enough

I practiced my shot
I bought new sponges
I gave the dog an extra bowl on Friday
I actually answered the question correctly
I dropped your present off at your house
I asked for pecans
I got my acceptance letter today

I'm trying

You (only) hit four of five
You should have bought the scrub brush
You're going to make the dog fat
You must have guessed
You couldn't deliver it to me
You should have double-checked
You won't last a year

I give up

11:42 a.m.

“You believe you’re a loser?” I ask.

“I just explained that,” Levi says. His voice is quieter now.

“You explained that other people think you’re a loser. I’m asking if that’s what you think of yourself.”

“Why does it matter what I think?”

“Because, son, you’re letting those opinions limit you,” I say.

“What do you mean?” Levi asks.

“You have two choices. You can surrender to others’ judgment, or prove them wrong.”

“What if they aren’t wrong?”

“You aren’t giving yourself a chance,” I say. “I think you’re a good person.”

“You don’t know me. You’ve only talked to me twice.”

“That’s more times than anyone else has given me. I’ve been sitting on this bench for a long time. Today was the first time I’ve walked over to the other side of the park.”

“Why’s that?”

“Nobody has ever helped me over there. You know, bad knees and all.” I laugh a little, but I hear Levi grunt.

I feel like I’m losing his attention, or maybe it’s because I asked too many questions. My glasses prevent me from seeing his facial expression, but his motionless posture lets me know he’s shutting down.

From behind me, I hear a girl’s voice say, “Do you really think I’m pretty?”

“Of course,” a male voice replies.

The girl says, “I don’t know what you see.”

“I see everything, sweetheart.”

I was forty-six. My ex-wife called me on a Wednesday. Stephanie, my daughter, was in the hospital. Her husband put her there. A drunken mistake is what he said, but the doctors called it a skull fracture; her husband had thrown her down a flight of stairs. I wanted to kill him. My ex-wife told me her new husband would handle it—all he handled was another decanter of two-hundred dollar whiskey. Stephanie went home, walking up the stairs, a couple weeks later. The husband apologized, then went out to Harry’s Pub.

“Can I tell you about my daughter?” I ask.

“What?” Levi must have returned to analyzing his notes over *The Wife of Bath’s* tale.

“She was a lot like you,” I say.

Stephanie

In high school . . .

She hated math. She hated science. She hated history. She loved Friday night. He was drunk every night. On Sunday she'd wear off-white lace.

She was too fat. She was too skinny. Her hair was too long, too straight, too curly. Why didn't he like her?

She went to the mall. She spent her step-dad's money. Sephora, VS, and Cons. She cut her shorts herself.

She cried sometimes. Why didn't he like her? Be dumb, be cute, be smart, be clever. Be anything but what you are and that'd be just right.

In college . . .

She enrolled. Education major. Why didn't he like her? Men now, not boys. She learned, she failed, she cried more.

In life . . .

She lost, she was trapped, desperate. He said he loved her. One more diamond necklace to say sorry.

She made it—they told her. Made it where? Another house, another drunk (man), Why didn't he like her?

She said I'm sorry. A lot. He gave her earrings. She forgave him when she found the pink thong.

In death . . .

She is free.

12:05 p.m.

“I, too, am familiar with death. Unfortunately, it’s not due to my military service,” I say.

“Oscar . . .” Levi inhales, sharply, through his nose. I hear the mucus ascend.

“Fall was always her favorite season. She was always falling.” I can see the bridge in my mind. Looking up, I see where she stood; what must she have felt?

“Sir?” Levi puts his hand on my arm.

I realize I’ve been squeezing, folding, fiddling my hands. “I’m sorry,” I say.

“You zoned out again. Maybe I should get you inside.”

“No, no. I must sit here. It’s nearly time.” Although, I hadn’t looked at a watch in quite some time. The tick of my wrist watch flicks my eardrum.

“Time for what?” Levi asks.

“Tom will be here,” I say.

“Tom?” Levi asks.

“It’s almost time for my appointment.”

“I suppose I should go to class,” Levi begins packing up his book and notepad.

“I think you should meet Tom,” I say.

My left ear twitches; I can hear the click-click of skateboard wheels carelessly swerving across the cracks in the sidewalk. The sharp snap of wood on cement reverberates in the air, louder than the ducks and the fountains. Tom’s mom always hated that contraption.

Tom is panting as he slides his board to a screeching halt.

I feel Levi stand up from the bench. “Levi, meet Tom.”

Still huffing between words, Tom says, “Levi? Hello. Tom.”

“I was just leaving. Have my seat,” Levi says.

“No, no,” Tom says. “I’ll sit on my board.”

Levi sits back down.

“How is your mother, Tom?” I ask.

“She’s doing fine, sir.”

“Library still treating her fine?”

“She’s sad that you haven’t come in to see her in awhile,” Tom says.

“Oh, well it’ll be a long time before I see her.” I tap my glasses. “Although, I do miss her conversations.”

“We could stop in on the way to the doc,” Tom says.

“I really should get going, I think,” Levi says. His voice is shaky—nervous.

“Tom, we’ve been talking about our past and how it has shaped us. Levi’s under the impression that he’s a loser. What do you think?” I say.

“He doesn’t look like a loser,” Tom says.

“Oscar, what are you doing?” Levi asks.

“Tom, maybe it would help to tell Levi about your mom?” I say.

“What about her?” Tom asks.

“How was your childhood?”

Tom scoffs. "Rough."

"So was Levi's." I say. I nudge Levi with my elbow. I'm becoming fond of making him uncomfortable, being the flame that makes him boil.

"What's your story, man?" Tom asks Levi.

"I'm just a student," Levi replies.

"That it? There has to be more than that." Tom's skateboard creaks as he sits down. "How long have you known Oscar?"

"Like two weeks. I thought we were just talking about Chaucer."

"Yeah, when I met him I thought we were just talking about Harry Potter. I was about six."

"You were a bright kid, Tom," I say.

"I was a sick kid," Tom says.

"You were a happy kid."

"You asked me if I believed in God. I still believed in dinosaurs." Tom laughs.

"Tom, tell Levi about your mom."

"I don't think he wants to hear that story. It's kinda personal."

"Personal?" Levi asks. "We crossed that bridge a couple hours ago."

"Alright then . . ." Tom says.

The Bastard

Oak floors and incandescent lights morph into brown sheets
Scratchy, foreign, like the hands chained to her wrists
One night out, to forget the way he, at home, treats
Her body. A Stranger's hands are better than loving Fists.

Three months later, she cries in a bathroom.
The abuser, gone; the dance partner, vanished; she remains.
Her vomit tastes like whiskey—doom—
Same eye makeup for five days, cloaking the pain.

Fighting back tears, she calls her mom.
The clinic doors shrink in her mirror.
He grabs her finger, she names him Tom.
She kisses his forehead, prays for better.

Twenty-two years later, he's in cap and gown.
Looking at him, she can't remember a frown.

12:41 p.m.

“Sounds like your mom really loves you, man,” Levi says.

“She does,” Tom says.

“Mine doesn’t have that kind of faith in me.”

“Loving and supporting are two different things. She was busy a lot. I had to face lots of challenges alone,” Levi says.

“What do you mean?”

“She loves me, sure. But she never wanted to be a mom. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t always be there.”

“Why not?” Levi asks.

Tom says, “When you’re a single-mother raising a kid with a severe birth defect, it gets pretty hard to stay positive and focused. She worked three jobs; I walked myself to school.”

“Damn,” Levi says.

“Yeah, it was tough. I had a lot of moments where I wanted to give up. People told me to, always questioning why I was smiling.”

“Why not give in?” I ask.

“Why listen to them?” Tom asks.

“What if they were right?” Levi asks.

“They weren’t. I knew they weren’t. I knew I could beat this thing.”

“What kind of defect are you talking about?” Levi asks.

“You think I should explain that, too, Oscar?” Tom asks.

“That’s up to you, kid.” I laugh.

Error

Somebody fucked up

Twenty-two attempts were made to correct it

Lateral incision

Seventy-two percent removal

Tracheotomy

Mickey button

Staph infection, times four

Pneumonia, ear infections, non-speaking

Age five, and that's it

Mom cried.

Physical therapy, blue signs, disabled

Watermelon-head,

freak,

android,

Mom almost got arrested in Walmart

I didn't mean to almost bleed out

Ruined my favorite dinosaur shirt

——Plastic surgery——

——Jaw reconstruction surgery——

——ICU——

Simba understood me

Could be nerve damage.

Could grow out of it.

Could regress.

Could (will) regrow.

Could kill me.

Will kill me.

Until then . . .

I'm alive.

12:46

Tom looks at me, and I can tell he doesn't want to share.

"Tom, Levi isn't sure about where his life is going. He's worried that his home-life has twisted him away from being a responsible citizen." I glance at Levi; he wants to leave.

"What do you mean, man?" Tom says.

"Just a shitty dad." Levi swings his backpack over one shoulder. "I really gotta get going, sir."

"Stay for another moment, Levi. We don't have to go quite yet, right, Tom?"

"Sure, sure. We have a couple minutes." Tom rocks back on the skateboard he's sitting on.

"You've told me plenty about your family, and the stories are all so interesting. Maybe you could share a couple with Levi?" I nudge Tom with my cane.

"Oscar, I have class." Levi's voice comes out at a higher pitch.

"Stay five minutes. Please. For this old man." I open my arms wide. My cardigan falls open and my plump-pie-made belly juts out. Levi chuckles, and I can hear the sounds whispering through smirked teeth.

"I guess I have five minutes." Levi sits down on the bench. The wood welcomes him back.

"Tom, why don't you tell that story about Christmas morning. With the coffee fiasco," I say.

"Oh man, that one? That was one hell of a morning." Tom sighs. "Sure."

Break-fast

I was always up before anyone else squeaked across the hardwood floors, swished across the cold tile, and cracked the seal on the stainless steel refrigerator. If it was my step-dad, he'd reach for the last swig from his mini-Diet Coke can from the night before, but if it was my mother who awoke first, she'd fumble for the jumbo sized bottle of French Vanilla (no sugar) Coffee-mate. Always ready to start her day. Her first move was to fire up any random flavor in the Keurig—this one being the third replacement model my step-dad had purchased.

The mornings when my mom woke up first, I would hustle out of bed, fuzzy-eyed but ready to slap down some bacon strips on the cast iron. My mom's claim on pancake expert was unchallenged, and my little sister had a permanent ass-plant on the corner cushion of the linen-wrapped sectional sofa in the great room, amply angled towards the rocky hearth.

On a Sunday morning we all had our place. Rarely was that place in a pew, but my parents found a way to ritualize the Sabbath.

Around six a.m. Mom would start the coffee. Bacon began at six fifteen. We forgave my sister and blamed it on her puberty that we wouldn't see her until at least ten. Looking back now, I can't help but feel this was an early onset of her continued patriarchal domination; rebellion against an absent father.

Once the grease and fat wafted past the slumbering beast's nose hairs, Dad would emerge from the denizens of Hung and Over. Dressed in trout-covered flannel pajama pants and a T-shirt emblazoned with O and U, he lumbered into the kitchen. His red-eyes begged for black coffee.

Mom put in another Keurig cup.

I sat, reading *Thrasher*, silent on the deer-skin throw on the stone hearth. Our scrappy ten-year-old dog snored next to me, enjoying the warmth of a gas-fueled fire. Between the hours of six and eight, my parents never spoke to each other. Their only interaction was a seemingly rehearsed dance around the kitchen, pouring coffee, scrounging for bagels and cream cheese, before finally plopping down in leather, high-backed, swivel-mounted, twenty-first century chairs.

"Goddamn it!"

The seven a.m. exclamation shook the leftover eye-boogers from the crooks of my eyes.

"Lee, what is it?"

"This fucking thing is—"

"Honey." Teacher voice triggered.

"It's broken." He gave the sputtering Keurig a smack.

"Shouting won't fix anything." Mom continued spreading blueberry jam across her bagel halves.

Becca threw open her bedroom door so hard that the springy-doorstop snapped in two and the door-handle punched a small dent in the drywall. "Does anybody in this house realize that I got home at two last night? After working a damn double. Fuck." She

and her Nike shorts retreated, slamming the wooden door against the door-jam. A click. Had she installed a deadbolt?

My mom and I were engrossed in a conversation about our speculations for the next day's episode of *The Voice* when Lee returned. He hadn't said where he was going, but we assumed Starbucks. We were both wrong.

The churning of the BMW X5's engine slowed. A slam.

"Everything alright, pumpkin?" How did my mom maintain that tone?

He didn't reply. He set a brown JcPenny's bag on the granite countertop next to the kitchen sink. From the bag, he produced a black and white box labeled "Breville." As he unpackaged the new contraption, Mom and I exchanged confused glances. We watched as he removed all the annoying blocks of styrofoam, un-bagged and unwrapped all the unnecessarily protected plastic components, and assembled a brand new coffee maker.

"This one grinds up fresh beans, then drops the grounds into here." He pointed out the chambers, but I was sure he had no fucking idea what he was talking about. It sounded like a sales pitch remix. "Then the coffee takes about five minutes. Never fresher." Definitely a sales pitch.

But that was his classic move, my step-dad. Always believing he could purchase the solution, but constantly outwitted by simple communication.

12:58

“Wow,” says Levi. “That’s pretty fu—screwed up.”

“Yeah. It’s fucked,” I say.

Tom and Levi laugh. Is it that funny for an old man to swear?

“That morning was probably one of the better Christmases we had around my house. At least that time my step-dad wasn’t hungover from the half a bottle of whiskey the night before,” says Tom.

Levi is silent.

“Don’t you have class to get to, Levi?” I say.

“Shit, yes. Tom, it was really good to meet you. I have a feeling I’ll be seeing you again,” says Levi.

“I certainly hope so, man. Good to meet you. Glad to see Oscar making a friend. If only he could’ve warned you about that piece of Oreo chilling in your teeth.”

I laugh. “My word.”

I hear Levi scratch at his teeth, and judging from Tom’s snicker, Levi’s cheeks must be on fire.

“Go learn something, Levi. And bring me Oreos next time,” I say. I fold my arms across my chest to act offended. Oreos are my favorite.

“Yes, sir.”

Levi’s strides are long and heavy; must be running really late. “Well, Tom, should we get going?”

“Yes, I’m starving.” Tom unfastens the velcro straps on his backpack. His skateboard clangs against the metal zippers. He smacks the straps back into place.

Tom takes me under the elbow as I muster my bones off the bench. Farewell park. Bless you and your endless breeze and possibility. We walk the short jaunt to the parking lot, and I edge my way around the passenger side of Tom’s Honda. The handle is missing, so I reach through the cracked-open window and pull the shoelace-tether attached to the hinge on the inside. One sharp pull and the door groans open. My nostrils are immediately invaded with ganja. I don’t judge. Sometimes I wonder if my knees would rejuvenate out of sheer joy if I took a few puffs.

“Tom, when are you planning on the wife and minivan? At least then it’d smell like baby poop and not skunk farts in here.”

“Very funny, sir.” Tom pulls his door closed. The ignition whimpers to life. A couple hiccups later and we are idle.

“Seriously. Why not have kids? What else do you have going on?”

“Uh, graduate school?”

“Right.” I fasten my seatbelt. I appreciate the additional-strap-cushion. “But after.”

“After? Here’s what I see.” Tom puts the car in reverse.

Family Circus

My dad's drowned silhouette sits across from me. "Do you want to see the Kleenex trick?" Sure, I say. My son's eyes glowing with delight. My dad tears up the tissue, stuffs it into his freckled fist, blows a lasting impression upon the disaster, and opens his palm to reveal the emptiness. My son is blown away. I am humid. I watch my dad pull the new tissue from the pocket of his Titlest vest, but my son only sees a reconstructed promise. "Abrakadabra alakazam!" All I see is the truth: nothing that was will ever be. And I remember that two hours from now, the magician will be snoring on the sofa, his assistant, plotting resignation, takes a green sponge to the stainless steel of the green bean sauté-r. And in the Toyota, driving four-hundred miles home, my son won't shut up about seeing the next Big Tent Show. I can't tell him his ringleader is actually a lion, willing to devour his own cub and bed a dozen lionesses. I can't tell him the elephants don't really balance on balls, clowns are really pizza delivery guys, and his grandfather is an . . .

1:03

“Tom.”

He stops short of finishing his sentence.

“That isn’t how it has to play out.”

“It’s not?” The car swerves away from the shoulder, barely avoiding the vibrating-bump-barrier.

“Of course not,” I say.

I dare not say more for fear of Tom crashing the car. Tom’s problem is that he doesn’t see what a great man he is. I can’t even see his face, but I know his eyes must be calm. Everyone always whisper-speaks when they talk to him. His mom did a fine job of raising him. Between cataloging books and serving Manhattans, she always found time to read him a book or two or throw him a spiraled pass. I really should visit her soon.

“All I’m saying is, the school board doesn’t have any right to cut the program like that. Our petition has almost two-hundred signatures.”

“I’m sorry. Pardon?” I say.

“Oscar, come on. Haven’t you heard about it? They’re de-funding our Poetry Posse, so we probably won’t get to go to the panel in Memphis.”

“I see.”

“Can’t you do something?” Tom flicks on the blinker. “We’re here.”

“This really isn’t pre-lunch banter,” I say.

“What?” Tom cranks the car into park. Then back to neutral. Then the brakes exhale. Then back to park. He jerks the parking-brake.

“You never talk about your grandpa.”

Tom shuts his door. “That definitely isn’t pre-lunch chatter.”

“Banter with me.”

“Mom never mentioned him?” Tom’s voice is mono.

“No,” I say. I’m not giving up.

“There’s a good reason. I see where you’re going with this. You’re gonna tell me that my step-dad isn’t the only role model, right?”

“Right.”

“It’s three out of three strikes for me. My step-dad drinks, my real dad is a flake, and my grandpa?”

Gallon Jugs of Water

When I was ten years old my Nana gave me a Red Rider BB gun. It had a wooden stock, polished steel muzzle, and a plastic cocking mechanism that squeaked after I loaded my fourth round of shot, which was irritating because Nana said I could go shooting frogs with Grandpa on Saturday, but I was sure my weapon wouldn't be oiled enough to bring home any game, so I realized my real job was loading sandstone into the back of his blue Chevy. I spent four o'clock in the afternoon, in her tiny backyard, twenty paces from six, one-gallon jugs of water, set up along railroad ties guarding Nana's well-watered assortment of vegetables, particularly Grandpa's green-wire-lattice-encased to-may-toes, and she warned me that if she found any holes, save the ones made by friendly garden critters, I'd have a red ass on my car ride home. By four'o'five I was an expert shot. I killed my first squirrel at four thirty on July 4th. Mom agreed to let me spend the night at Nana's, which was great because I got to sleep on those soft, fleece, Big Lots sheets Nana bought me. Gordon brought home sparklers, cherry bombs, and an ignitable collection of tanks and trucks. Nana scolded Grandpa for that. I immediately scurried to the sandbox, the refuse pile from a coy pond in the backyard, and dug tunnels with my tiny worm fingers, poking, prodding, producing trenches and tunnels for animated green marines. The grey ones were the enemy. I tied the fuses together with fishing wire from Grandpa Gordon's tackle-box, used Nana's yarn dipped in nail polish as extra fuse, and sat at the ready, Red rifle in hand, preparing to strike a match. When it blew, my face was splattered with sand and limbs and the tanks all blew up on the wrong side of the battlefield. The medic marine survived. The water jugs emptied. The tomatoes riddled.

1:12

“Satisfied?” Tom opens his door and slides out.

“Not in the least,” I say.

The aroma of the smoke billowing from Texas Roadhouse is unmistakable. Tom finally made a good choice in meal, I think to myself. If he took me for sushi one more time, I might have chucked the edamame at his face, or, rather, wherever I thought his face was.

“You ready to eat?” Tom asks.

“Absolutely. But I doubt the steak will satisfy me either,” I reply.

“Want sus—”

“You can keep trying as I eat my mashed taters, all right?” I say before he can finish his question.

Tom is always considerate. His mother raised him that way. Tom pulls the outer handle of the door and helps me out of the low-sitting car. He fetches my cane from the back seat, and my warted-fingers collapse around the bone pommel again. All my life I have found comfort in the things found between my fingers. Now, in my old age, I long for the feel of grass against my knuckles and bare limestone on my palms.

Tom takes my elbow, again, and leads me, though unnecessarily because my nose still functions excellently, to the door of the steakhouse.

“Hi, welcome in! How many?” the hostess greets us.

I imagine she’s nineteen or newly hired.

“Where’d you work before?” I ask.

Tom stops.

“Excuse me? I said how—”

“Yes. Two. But on the way, where’d you work before this?” I press on.

“Do I know you, sir?”

She’s still polite, maybe caught off guard. You ever ask a hostess where she worked before?

“Just humor him. It goes faster that way,” Tom says.

“Umm. Starbucks. Why?” the hostess says.

“And you left?” I ask.

“Yeah.” She pauses. “Hours didn’t fit my new schedule. What’s the point of this, mister?” She lays the menus on the table; they flop.

The Barista

She loves A\$AP Rocky. She listens to every word her mother tells her. She cuts her curls short. She hears, You look like a boy now. She doesn't care what her father says. She cries alone, in her Pottery Barn comforter. She cries with him, under a flea-infested Walmart fleece. She makes coffee for the pinstriped-crew-cut. She finishes her Psychology for Adults homework at two a.m. She orders herself a new sofa. She never sits on it. She just wanted to prove she really was Jennifer Garner with that stupid wishing-dollhouse. She makes a vanilla bean, two pumps caramel, three shots of espresso, no water safety-net for the nineteen year old nursing student. She never sees her again. She calls her brother, her expert, to ask if she should apply for other part-time jobs. She hangs her Associate's degree on a nail she beat into the wall with her seventeen year old temper. She feels our dad's boots on the hardwood floor. She waits until they stomp concrete. She knows he won't tell her goodnight. She knows what he does in his man cave. She feels he's gone. She feels safe. You can be anything you want unless the government tells you that you can't. She doesn't know what to do with her grandmother's tits. She thanks the boys. She doesn't get another job. She rolls her eyes while making a chai. She pauses to look—buzzed neck, pearl earrings, and a painted-purple lip. She wonders if she felt like her, too.

1:15

“Amy! Seat that table and get on with it!” a cigarette-addicted, chain-smoking voice erupts from behind my head.

“My apologies, manager.” I remain looking at Amy, the hostess. “She was assisting me with a career choice.”

I’m sure Amy looks confused. “Yes, sir. If you have any problems with her, let me know. She’s new.”

“Yes, I can tell. But also excellent, and sure to quit soon,” I say.

“What did you just say?” the manager grips the wooden back of the banquet table’s bench.

“Chips and dip,” Tom interjects.

“You got it.” I imagine his hairy fingers un-handing the seat.

“Amy, is it? I’m so sorry,” Tom says.

“Oh, it’s fine. He was just joking around. It’s like that here.” Amy coughs, lightly.

“Has it been like that everywhere?” I ask.

Amy doesn’t say anything.

“Where does your arrow point?” I ask.

Tom says, “The tattoo her arm? How could you . . .”

“This thing?” Maybe she points to it; I do when I talk about my ink. “Oh, I got this when I was eighteen. Dumb, right?”

“Where does it point?” I ask again.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand your question and a fiver just walked in so I gotta go.” Amy lays down two, napkin-wrapped sets of dinnerware.

“Funny thing about arrows,” I say.

Point of Interest

There is an arrow, on your dashboard, next to the miniature gas-pump, denoting which side of the car your gas tank is on. There is an arrow, down the road a little ways, hinging on a rain-dropped-spoiled wooden post, painted red, pointing to the right answer. There is an arrow, forty-five miles from highway seventy-five, crooked and cracked, fletched by aged, red hands, stained with dirt and life, stuck in the ground where an Osage missed his bison. There is an arrow, or so it seems, floating over my head, propped and positioned, pointed out by people to pester me about my place, purposed to propel the proposal, prejudiced opinion of normal, above a perplexed pre-teen.

In the previous days, every kid knew they were going to college. They checked all the boxes and followed all the painted arrows on the tiled floor. There was no question, no debate, no excuse for staying out late. Applications crossed, interviews dotted, they weren't allowed to even mention vo-tech, part-time, blue-collar, working class, or any other fouler than dirt occupancy. No, no. Parent-teacher became parent-teacher-pick your own switch, cause one ain't will scare off Harvard. Did they even bother to ask how his photos did at the gallery? The shadow from the arrow fell perpendicular to the shadow of a towering sunflower, creating an X over the indian blanket garden. Did they ask about his composition for meaning?

Fuck no.

1:19

Tom and Amy both chuckle.

“Is it so funny to hear an old man swear?” I ask. For the second time today.

“Just you, sir,” says Tom. “You always swear with a smile.”

“Like you know it’s bad,” Amy adds.

“Well, the point is,” I say.

“I wanted to be a photographer,” says Amy. I can feel the grip of the manager return to the seat. “But—”

“Thank you,” says Tom.

I listen as the rubber soles of Amy’s sneakers scuttle, squeaking, back to the front of the restaurant. “Sweet girl,” I say.

“You really freaked her out, Oscar. And her manager will probably yell at her later.”

“I know, Tom. I’ll talk to him, too.” I tap my fingertips on the plastic-topped table. Advertisements for local businesses are imprisoned under the film. I finally find my water, wondering why Tom didn’t scoot it into my grip. “What’s on your mind, Tom? Dad?”

Tom remains silent.

Tom always remains silent when I’ve guessed correctly. He hates it.

“My car got busted into.”

So I’m wrong. “What happened?” That explains the breeze from the backseat.

“I was parked on campus, went to class, came back and my shit was gone.” Tom sips his water.

“What’d they take?” I am hesitant to ask; I guess his next response correctly.

“My clubs.”

My hair-filled ear flinches. Not sneakers this time, but soft-soled flats, most likely.

“Hey there! I’m Samantha. You can call me Sam. I’ll be taking care of you today. Looks like Amy got you started with some waters. Would you lovely gentleman be wanting anything else to drink? Beer?” Directed at Tom. “Tea? Coffee?” Directed at me.

I imagine her face when I say, “Two beers.”

“Two?”

“Two,” I repeat. I flash a peace-sign. Tom laughs.

“What’ll you have?” Sam asks.

“Something that will ease the suffering of two dying suns,” I say.

“You got it.” Sam hurries away.

There’s a silence that’s filled with Tom swirling his straw between chunks of melting ice, the couple at the booth behind us arguing about CNN and FOX, and the singeing-sizzle of a fading neon sign above my head.

“Tom, let’s talk about your dad.”

“We were talking about my clubs.”

“Same thing.”

Wedge

Which wedge would work well when hitting a whiffle ball down to a four-foot-wide kiddie pool? That, my step-dad and I couldn't decide. Fifty yards out in our Better Homes and Garden backyard, palms dripping black flecks of the wedge grip down my psycho-lines, filling my single, white glove with itchy sweat. One dime per make, one curse per swing. I drove that wedge right between—that dimpled seed and grass guillotines—aimlessly watching the disaster of my swing. Hearing, feeling, the imperfection and disappointment. Two ice cubes clinked together in his glass. He raised the whiskey and dropped the judgement. “Keep your head down. Knees bent.” So I swung the wedge in further. He took another sip.

That night, I dug one muddy-massive divot in our foundation and never put it back.

1:25

“Here you guys go!” Sam returns. She sets our two, large, beers down on the table. I can smell the citrus.

“Shocktop?” I ask.

“Little sun for my two dying suns.” Bracelets jingle-jangle around Sam’s wrists as she props her hands on her hips.

“Does she have a pretty smile, Tom?” I ask.

“Uh. Oscar. Uh. Yeah. Yes. What the heck?” Tom slurps the foam off the top of his beer.

Sam giggles. “And he has a lovely beard.”

Tom spits the foam back into the glass—and a little bit on me.

“Let me know when you’re ready to order, boys.” I can almost hear her eyelashes clap as she winks at us, soft as the closing of butterfly wings.

“What’s gotten in to you today, Oscar?” Tom asks.

“What do you mean?” I take my own sip of booze. Sunny.

“That was unfair. The whole, ‘does she have a cute smile?’ thing.” Tom takes a drink.

“Explain,” I say. “And I said ‘pretty,’ not ‘cute.’ Go on.”

“First, it doesn’t really matter. She’s probably awesome anyways. My roommate does that to girls. Tells them to just smile. Maybe they don’t want to. Anyways, I just don’t see how that’s relevant. You know I’m not looking.”

“You’re worked up today. I just asked about her smile. Maybe I was curious.”

“I’m sorry,” says Tom. He takes another drink. “Just a lot on my mind.”

“A lot on your mind and little on your lips. You were pretty quiet on the way here.”

“Or maybe you’re just zoning out extra today. I talked.”

“Feeling like life isn’t fair, are you?” I wonder how busy the rest of the restaurant is. How many more people could I talk to today. It seems like I might get the chance to say something to the couple behind us, but Tom is much more worried about something. I wish it wasn’t like this. Tomorrow is Fall.

“Every which way I turn: sucker punch. Do this. Write this. Read this. Pay this. Meeting here. Don’t go there.”

“Let’s talk about life and fair,” I say. I take another drink.

Tenure

The headline read: TEACHER TOUCHES STUDENT. But Mr. Hobbs is a germaphobe—sixth hour proved that with a drawer full of cockroaches and peanut butter. Video too graphic for TV. Recorded in a ten second snappage of a thirty year career. Mrs. Hobbs didn't believe the girl. Them. The colony who felt their budding Cs deserved As when they were too focused on the QB's D to write a "Perfect Paragraph." But pose a porno—they could accomplish that. A sub for the next three months meant worksheets for them. And a bullet to the head would be tomorrow's "Morning Joe Bradley" sixty second skinny. Mr. Hobbs was cropped out of the faculty photo. His portrait sat on an easel next to a six foot hole. Mrs. Hobbs sobbed into a black handkerchief. On Monday the girls got detention for their less-than-fingertip-length shorts.

1:31

“I taught high school for a time. That gentleman was a mentor to me. He never did anything with those girls.” I feel a tear welling in my cornea. I blink, but my lashes are so thin now that the tear escapes the net. It traps itself in a wrinkle just below my tortoise-freckle.

“That’s pretty sucky,” Tom says.

“Sucky,” I mime. “I’ll disregard your unintentional pun. But yes, it was sucky. I wished very deeply that I could defend him, but nay. I felt like a young deer watching an old buck go down.”

“You and your earth metaphors, sir,” Tom says.

Sam returns—I hear the bracelets. “You two young men decide what you want?”

“Absolutely. Venison.” I don’t wait for Tom to butt-in. “Potatoes. Green beans, heavy on the pepper. This old tongue isn’t as keen as it once was.”

“Sir?” Tom offers.

I hold up my hand. “Thank you, Sam.” I smile. My top denture slides forward, nearly breaching my upper lip.

Sam giggles. “Sounds lovely, boys. I’ll get that right in.”

There’s a brief silence before she jangles away, and judging by Tom’s shifting seat, she may have winked at him again.

“Sir, why venison?”

“Because you wanted to talk about what’s fair, right?” I take a sip of my beer.

“Well, yes, but I don’t see what deer have to do with this. I get it, though; I’m a young buck or whatever.” Tom taps his fingers on the table.

“The word is fawn.”

“I know. Feel like Mr. Tumnus all of a sudden,” Tom says.

“Feeling cheated?” I ask.

“Not funny, sir.”

Getaway

I split the city to roll in the grass. Eight ticky-tocs, metronomed existence, ebbed away by the fire over pines. My thoughts fleeting, as the embers spat from a rickshaw chasm, a satanic assortment of burning rock and ash. My eyes like the devil's dogs, fade to black as the warmth surrenders to a south-watery wind. Behind me, rustling in the thorny, brambly bushes, a terror of the night. I leap up, hatchet in hand. Defending my blue ribbons and bacon. My vision is blinded by the glowing flames, and I cannot see beyond the dark void of God's blanket. I rush to shelter for safety. The city came with me, for I sleep in no mud hut. Instead I wrap my natured body in nylon and fleece. An armadillo picks through my potato chips.

1:38

“So I take it your camping trip didn’t go too well?” I ask.

“Not exactly,” Tom says. “I did have a realization while I was out there though. I was cooking these potatoes, and I thought a lot about origins. Potatoes start their life under the dirt, but once someone takes the time and care to dig them up, they get turned into a million different things—fries, wedges, pies, everything. So, I figured, my life is like a buried potato right now.”

“Go on,” I urge. I’m rather satisfied with my beer, and the second one Sam delivered is making Tom’s metaphor sound halfway decent. I don’t mind.

“So then after that happened . . .” Tom continues.

Shit. Another gap.

“Then Mac died the other day. I just couldn’t handle finding her with some random dude and my idol dying within twenty-four hours of each other.”

“One moment, Tom,” I say. “First, who is Mac? And second, why didn’t you tell me sooner? I thought it was the same, repeating issue that snuffed the flame.” I disengage from my beer and try to dry some of the suds floating in my brain.

“Mac Miller. The rapper. And, turns out, it was the same issue. The issue of her repeatedly fucki—er—hooking up with the same guy. For months.” Tom takes a sip.

“How did you find out?” I risk prying.

Tom splurts a pained, half-laugh into the residual foam of his citrus beer. “Gave me chlamydia.”

I fail to stifle a light laugh, one that wriggles my denture loose again.

“Go ahead,” Tom says, “laugh.”

In truth, I’m not sure what to say.

Jingle, jangle. It’s so audible over the kitchen noise that I wonder if it’s a waitress technique or my selectively aged hearing.

“Here you go, lovelies,” says Sam. She draws out her vowels as she places the plates in front of us. “Everything look good?”

“Smells divine,” I say.

“Looks great,” says Tom.

“Let me know what else I can do for ya. Enjoy.” This time her soft-soles hurry away, back to the kitchen.

Earwax shifts in my inner canal and I realize the restaurant has gotten busier.

“What time is it getting to, Tom?”

Tom, mouth full of food, says, “One forty-five. Why?”

My mind departs the lunch table. Yesterday flashes behind my pupils.

A white linoleum floor.

Slightly dingy, acne-esque, white painted walls.

There’s an alphabet along the back wall.

Children run to and fro around a massive fish tank in the middle of the room.

Inside the tank are two dozen fish; one has a spinal-fin reminiscent of stegosaurus bred with a dromedary. It hustles through the water—a cold water splashing sapphire. A towheaded boy stares it down, daring the fish to charge the glass.

It won't.

He raps the glass.

The tapping pulses in my ears.

“Oscar?”

Tom's voice terrifies the fish into the safety of a cheap imitation of a diver's helm.

F.Y.B.

Fawn fumbles forward.

Fawn fumbles forward. Doe nurses; buck gardens.

Fawn fumbles forward. Doe nurses; buck gardens. Tender of all gardens. Antlers on bark.

Fawn fumbles forward. Doe nurses; buck gardens. Tender of all gardens. Antlers on bark.

Fawn folds limber legs into down of doe's making.

Fawn fumbles forward. Doe nurses; buck gardens. Tender of all gardens. Antlers on bark.

Fawn folds limber legs into down of doe's making. Buck in headlights.

Fawn fumbles forward. Doe nurses; buck gardens. Tender of all gardens. Antlers on bark.

Fawn folds limber legs into down of doe's making. Buck in headlights. Fawn fumbles forward.

Yearling yearns yonder.

Yearling yearns yonder. Expressive hops over cattails and wil-o-wisps of wonderment.

Yearling yearns yonder. Expressive hops over cattails and wil-o-wisps of wonderment.

Doe does stand, greatly, grim, grey.

Yearling yearns yonder. Expressive hops over cattails and wil-o-wisps of wonderment.

Doe does stand, greatly, grim, grey. Yearling dashes down dirt and birch and dogwood and learning.

Yearling yearns yonder. Expressive hops over cattails and wil-o-wisps of wonderment.

Doe does stand, greatly, grim, grey. Yearling dashes down dirt and birch and dogwood and learning. Doe doesn't see yearling.

Yearling yearns yonder. Expressive hops over cattails and wil-o-wisps of wonderment.

Doe does stand, greatly, grim, grey. Yearling dashes down dirt and birch and dogwood and learning. Doe doesn't see yearling. Yearling humps.

Buck becomes buck.

Buck becomes buck. Doe nurses; buck gardens.

Buck becomes buck. Doe nurses; buck gardens. Tendered gardens ground gnashed gnawed new.

Buck becomes buck. Doe nurses; buck gardens. Tendered gardens ground gnashed gnawed new. Fawn fumbles forward.

Buck becomes buck. Doe nurses; buck gardens. Tendered gardens ground gnashed gnawed new. Fawn fumbles forward. Buck bounds on down boulders of bereft brothers, brindled broken bows.

Buck becomes buck. Doe nurses; buck gardens. Tendered gardens ground gnashed gnawed new. Fawn fumbles forward. Buck bounds on down boulders of bereft brothers, brindled broken bows. Fawn fumbles forward. Buck becomes buck. Doe nurses.

1:46

“What am I?” Tom asks. “The fawn, the yearling, or the buck?”

“You’ve missed the point.” I cut another slice of venison, stab it with my fork, and guide it to my mouth. The soft venison is easy to mash inside my toothless mouth. One thing they never tell you about dentures is that your likelihood of choking is diminished. For two reasons. One, your choice of food doesn’t include choking hazards. Two, you will quickly learn to swallow larger than average bites; for instance, a whole cheese-puff. Wait. There goes my mind again. What did Tom ask?

“What did you think of Levi?” I ask.

“All right. Ignore my question. Thought he was a nice kid. What’re you helping him with?”

“Literature I. Dr. Bledsoe is giving him a rough time.” I smirk, remembering.

“Oh, Dr. Bledsoe. The Chaucer paper?” Tom asks.

“The very same one,” I say.

“Glad I chose to focus on Shakespeare instead. Thanks for that nudge. I can’t imagine working with that crazy lady.”

“She is akin to the Wife of Bath, assuredly. But she knows her shit,” I say. The fingers of my right hand are moist with the last sweat, dripping down the glass, of my third beer.

“Sir, should you really be drinking so much?”

Tom’s question catches me off guard. “What day is it?”

“Wednesday?” Tom says.

“Then a toast that it isn’t Whitmansday and damn the heretics.”

“Sir.”

I imagine Tom staring directly at my eyes. I wonder what he sees. Himself reflected, tonally blackened. “He has a good grasp of the sonnet, though. Very impressive. Subversive instinctually.”

“How so?” Tom lays his fork down on the ceramic serving plate. It clangs.

My left hand fumbles inside my coat. From the inner pocket, I produce a folded sheet of white paper. “Gave me this today.”

Miller's Sonnet

Didn't grow up in Blue Slide Park like him
But there was'n old metal one by the gym.
Yellin Goosebumpz, scratching my throat
By the time I heard Cinderally, goat
was my moniker, had one cause he did
Shaved my head, got some tats, rich kid.
A poet in a Hawaiiin shirt, french-tucked
Mac, thanks for the jams every time I fucked.
Un-convenient lines, designed his own shoes
Went swimming asking what's the use?
Mom said it's drugs, wrong d, on that depress-
Son, battling addiction, found his life loveless.
His fans screaming what they'd do to stop it.
But, R.I.P., you weren't there when he popped . . .

2:00

“Seems you two must have this Mac character in common, yes?” I finish my third beer. I feel my big toe against the end of my sneaker.

“This isn’t bad, sir,” says Tom.

“Have you finished your food?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’m done. What’s up?”

“Here.” I remove my billfold from my back pocket. “Take out a hundred. My appointment is at three.”

“Oh, O.K.”

I hear Tom fumble through the collection of flattened-post-crumble ones and fives stuffed in the leather. No plastic, save for my Driver’s License, which should have been revoked two decades ago. Not that it would do much good now.

“Ready?” Tom asks.

“Not until I say goodbye to Amy.”

“The hostess? You’ve already freaked her out enough, sir. And probably gotten her fired.”

“Where’s the manager now?” I ask.

A pause.

“Actually, he’s at the front talking to Amy right now. Her arms are crossed.”

“Let’s go.”

“Sir.”

“It’s Oscar, Tom. Why the ‘sir’-ing, today?”

“What are you doing, Oscar?” Tom hasn’t come to help me get up yet, and I guess he’s still seated. I must wait.

“What would you call the feeling when your heart meets injustice?”

Dis-chord

We've surrounded ourselves with backlit faces
to make us feel illuminated, but it's a facadical
existence. Blowing smoke across the screen,
feeling mystical and informed, armed with
four digits and one to make space, but we've
hammered the thumb down, put a tack in it,
and stapled beliefs to a flickable, never-
ending screaming match, impossible to call
discourse when there's this much discord.
Like hitting a G7 when you meant G, totally
ruining the harmony and breaking the little e
at the expense of everyone's ears.
Egregious.

2:05

“Always the eloquent,” I say.

Tom continues, “When we’ve lost sight of ourself, we let others push us around. Like hitting the wrong note mid-strum at a live concert. There’s nowhere to go but onward.”

“How can we correct the error?” I ask.

“We have to walk over and talk to the manager and Amy, don’t we?” Tom’s tone reveals he both understands and regrets understanding.

I ponder how long he must’ve regretted his own morning, sitting down on a bench next to an old man. I regret leaving Levi.

Tom stands; the plastic of the booth seat exhales. As we’ve done a thousand times before, Tom takes my elbow and guides me across the restaurant. I’m not sure what hits first, the manager’s voice or his cologne. Both reek.

“Amy, excuse me,” I say. I hope that the hostess counter is between us. The manager slaps his hand down on the countertop.

“How can I help you, sir?” the manager’s voice comes from above my head. I look straight-forward, worried the stench of his pits may wander into my nostrils. Suddenly, I’m thankful I’ve lost the ability to shave those hairs.

“Amy, your voice has grown so deep and musk,” I say.

I hear Amy giggle. The manager’s keys clang-bang as he whips around to face her. She is silent.

I laugh—an explosive exhale of venison-sautéed-green-bean-breath—upward. It blasts past the cheap, mall-vendor scrounged Polo mask, penetrating the manager’s sexism.

My dentures plop onto the counter.

“Ah!” the manager screams. “What the fuck?”

Tom is reeling with laughter as he tries, desperately, to hold me upright.

Amy’s giggle turns to gaggle.

“Amy, I am so sorry.” My speech is slurred. I don’t bother wondering if it’s the beer or missing teeth. I’m sure it’s both. “You were wonderful. Don’t settle here.”

Amy, through chokes and laughs, says, “Thank you, sir.”

“No, no. ’Tis Oscar, milady.” I bow, low, swooping my hand left and right across the counter. My fingers find my missing apparatus, and I swiftly return them. “Adieu.”

Tom is still laughing as we exit the restaurant.

Outside, rain has begun to fall. The rubber of tires on wet pavement sounds heavier, and my mood is immediately changed. “Tom, what time is it?” I ask.

Tom, still unable to control himself, says, “I can’t believe your teeth landed on that dude’s hand! He stormed off so fast! Wait, what did you ask?”

“What time is it?” I repeat.

“Two ten. Car’s this way. Oh, man.” Tom takes my elbow with his right hand and pats his stomach with his left. Full and satisfied.

We make our way to the car as quick as we can, and Tom is kind to guide me around the spreading puddles in the parking lot. “Tom! I’ve forgotten my cane!”

“Let’s get to the car, and then I’ll go get it.”

Tom loads me into the passenger seat of his too-tiny car. I think about mentioning the minivan again, but I already have other thoughts to discuss with him. “Hurry back, young Hal.” I remove my sunglasses.

“Whatever, Falstaff.” Tom doesn’t look my way as he slams the door.

Alone in the car, face bare, I consider lowering the mirror and taking a peek. Sometimes my mind’s eye, if I breathe the right way and hold my mouth just right, will generate some relic of memory and gift me with a fuzz or two. I imagine my appointment is only thirty minutes away or so. I’m excited to see her though. It’s been too long. One of many regrets, it seems, that I find here today. Oh, what a Wednesday.

I hear the plod of waffle-soles through puddles.

Tom opens the driver’s door. “Raining harder now.” My cane lands in the backseat. “Ready?”

“Tom, why do you write?”

“Huh? Why the—What?” Tom puts the car in drive and turns out of the restaurant’s parking lot. He remains silent.

“Tom.” I place my hands on my knees. My sunglasses are still off. My eyelids tight.

The Writer

How many women must I bed before Willie's ghost
shudders so hard with applause that his
pen is reinvoked?

Will my wooden or neural bookshelf, spaces stuffed with
old newspaper, birthday cards from my sister, and shitty prose
on yellow paper from 2012,

match the grandiose of Sam's personal library?

Is my creative power stifled by the non-existence of mountains
and hawks in my birth-region, or may I relocate myself and
feast on the inspiration of Jack?

Should I be concerned that I haven't invented numerous
species or discovered a drainage hole, underneath the
neon flamingo, to be a doorway to a world adjacent
John's or Chris's?

If I'm going to pick a single color to wear, leaving
black out,

which should it be and what
would it say about my artistic vision,
but more importantly,
would Edgar get it?

How many books are printed each year, and
how many never sell a copy?

I wonder if we should have stopped at The
Bible and burned
the whole press down.

Did they know they'd damn the writer by publishing
him?

Maybe they should have published
her first,

and then the standard would be more robust.

Don't write a single word more if you've never
shaken the hand of a homeless man,

looked through his sixteen-tooth mouth, past his
uvula and into the fear that his daughter, maybe named
Gloria,

won't get a meal until Tuesday.

Don't shake mine if you didn't give her a sandwich.

2:42

“Do we have to be led?” I ask.

Heroes

We are leading each other
He has been led by Him
God,
Jesus,
Hitler,
Ghandi,
Tupac
BecUze what the fuck do we follow banners of men for?
Joan of Arc, Malala, my mother,
We die, split our wrists, cup the blood at the altar and
pray for forgiveness,
Hoping we've honored, bon-replicated their
Great Works.

ESPN inter-views football slayers shirtless because ratings say
viewers enjoy seeing the meat of their
sacrifice.
That's why we haven't addressed the helmet issue.

Speaking of helm, who the fuck is guiding this ship, anyways?
The cock-a-too, put it by us, two, fooled: me,
and
Fooled you.
Nah. We won't follow his banner.

What's different? The stache can't compare to the don.
He's just uncaring, characteristically, incomprehensible,
and I bet he'd be proud of my alliteration.

The Nazis flipped their vote right after Manafort,
Then the orange-smearred, White tower of our peace,
cracked.
Et tu, Brutus?

2:44

“Nay, Caesar. Not I,” I say. “I’ve long wondered—all my life—why I devoted myself to words.”

“Why did you?” Tom asks. He puts the car in park. “We’re here.”

“Do you see a redhead?” I ask.

A pause.

“Standing by the door. Long curls. Green coat.”

“That’s her,” I say.

“Who?”

“My daughter.” I reach back for my cane and find it without looking.

“You’ve only ever mentioned Stephanie,” Tom says.

“Is she gorgeous? The redhead.”

Another pause.

“Stunning,” Tom says.

“See,” my mind forcing humor, “couldn’t have some mangy literature-grad scoping out my offspring. Maybe she’d like you and I’d get called for nepotism.”

“You lost me, sir,” Tom says.

“I can take it from here.” I pull the inner handle on the door. Since when was I so good at finding things? “Do me a favor, though, Tom?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Get to know Levi. He needs someone to nudge him.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing, sir? I mean, Oscar.”

I wait, unsure what to say. “You’re closer to the situation.” I leave it at that.

“Thank you, Tom. I’ve always loved you and your mother.” I push the door open and step out. Before shutting the door, I say, “Write.”

The door slams. I turn, in what I hope is the right direction, toward the doctor’s office doors. Sliding glass awaits me. Pins and needles await me. A girl I haven’t spoken to in a decade awaits me.

Tom’s engine struggles to push the car backwards, out of the parking spot, out of the parking lot, and back onto the highway. I pretend I can feel his confusion until the very last remnant of his muffler’s strained churning fades into the light drizzle. I just now notice the rain prodding my bare scalp.

“Hey, Dad.”

Her voice stops the rain. The splosh of drops in puddles, muted. The street vanishes. The white-stucco building, obliterated.

“Olivia.”

Waiting

You are waiting
 But she is smiling
 But you haven't taken the time to notice—
 beamed into the alien light of an lcd—
 Songs booming, lashes blooming,
 This is thirty percent of the night, and there's
 nineteen percent going down in the kitchen,
 clanked against faux marble tops, in gas
 station scrounged shot glasses reading
 COLORADO
 There's smoke somewhere, on the eye
 And they're all in wedges, snapping snapping
 Snapping
 Shimmer and highlight
 Getting ready to shake thighs and rights
 To none's approval but their own
 "I'm so inspired by you, that hasn't happened for the longest time."
 Skip
 Back
 "What I want you got might be hard to handle"
 But like a blaze that burns Merlin's witch
 Turned a bearded man's dream come true.
 Making a spell book dance party, on carpet green,
 and walls pink, it's a bonfire of faeries
 In twilight, lit, and loaded
 For a midsummer night's dream.
 And I rest in my leather seat,
 Beset by beast,
 To fulfill the will of my queen.
 Gaggle, gawk, gather,
 A humble Lancelot surrenders his
 Sword.

2:52

In my mind, she is still the fourteen year-old, grinning, glowing, getting ready for her last Halloween—the last one I'd see. In front of me, I'm sure, is a grown woman. One I do not know.

“Didn't think you'd be on time,” she says.

Her voice bridges this gap.

“Who was that?” Olivia asks.

“A graduate student I'm mentoring on Shakespeare.” My reply is dry.

“Always with the words. Well, come on, Dad. Let's get inside.” She takes my arm. I much prefer the elbow.

The doctors' office smells the same way all pharmacies do: like the decaying glue holding together the plastic wrapping of 1980s adult diapers. I find Elmer's to smell similar. I can feel the radiant beams of bar fluorescent lights baking my bare scalp to a crisp. At the least it may dry my damp hair. The water dripping from my gray scruff is making a wet spot on my dress shirt. I pull my jacket over my belly, buttoning only the top latch. Mandarin buttons. My feet shuffle against the linoleum tiles; my cane pecks tiny dents in the cheap material.

“Dad.”

Olivia's voice, again, cuts through my thoughts. “Oscar Thomas, 1946.”

“Thank you,” the nurse says. I don't recognize her voice. She doesn't ask about yesterday.

Olivia takes my arm. This time, I jerk away slightly, and I immediately regret it. I mustn't distance myself. She doesn't let go. A few short steps later, dodging a wheelchair with a squeaky right wheel, we sit side-by-side under a television. The volume is turned down to one or two, but I recognize the Blue Clues theme song. I smile. I search for Olivia's hand, but she's taken up a magazine. The pages rustle. The waiting room must be full.

A baby burps.

Velcro un-velcros.

A mom wipes away the drool; I've done it many times myself.

Olivia's elbow nudges mine.

“What have you been up to?”

Olivia is silent. Then, “You mean this year, or the past few? I dunno, Dad. Why'd you call me?”

“I wanted you here.”

“At your doc appointment?” Olivia's voice quickens.

“Tell me. How is your life?”

Olivia snorts.

The Packers Won on Sunday

I told my girlfriend that my writing ability felt
like Goku's kamehameha,
and she shouted, "You're a fucking idiot."
But she actually mouthed the words,
And, I'm sure,
She knows the hand motions
And the way the right knee is the one that bends
Against the red blanket that
Apollo needs (kneads), and Artemis is learning
Hunting roaches and the other praying
creature.

Deep into the night
Under rice-paper-fleshed lanterns
Next to an ex-pat's Chinese bookcase
At least he put Chinese literature in it.
And he halfway speaks the tongue.
But he picked it up from an extended stay
Flew once to Amsterdam, where he saw whores,
and once to Edinburgh, after it was pulverized by bombs
And the toy cannon served as a model for the
Painted, metal, gun-metal, model
Harken of Tolkien, fan of the elves
V not F
But the linguist on CNN just told him that
the president is unhearable, nigh unreadable, But
all the kings he portrayed
Proclaimed, dominated, but in
Age of Empires,
the whole fucking thing started with a farm.

2:58

“Can we be done with the small talk now?” Olivia flips the page of her magazine, audibly.

I don't have time to reply to her.

A nurse, banging a pen against her clipboard, approaches us. Her shoes squeak, but not like a mouse; more like an injured dog. She's been standing all day. “Mr. Thomas?”

“Yes, ma'am,” I say.

“The doctor says that he gave you all he could yesterday. And that he wishes you would go home and rest.”

Olivia squeezes my arm. I try to guess the expression on the nurses face. Eyebrows scrunched forward, lips in a straight line, no teeth smile. I must be correct. Olivia says, “Dad, what're we doing here?”

Her tone is different.

“Oh my. I'm terribly sorry,” I say. “My appointment was yesterday, wasn't it?”

“Mr. Thomas, would you like a wheelchair out?” The nurse's tone, imploring.

“No, thank you. I'll be quite fine.” I stretch my right arm, dislodging Olivia's grasp, and plant my cane firmly. No dent is made. I will my knees to throw my torso off the chair, and I smile at the nurse.

The nurse's face holds no smile. Her eyes flash panic into mine. My eyes absorb black specs on a white canvas.

Watching Movies with the Sound ON

Pabst in a glass with a ginger ale
 From the dude with Jonah Hill's horn-rims
 And I'm thinking I'm DiCaprio,
 the one covered in beard and bear skin,
 But I've never even shot a rabbit.
 How could I?
 If it was my only way to a meal, and
 I have a similar theory about running.
 But I feel like a deer, crashing through foliage
 Antlers down, eyes closed, hoping, hopping,
 Until the headlights hit me, and my old girl says,
 "Yeah, I fucked him."
 And I say, "Do you know anything about Namekians?"
 No?
 So maybe it was worth it.
 Then again, Gohan was more prolific,
 This idyllic child, destined to save the world,
 but it was only half his world, so what stake
 did He have in it? Before they hung him up,
 bleeding out, abandoned, crowned prince of
 All us fools.
 Which story you talking about? His story?
 Not history, is it? The never found the planks of Christ
 before the termites of Rome devoured them.
 Can we confirm that Buddha wore these robes?
 Or that Ra didn't rule the sun?
 I debated someone on Tuesday whether Zeus or Thor
 was the god of thunder. Nobody worships them now,
 So are they still gods?
 How did god become god?
 When has he ever intervened, concretely, in humanity?
 God makes me ask too many questions.
 That's why they call him teacher.
 Did Jesus use SIOP so that his followers could shake their old beliefs?
 Even an 8th grader knows assimilation is evil. Ask them.
 Nobody seems to know the difference between
 division and diversity.
 "But, Gotenks," I said, "why aren't we talking about fusion?"

4:21

I wake up and it's still dark. For a moment I forget the past decades. The blackness hits me like an evening locomotive.

"Daddy?"

That hits me harder. "Olivia?"

"Of course. You're all right, Dad. You fell straight onto your head. You're in a back room at the office. Can you hear me?"

"Get me a pen and paper." I have only one thing on my mind.

"Not now, Dad. You need to—" Olivia stops.

A tear falls from the corner of my eye.

"O.K." she says.

She's gone for several minutes, and I'm left alone to think. I have only one more question I want to ask her, but I'm not sure if I can. I clutch the paper-roll bed liner on the top of the portable mattress bed. How many times have I laid like this, broken? I regret my fatherhood. It seems that there really are some things that are taken to the final bed.

Olivia opens the door to the room. The latch handle clicks back as the door closes. We are alone.

"Olivia, may I ask you something?"

"Sure," she says. She places the pen in my right hand and slides the pad of paper under my left. She guides my grip to the first line.

"College or wide?" I grin.

"College." She snuffles. "Is that your question?"

My grin deserts. I've always run. Not now.

My hand begins to move, trembling, stumbling across the—I presume—blue line of the pad. Of course, for all I know it's a yellow pad, and those don't have blue lines. Right? My mind is gapping again.

"Olivia," I start. "Are you happy?"

My hand continues to scrawl.

Olivia begins to speak, uttering an "ah" or an "oh."

Parking Lot Lawn Chair

Silver has always shown me more than Gold
 Crippled boney, brandished bird,
 Stoked the flame and propped up one of those,
 you know,
 Red canvas contraption, sat down for a
 goddamn conversation.

We get Coffee every Sunday and drive
 through Nichols Hills just to look at houses neither
 of us want to own, but
 I grew up laying sandstone on sand, stolen
 off Osage land, and we've both got no inclination
 to build a White picket fence. Wine
 stain on a linen shirt from Woody Guthrie's prophet.

Slap the bag, slap the bag, everybody dressed
 in rags studded with sequins because it all
 came from cotton; where's the cotton picked two centuries ago?
 We wouldn't vote for George Washington today because
 he grew hemp, and my dad would call him an earth-muffin
 and the DEA would hang him,
 but ICE would get him first, shot crossing the
 Delaware,
 and it's a shame that legendary telescope didn't see this shit coming.

I fear for the future 20-somethings, obsessed with
 AXE and 69, six6nine9, mumble mumble,
 blah blah, ignorant that
 the EPA just told us it'll only take two or three degrees to melt the earth,
 and all I hear is, "turn up, turn up" and the country, the world, is boiling from excess
 human progress.

Nobody stopped us; God—let it be.

4:45

“Is that why you became a teacher?” I ask, immediately after she finishes.

“You’re the reason I became a teacher, Dad.”

I can hear the tears welling in her eyes. “I want you to take this to Tom. I wrote his number on here, too.”

“What is this?” Olivia takes the paper from me. I folded it. I don’t want her to see it.

“A last request from a blind, old man.”

Olivia squeezes my hand. I don’t feel it. “Is this why you called me here?” Olivia’s tear falls onto my hand. I feel it.

“No. I asked you to come so I could tell you that I’m sorry. I have lived a long, long life. And now it seems I’ve found my final pillow. I really would have liked it to be softer. The bed a little firmer.”

Olivia lets loose a single chuckle.

I continue, “But if this has to be it, I’m glad you’re here. I wish your mother was here.”

I pause.

“Dad?”

“Yes, sweetie.” I can’t see her, and I can barely hear her. She is my fourteen-year old again. Red curls, locking, frolicking down her shoulders. Bright, creative, full of passion. Another tear pushes out of the crevice of my eye; I think about her tending a crippled father. Past her time. Her sacrifice. What did that teach her?

“I love you.”

“Please hand me my jacket.” I don’t know where it is, but I imagine there’s a chair tending to its care. Moments later a familiar stitch scratches my fingertips. Clumsily, I fumble in the tail end. My fingers don’t falter once I find the folded hatch. A dirt-crusted fingernail finds the corner of white notebook paper. “My final word.” I proffer the folded note to Olivia.

My ears turn down the volume as the paper unfolds.

Vision of 2020

Someone help, my 2020 is all screwed up.
I mourn the loss of the movie theater;
people have forgotten how to sit in peace with
each other.

Turns out the priest, turns out a few, turns out
the bishop, regular and arch, too, and holy father —
Turns out the Pope raped a few boys, few,
holier than thou. In spiritu sanctum.

The 25th Amendment got erased from the cloud, and the
DOE hasn't been funded this decade
or the last, so the presidency kinda stopped at
Obama's.
Now we have Lord Crumpet, blowing on his trumpet.

His 2020 isn't so clear; more like a 20/20 or
20. vs. 20.
21. Did he like that brother fought brother in 1863?
22. Was it Custer's knee that was wounded?

We've only taught you how to pass this
abcd
because they can't afford you thinking about the
5 Ws or H and certainly don't mention THC.
Here's some Codeine. Vicodin. Meth.
Quit feeling;
Feel yourself.

Psst: "What you're reading and what you're seeing is NOT what's happening!"

Blue lives matter because black lives don't?
Reported: dead or alive. But mostly dead.
But the funerals look different, and the audience sounds different,
and the protests aren't just different;
It's right or wrong.
Not and?
No, not and.
Life, liberty, OR the pursuit of happiness.

Everyone I see looks asleep, so this must be the
American Dream. Please, coffee, no cream.

Thursday

Tom had asked Levi to meet him at exactly eight in the morning. It was now five minutes till, and there was no sign of Levi anywhere. Tom, seated on a wooden bench, rocked his skateboard back and forth under his feet. He didn't like waiting. He especially didn't like waiting when there was so much to think about.

Last night. Seven o'clock. A redheaded woman knocked on his door. Handed him a slip of paper. She didn't said anything, and it seemed like she hadn't planned to. She didn't know him. "From Oscar," was all she had said. The note said the rest.

Tom couldn't believe it. He hadn't slept Wednesday night. He phoned Levi after reading the note three or four times himself. Everything was so specific, but who would've thought otherwise. Teaching unto the end. What was his final message?

Tom checked his watch. Eight o'clock. He sighed, and looked up, scanning the park. 89th and Pine sure held a lot of memories for him. His mother had taught just down the corner until they shut the school. Consolidated all the "colored" communities, the report said.

Tom was glad he'd made it out before then.

Oscar's instruction: Tell Levi.

Tell him what? Tom fiddled with the notion in his mind.

At a minute past eight, Levi approached the bench. Tom saw him coming, running wildly. Tom laughed at Levi's obvious sophomoric gait. There was another dude with a megaphone yelling something about listening to others.

A mom relaxed as her son played in a sandpit. The boy was mesmerized by the miniature digger.

"Hey," said Levi, stopping just short of the bench.

"Hey there," said Tom.

"Have a seat."

"Take a risk." Levi repeated a familiar call.

Tom smiled. "Sorry to phone you under these circumstances."

"It's all right." Levi sounded faraway.

"How long did you know him for?" Tom asked.

"Just a couple of weeks, really. I guess I looked lost one day and he said—"

"Come have a seat, young lad." Tom finished the sentence, gesturing with his hands like a 1582-era actor.

"Exactly." Levi allowed a laugh. "So what else did your note say? All mine said was 'Ask about mom.'"

"You got a note? You didn't mention that last night."

Some girl just gave it to me this morning.

"Redhead?"

"Yeah, how'd you . . ."

"Oscar's daughter." Tom realized he hadn't looked at Levi yet. He did then. Levi's eyes were red, puffy, shadowed by hours of crying. "Mom, huh? Well . . ."

Oh Captain, My Captain

I'm making 120 copies for my classes today,
but because the smell the fresh ink bleeds,
I can only think of the giant, machete-bladed,
paper cutter that my mother told me to use,
being careful to make straight cuts, shape and
form stars and triangles and squares,
she said we're going to put letters on them,
hang them, surround them with this cool
border she found at Dollar Tree, and by tying
some string and hanging an anchor chart, we
might actually steer this ship of citizens and
non-citizens, because the human brain is the
human brain, into some ocean of
unfathomable thought, where, hopefully, we
may come to rest on the island, dig up the
buried booty of yester-year, and then press
on, to mainland or home, each sailor must choose,
and my ship's captain has gone down with
her vessel, overrun by pirates and politics,
and I'm stuck in my one oar, tar-hole-filled
dingy.

Aye aye, captain. Ahoy.

Friday

Tom rushed his way past bumbling freshman desperately screeching at varied tones of latent puberty in the faces of Financial Aid Office workers.

Tom wasn't quite sure what he was doing, but he knew that he had to. Oscar's message had been clear.

Tom dictated to himself, over, and over, and over all the reasoning for his choice, for finding a purpose.

Tom wasn't quite sure of how he was going to confess to his mom that he was quitting engineering school after one literature class.

Tom forced the bile down his gut as he thought of the pay-cut and the paper-cuts and all the other vomit he'd probably encounter.

Tom wasn't opposed to the idea of uniforms, but he'd really rather not have to wear one and slacks with a tie seemed a good compromise.

Tom confirmed his decision, huddled in a grey-fabricated cubicle, which didn't bode a great metaphor for the expansive learning done.

Tom wasn't even sure where the new building was . . . where would it be.

Schoolhouse

I just got approved for my first home-loan, and I'm so excited, I couldn't wait to run across that stage, tassel flailing, gown flowing, hand outstretched to shake the agent's hand, accept my paperwork, and move in. I can't have any company over yet; there's no living room. All I was approved for was a tiny, hay thatched hut down a muddy, ruddy road outside of town. Fine by me. I'll live anywhere. I just want to live.

I spent my first year in the hut learning how to hold up the walls, re-tie boughs against the roof to stop leaks, and sometime during the fourth month I realized I forgot a window. It was so dark in my hut, but then I had a neighbor over and she brought a hacksaw with her, and without asking she busted out the entire south wall. I was furious, screaming and ranting all the way to the copy room. Then the copier jammed. I kicked it, and knocked down the west wall too. With my new view, I noticed a knoll, not far from my muddy swamp. I imagined what it would be like to bask in the sun and be caressed by the cool breeze of AC. Someday, I'd have a loft, balcony facing the sunset, and then I'd have it made. Living in a hut surrounded by two-story homes is daunting, but I'm making it my own.

Today, I decided to completely demolish my hut and move to the knoll. Nothing was stopping me, and I was backed by several of the village people. They banded together, gathering cement, ceramic, common-core curriculum. We built something. We. I was beginning to understand that I couldn't build a house by myself. It was essential to build in the hidden library door behind the bookcase in the living room, but it was this other teacher that suggested adding a skylight over my recliner. The illumination was appreciated. Since then, I've taken a shotgun to my roof and blown a few more holes. It's rewarding to be so flexible.

This summer, standing in front of my mother's mansion, a testament to three retirements and thirty years of detentions, lamination, and lacerations, my palms sweat in the anticipation of building my own, sky-scraping spire.

Saturday

Levi peered in the window of the corner jewelry store.

Levi wandered down every street in town.

Levi knocked on her door.

Levi said, “. . .

The Part Where the Moon is Bright

If you've ever sat through a hail storm, in a sedan, under an overpass, at 12:00 am, with three ounces of pot, then that's the part where the moon is bright.

If you've ever remembered that somebody's favorite place is the flamingo enclosure, on the third-go around the zoo, then that's the part where the moon is bright.

If you've ever kissed an inked shoulder at the same time as the desert sun, giving her goosebumps and more freckles on her rice-paper skin, then that's the part where the moon is bright.

If you've ever fucked to the rhythm of a wet trampoline, in front of her dad's house, instead of the warm bed she pulled you from, then that's the part where the moon is bright.

If you've ever cuddled under two layers of fleece, nine pillows, three cats and four sticky sweaty legs, then that's the part where the moon is bright.

If you've ever wet your denim knee, on a snowy peak, tripped on mushies and feelin' the gushies, then that's the part where the moon is brightest."

Sunday

Levi wrote:

You prong your fingers into the bound knot of a plastic baggie. You, with your fingernails, jab and tug at the damn thing. Your middle finger makes some headway. The knot begins to slip. You grin as it unfurls, and you give the bag a little slap to unroll the mouth. First chore accomplished, now you move on to the second.

You extract three prickly, poky, poignant plants. You mash them into the teeth of your waiting utensil. You unfold the wooden-surface workspace. Then, fetching a paper, spilling the guts of your art piece down the middle, restitching her with the saliva between your dry lips, you relax.

As you sit down on the sofa, you think about what just happened. It was a normal Thursday. You came home from class, dumped your coat on the entryway table, and sat down on the toilet to shit. Then, you said, "Shit."

Lying in front of you, curled but not purring, was Olivia.

"Oh, sweet Olivia," you say, sitting hazy-eyed on the sofa. Your mind doesn't drift off like you want it to. No euphoria enwraps your body to mummify your heartbeat. All you can think about is Olivia, and what it must've be like to have lived nine lives.

Oh to be named Olivia.

Oscar: 1943-2018

Do not go gentle into that good night—
I'd say open your eyes and meet it but
he did not have the luxury of sight
Blind as a back-alley battle-ring mutt
Falconer, farm-hand, familial man
A poet, professor, park-bench sitter
patiently perceptive like jaguars can
freeing the fruit of life from its bitter
If I had known more I'd be proud to say
The innards and out-ards and in-between
I gathered much from him in day-to-day
picture frames of memories shadow's seen

He who fatefully lost sight of his own
knew our souls are not tethered to a stone.

Oscar: 1943-2018

Rage, rage against the dying of the light. Your soul is not tethered to stone, and your identity is not etched in one. It flows like a river, and you control the banks of dirt. You control the placement of stones that your water cascades down, splashing specs of you on your surroundings. Before he sensed the ebb and flow of you, he spent a lot of time

watching waterfalls. Before he fatefully lost his sight, he witnessed how the water controls the earth. He told me that I am like that. He shared from his picture framed memories, shadowed by the haze of his blindness. I gathered much from him in our day-to-day conversations. He said that people have two aspects: innards and out-ards.

People are too focused on the out-ards, and we let them control our innards. I was struggling with who I was, and if I knew more about how I ended up that way, I'd happily say. Oscar was the one who saw it all. He freed me from my bitterness. "Did you know jaguars are just like zebras? No two are the same, yes. But neither care what

they look like." He was a poet, professor, and you could always find him at 89th and Pine. That's where I met him. Or rather, that's where he stopped me. I knew I needed to know more about this falconer from the north. The fights of his life left him blind in his out-ards, but they couldn't steal his steely sight. If I could reach out and open his eyes

to meet you all, I would be proud. He was my friend, and I'll never forget him. Sir, please, do not go gentle into your good night.

Oscar: 1943-2018

Rage

flows

cascades

on

you

Before

I

shared

memories

that

have

innards. I was

happily

freed from

care

He

stopped me. I

left

out-ards

out

I be proud. He was

gentle