She Shall Inherit the Earth

The wall bathed in pure gold.
The pillar felt comforted, a
chipped gray platform that had already
seen the world.
My wife mothered
the animals, looking up tenderly
from her flowing robe existence
to watch me grab
my briefcase and head for the door.

She asks how well I slept,
if shrimp linguini would be all right for dinner,
if sparrows have thoughts like humans do.
But I don’t hear her, though I
doubt she was talking.
Instead, I watch.

I breathe in her favorite pink shirt, the one
I bought for her four Christmases ago.
Those yellow-orange blankets are
enveloping her
like a package ready to be shipped off to Aphrodite,
just so she could explode at the truth.
And her hair intertwined with blue ribbon,
that fragile gold ornament
perched preciously atop her head.
I remember when we met and
I want to tell her something.

She smiles again
before returning to the quiet fleece
nuzzled like infinity in her hands.
I glance down at the lamb,
who seems too busy
being happy to notice I exist. But it does.
A patch of white snow,
who knows our crimsons
will soon touch him.

I hear my wife say the world is beautiful, and
she wishes me well.

I close the door behind me and
routine starts the car.
I pretend I'm zooming toward
paradise, even though I won't quite get there yet.
In the passenger's seat, the devil asks me
to sign some paperwork. I refuse,
thinking of the lamb,
my wife,
and all the other walls that aren't yet painted golden.
How to Regain Consciousness

Every Saturday night, I let my sister win at Trivial Pursuit while she talks about all the dogs she'd like to have that would hide their bones in the backyard and drink out of the decorative ceramic birdbath that our mother gave us four years ago because we had both fallen in love with sparrows. "Can't you stay?" my sister says as I step out early, long before midnight. "I'm sorry," I tell her. "I have to pick up an espresso with the natives down at Starbucks. I'll be back before long." No, I won't. I won't be back. I'll sit there for hours and look into Helen's eyes and question how she ever got back from Troy in one piece even though she doesn't yet know I was the one to kidnap her. I was the one to put her in chains. I was the one to shatter her alabaster jar that was filled with perfume and other orphan scents that never understood the power of a gentle aroma. But she doesn't say that. "That's an interesting mosaic you're working on," she says. "What is it?" "Oh, this old thing?" I'll reply with a false smile. "It's just some differential calculus I've been painting twelve shades of blue. I know you're a journalist. You wouldn't understand." She says that she wants to write for the local newspaper more than anything else in the world—and I refrain from telling her she'll probably be writing my obituary too because I struggled with Eve as well and it wasn't an apple, believe me, but it could have been. I think about it a lot when I'm in my canoe out in the swamp and the only fish are the ones that haven't yet heard the sirens wail. I throw them back. I could never eat them, but whenever I notice the trout with its sad eyes speak a lifetime into my bones, I begin to realize that all of my mistakes have floated up to meet the canopy. It's not the easiest thing to do, of course. I dream of Benedict Arnold and he tells me that betrayal is just love that hasn't earned its wings yet. He's walking with St. Peter who's trying to talk about the proper foundation and suddenly he turns to me and asks, "My friend, how long did it take you to create that shrine?" I know what he means. It was carved out of silence and laughter, two things that somehow coexisted and I thought they were both sunshine and roses at the time respectively. And that shrine didn't explode until yesterday, right when the canoe was talking to his psychiatrist and my refuge of a park was filled with a dozen makeshift Romeos. So I had to run elsewhere. I chose the hills like white elephants who purified themselves since their first drug bust and promise that tomorrow will be another story. I thought so too. But then I see the Cheshire Cat with a smile so pristine and it's the wrong hope and everyone knows his tree is just a sword. "You're a scourge upon humanity," he says. "You're sick—and none of my vitamin C would help cure you." I know the cure and I wonder if my sister knows where to find it as I drive in the delicate dark down to Doug's Diner, where I used to order chili when I was fourteen and contemplate at what age you are too old to color the menus. "I know you," the waitress says. "Your crimes are all over town." "I'm sure they are. I'll have the roast chicken." "Sorry," she says. "You're a felon. The only things I could serve you wouldn't be edible." She reminds me a bit of Lady Macbeth but I'm the one with the wrong blueprints, after all. I thank her and walk home alone, answering the questions and questioning the answers, dreaming of the days when all I had to do at night was a string of long division problems with the occasional remainder. I look up at the moon, a frosted sphere of mystery, and ask if it knows what the solution is. It gives me no reply but I gaze up at it longer and think I see Joan of Arc nestled in a crater, telling me that one day I will also find my Sea of Tranquility but I need to be patient. And so I drink the medicine all the way home. My sister is waiting for me on the front porch when I arrive. "What happened?" she asks. "I thought you said you wouldn't be back." I look into her eyes and I see
an unfamiliar river that nobody ever told me about before. But I know why it’s there. I’m
tempted to suggest a game of Scrabble to change the subject but, knowing full well how
temptation works, I pull up a rocking chair alongside her, breathe a sigh of relief, and begin to
explain everything I should have told her the day after I was born.
Those Cornfields

All her clocks are set twelve minutes in advance. Daisy says it gives her time to think and possibly shed a piece of herself. “What do you think about?” I ask her, that void in my larynx between hollow and tender.

“Nothing much anymore,” she says in a hushed tone, mouth full of marbles and minestrone. “I think a lot about cornfields, the secret ones in your mind. Freud lives there, you shoot some pool, you question the worth of scented candles.”

I bought some vanilla incense for Daisy once. I think she told me she returned it for something a little less self-important, like a decorative rug to sweep childhood memories under or plastic fruit. “Are you missing something?” I ask.

Her red hair lights up the skyline. “Of course.” She speaks the truth plainly, answers to riddles nobody knows. “I mean, can’t the moon be sad anymore?” I struggle with that and I think of the tides and then she falls asleep in my arms.

I murmur a gentle lullaby and they applaud. It’s the only brutal song I know. And Daisy’s dreaming now but she makes me reevaluate my own cornfields. I cherish her for that. But if that’s enough, then I need to find the rest of the harvest tomorrow.

I need to destroy big regrets and salvage the little miracles. Daisy, forgive me for what I’ve kept in my silo. It’s perishable like the sand in your eyes, like the seconds on my wristwatch—always eight minutes behind—shadows on an unfortunate sundial.
The Only Demand

It was the second time leaving my mother. She had left her ultimatum on a pink post-it note near her bronze ashtray and the black-and-white photograph of Derek.

“Martin, find a job today or leave my house.”

Her handwriting, harsh and determined, was that of a queen who was giving her peasants one last chance to swear allegiance before introducing the guillotine. I had first caught the note when I sat down to enjoy my wheat bagel and read a copy of The New York Times. My neighbor always threw it on my mother’s lawn while he was out walking his dog Bowser, early in the morning before the sprinklers went off. He said he couldn’t stand that “sad, liberal trash.”

I wasn’t impressed. I had a job, two actually. One was tutoring my cousin, the one who still laughs at my jokes, in algebra and biology. The other was waiting until dusk so I could bolt from my mother’s and run down to Emily’s stucco house with the beautiful bay windows. There we’d sit for hours and swap medieval stories and watch the stars, locked in orbit but given full permission to shine.

Emily was moving to Paris next week for a year. She never told me why and I don’t think she ever needed to. But I couldn’t stay glued to the ground. So I ran.

I didn’t even know what I was doing at first. I ripped up my mother’s note into a hundred little pieces and slammed my breakfast plate onto the wood floor, bagel and all.

“I’m leaving,” I gasped as I hurried upstairs, grabbing the first backpack of mine I could find. Then my hands went flying, throwing everything into the bag that I felt I would need for the rest of my life. A hairbrush, my iPod, a deck of cards that was missing the two of diamonds, that now dog-eared journal Uncle Bill bought me a couple birthdays ago, a few faded T-shirts, a borrowed copy of The Great Gatsby, and anything else that made sense at time.

“This is it! I’m leaving!” I shouted, relishing my echo. I ran down the stairs and out the front door. I didn’t have a plan. All I had were time and the sound of my voice.

Maybe I’d go to Emily’s and knock loudly on her door and whisper some cheap poetry and if I couldn’t remember any, I’d make some up. Shakespeare wouldn’t mind. I flew off the back porch, not bothering to slam the screen door behind me. The wind tasted like a forbidden dessert as I pounded my feet against the pavement and barreled to nowhere in particular.

I didn’t pack a map and that was my greatest joy. I never wanted to be confined to directions, chained to dotted lines on a page that would only carve a dictatorship out of my path. Run faster, harder, each step meaningless because I spurned destination. “I just don’t think this is working out.” It never works out and if it ever did, I wouldn’t have to catch my breath so often. Gaze at the trees, laugh at their immobility. I used to want to be an oak but only if it meant I could climb myself. The back views of every white house I zoomed past rushing down the cobblestone alleyway looked exactly the same, and I wondered why nobody was brave enough to paint their residence yellow.

And that’s when I thought of water.

I brushed the thought aside at first, trying to scatter the butterflies in my brain. I didn’t want any water, didn’t need to nourish my dehydrated bones. But I hadn’t seen my beloved lake all summer, the one I used to go fishing in with my father as he’d share his wisdom with me. “Never lecture on rain if you’re drowning in the flood,” he told me once. I still don’t know what that means, but as I tore through a thicket where the squirrels juggled their acorns and I finally reached the lake, I realized it didn’t really matter.
There it waited, my prized blue diamond, shimmering its seductive glare toward me just before daybreak. My thoughts melted. The powerful waves didn’t speak to me with words but with their beauty. They dashed themselves against the large, weary rocks in exquisite anarchy—no course to chart, no compass to carry. Their existence was all they needed.

I transfixed my eyes on the water I couldn’t control. As each reckless wave pulled me closer to the shoreline, I knew I needed to be myself again.

I dropped my bag on the wet sand. And I jumped in the lake.

Splashing in the water, I could finally breathe. I didn’t have to question the waves or prove I was worthy of a morning baptism. I just had to begin again, to erase my former memories of rusted armor and paper hearts I never had enough courage to throw away. The water never condemned me for tasting its glory and every starfish smiled the truth. The water understood.

The calls of anguished seagulls sounded overhead as dawn prepared to make her grand entrance on the horizon. But no sliver of yellow in the distance could harm me. I was a nomad finding his home, one whose doors would always be unlocked. The past and the future ceased to exist. I simply floated in the lake, whose only demand is that all who swim in its waters can create their own rafts out of nothingness.

Later that evening, I told Emily I wanted to go to Paris with her. She said the water is beautiful there too.
Bologna on White, Extra Mustard, Ginger Ale with an Olive (I Know It's Weird),
Diet Marshmallow Fluff Supreme, Like Cheryl or Possibly Jane Would Have
Approved of in the Middle of a Nondescript Summer, That One with the
Exterminator

what I ordered was not delicious,
not quite terrible,
but I wish somebody with me could have
experienced more
than just the aftertaste
of a glossy menu
or the hollow
fluttering
of a moonbeam café.
Symbols

In the morning, the iced tea is on
the wicker table and it reminds me of the time
you were crying

about everything in this world
except yourself
that deserved a tear or a kind word

but never received either. A long afternoon,
the sun discovering beauty,
making no distinction between the roses

and the weeds. A ham sandwich,
maybe two if I’m hungry,
as I watch the evening shadows

chase each other until
one of them matters. And if I could,
I’d remove all of the apples from

the still-life paintings you gave me
and replace them with pears
because I guess you’d prefer it that way.

But then night falls and I hear
voices that speak
when there’s nothing to speak of

except the sepia photographs of you
at the beach
and the lemon wedge

in my tea—both symbols, each in their own way,
of something you don’t remember
and something I’ll never forget.
The Lucky Ones

Jimmy couldn’t wait to go to college but he was a little disturbed to discover that his roommate was a tuna. “Uh...” “Oh, hey!” the tuna replies back. “My name’s Eric. Going into psychology—nice campus, isn’t it? Love the duck pond here.” Jimmy hesitates. “You mean your name isn’t Charlie?” “No, but I’m told there’s a strong resemblance so thanks for asking.” This friendship just might last a lifetime, with or without an aquarium.
The Red Tomahawk

The red tomahawk collects dust
on the ground where I once
learned to capture the carcasses of many.
It was golden outside,
and I was tired after the walk up the green hills.
They were soothing like quiet mothers
with cups of herbal tea in the morning light,
so out of place sitting next to the thief
who kisses the daughter goodbye
and robs her piggy bank after midnight.

The red tomahawk cannot postpone
the moon outside
and I remember the battles well.
I remember the white horse now locked away.
He neighed like fire—
dragons were scared but this tribe wasn't.
My colored feathers fell into the silent river—
too many bodies, not enough water
to form the raindrops
that wash away the tremors of the mushroom clouds.

The red tomahawk cannot catch the eagle
but his bones die anyway,
crumbling underneath the tower that
sends signals out to broken radios.
It is warm here. I might be a desert.
My face might be an oasis,
a mirage to a vulture longing to feast into a dove
that knows nothing except that the sky
isn't as blue as it used to be.
But I killed that dove first.

The red tomahawk rests with skeletons now.
It's cold where they sleep
but some blood might keep them warm.
I'm not sure where I'm going now.
The wind's picking up and these fields
hold little promise for a sad warrior.
I suppose I'll walk
somewhere—without a well-worn map
or the realization that something else
must now keep the lonely horizon company.
Nervous Acrobats

This was the season:
brownies I could never help you bake,
gin rummy, the police squadron
that thought something was wrong.
But we were just talking on the antique swings,
the ones with too many carved initials in the mahogany.
That’s where you told me about the birthday cake
you made for your sister, the vanilla frosting,
the overly precise candles.

Then I mentioned the bird I kept for twelve years,
the one I named after you.
It reminded me of my mother’s stained-glass parakeet mosaic.
I wondered what it would feel like to be that creature,
hanging in the window. The pigeons would mock me
and the sparrows would try to help.

So I gave the bird to you and you wondered why
its beak was injured. That’s when I remember
that I forgot to feed it
anything that mattered. “I love you,”
it tells one of us. “But I never want to eat
another worm again.”

So it goes. We leave the playground
for the boulevard
and watch the circus slide into our city.
The clowns take off their makeup,
the lions show the audience how to make
a proper salad, and the tightrope materializes.
“You can’t beat gravity,” my father once said.
“You can only rise above it.”

But now we’re walking a marathon of baby-steps,
a pair of nervous acrobats
who take turns falling down,
always surprised when someone catches us
at the bottom and says,
“It’s all right—you can start over.”
The History of Croutons

Chancellor Caesar Salad and the Moderately Amusing Entourage of Bread Crumbs

Sing the Hits of Yesterday and Today!

lettuce go into the patches of destiny
and dance, dance, dance
into the arugula river
and nobody's harmed and we're all loving each other—
and this river zigzags all the way into the artichoke
heartbeat of the forest
and I think I see the chancellor now, practicing his foreign diplomacy
and his Barry Manilow covers. I've seen these folks before,
armies of deer that prefer marshmallows to cucumbers
and everybody swims in rivers of their own until the squashy
sun goes down. the courtier in Brussels
sprouts revisits his cottage
cheese radio and turns up the volume as he
pounds his baked potato drum
with his broccoli spear batons. he is a messenger
for all that is royal, all that is
high in vitamin C. he questions what
you never could and the countdown ends prematurely
while somebody reaches the naïve, incorrect conclusion
that the little wars we wage
can be so mechanical and so delicious
simultaneously.
How It's Treated

Rejected Titles for This Manuscript

The Lunar Eclipse Has Been Cancelled
Johnny Q and His Crime-Fighting Narcoleptic Zebra Paint the Town Every Color But Red
Everything Is Violet (Except for What Isn’t)
In the Heart of My Kaleidoscopic Soul
I Never Metaphor I Didn’t Like
How to Comfort a Tumbleweed
I Used to Be a Gemini
Scarves in the Summertime
In the Room the Women Come and Go, Talking of Michelangelo the Unicorn’s Sidewalk Café
The Rise and Fall of the Yogurt I Had for Lunch
Flummoxed by Kerfuffle
Picture Postcards from the Postcard Factory
Untitled Bundle of Joy
That’s Nacho Cheese (Leave My Provolone!)
Mike’s House of Riboflavin
Strawberry Preserves All Over the Road: Notes on a Traffic Jam
I’ll Forever Be a Ventricle at Heart
Cherries on Sundae, Mylanta on Monday
Scenes from the Rear-View Mirror
Take Me to Paris But Don’t Take Me Seriously
I’m a Poor Cucumber Farmer So Will You Please Raise My Celery?
Chip on Your Shoulder (Linguini in Your Hair)
No More Horsing Around: This Is the Pony Express!
The Unabashedly Eccentric Icicle Wars of 1982
Too Old to Be Hip, Too Young for Hip Replacement
Where’s Julius’ Girlfriend? I Think He Caesar
Highway 61 Revisited, Revisited
The Hideous Wallpaper Boogie (in D Minor)
How to Talk Yourself Out of Being a Mime
Ask Your Doctor About Cheerios
Differential Calculus: A Love Story
I’m Just a Pawn on the Chessboard of the World
Miss Free Verse Is Lonely So You Should Meter Sometime
The Curtains of Chaos and the Drapes of Wrath
I’d Like to Buy an Owl
Dr. Love and the Delightful Mistletoe Brigade
Record Albums in Peril: It’s Vinyl Jeopardy!
I’m Only Getting Four Hours of Sleep Because I Like Thinking Up Names for This Manuscript
Peter and Mike Rock America, Part II (This Time, It’s Personal)
Letter to My Editor Regarding “The Big Red Horizon of Destiny”

I wasn’t going to include this poem in the manuscript, but I thought I should. It’s pretty personal. You’re a pretty person too, but I have a hard time expressing my emotions like what comes out of the womb, naked, vulnerable, in need of your sweet pink blanket. I probably should explain what’s going on now. The apples stand for my love for this one girl, way back in high school. We’re still friends and we jog together every other Friday—hence my meticulous attention to detail on the bronze sneakers.

But, anyway, the apples are red and so was the dress she wore in that photograph I saw of her and Dan at the senior prom. I didn’t go to my senior prom. I stayed home and watched Wedding Crashers with my parents. I don’t regret much and that doesn’t sound like something I should regret but I do. I regret everything, except for you, since you’re reading my poem and you’re delighting in my fireball language that burns only the most intrepid of souls. The white dove represents something too. I was going to say “We bleed like bleeding cherries”—but the apple was more unexpected, not to me since I love apples—but I didn’t want to give anything away. You get paid to indulge yourself in my words and I couldn’t ruin the surprise.

The tire swing should be obvious—it represents the elliptical motion not just of my life but the precariousness of all the other lives that have come into contact with mine, those who drove me to far-off lands, like to the Gap or Exxon-Mobil. I thought the tire swing was a great symbol because it’s not part of a car but still it finds its functionality. It crafts a new highway, which is why the yield sign is stuck to our narrator’s forehead in the fifth stanza. Also notice that the rope swings back and forth like a tired pendulum. This is why our narrator—who is really me with a nicer tie and a better name—goes inside to see the grandfather clock (which has a pendulum). This grandfather clock is in the same room as Felix the Cat and you might be quick to assume that I’m comparing two types of time, one old and rigid, the other sly and captivating. This is a common error. This is not a clock with Felix the Cat, this is actually a cat named Felix.

You see, Felix was my grandfather’s name and the very first pet I had was a small hamster, which is kind of like a cat. And when I said to him, “Did you ever know that you could be beautiful?,” the word “be” is a veiled allusion to his job as a beekeeper from 1947 to 1963 (which are also the house numbers seen by our narrator as he travels down Green Street. I knew a Mr. Green once, I think. He was a nice guy and he might have even knew my grandfather but, either way, he’s in this poem). This probably makes more sense once you notice that I’m scooping honey onto my biscuit and not strawberry marmalade.

You get honey from bees. You don’t get strawberry marmalade from bees. And then, toward the end of the poem, I shift to dactylic hexameter—and this signals a change in theme. We begin talking about standard marine imagery, the sails, the “salty brine,” the “harbor that only offers us protection from the ocean that only offers us peace” (I always wanted to use that line in a poem; it’s a throwaway line from a poem I wrote a few years back, but that was before the manuscript and before I met you). There are also “a couple of pirates with 20/20 vision.” This is irony. Pirates usually wear eye patches. The double-irony, probably too obvious, is that the reverse is also true: my cousin’s second-best friend that I met on the beach last July (foreshadowed by the tree with the tire swing earlier, which wasn’t originally beech but elm, but I took some artistic license) was an optometrist for ten years but needed glasses when he was four. Those ten years are represented by the ten giant hourglasses next to the ceramic cow in the middle of the field. It’s ceramic because all poetry is fragile and it’s a cow because I like cows.
A signed photograph from Magic Johnson, a couple of outdated Nobel prizes, a patch of gray sky, three red paper clips, a bus ticket to Jupiter, a dog collar for the German shepherd she'll buy one day, dirty silverware that her rodent butlers have yet to clean, forty acres and a claustrophobic mule, tuna-flavored popsicles, blueprints on how to make a fire hydrant, a copy of *Apricot Monthly*, fruit-shaped magnets, a set of her mother's dentures, an introverted ferret, an oak tree that shrunk in the wash, “black ice” fingernail polish, an unsharpened pencil, some riboflavin guarded by the jack of spades, forty-three-watt light bulbs, apologies written both to God and herself, a year's supply or turtle wax, half a year's supply of tortoise wax, a sphygmomanometer, an angry tube of Wite-Out, a better life, a plastic Mickey Mouse ruler, the flag of her fictional county (blue with two white discs in the center), the horn of a triceratops, a sketch of her femur, a couple of index cards with fake phone numbers scrawled all over them, redemption, an unopened box of cashews, the company's mission statement folded a paper frog that Wendy named Greenfoot Jr., gold tweezers, a 12-ball and a cue stick that had to be cut into pieces so it could fit, blue chalk that won’t associate itself with the egotistical yellow chalk that's bullying the purple chalk because it doesn't know what it wants, the scent of tangerines, a makeshift junkyard with rusted license plates, invitations to Wendy's younger sister Julie's SAT studying party, smoky jazz, wounded cows who still want a homecoming parade, opera glasses, a painting of her brother Ronaldo holding some maracas, WD-40, two bottles of WD-20, a bottle of spicy mustard, a wedding gown, her third-place entry for Hallmark's greeting card contest, a pocket thesaurus with the pages on “love” and “beauty” dog-eared, four yo-yos, a smooth highway, a tepee built out of stalks of wheat where the tooth fairy runs her business, not enough time, a nametag that she forgot to fill out, and a mirror that knows the last time it will ever be used is the first time everything will begin to make sense.
A Splattering of Minimalistic Poems That Are Presented in a Mildly Entertaining Way Such That the Reader Might Assume That There Is Some Intrinsic Connection Between Them

The old front porch—
a glimmer of sunshine
where you used to be,
playing your guitar
but fumbling the words.

In my father’s fields,
wheat grew too high.
Nobody saw me
when I first told that raccoon
it was beautiful.

Three red leaves
chewed by caterpillars,
ignored by the paperboy—
who, for the first time in his life,
wears a parka.

The farmer hears his rooster
as he pours some granola.
Raindrops on the tractor wheels,
gray sky in the distance—
things that won’t disrupt the harvest.

A ladybug sits atop
the pink rose I gave you.
There’s no glass vase,
just a water bottle,
something to remember.
The Connoisseur of Toothpaste

When I was five, I didn’t know that Colgate and Aquafresh existed. My parents used Pepsodent—it was all they used and I was too young to know the difference. When we moved to Montana, I was seven and started second grade in a new school. I remember this one girl who stood there right before homeroom, a gentle spirit in the sunshine. I called her Victoria.

She had a flower in her hair and looked kind of pretty so I asked her if she wanted to be my friend. She said yes. And so it began.

Second grade was like any other grade—multiplication tables, cursive, and state capitals. I always thought Bismarck, South Dakota sounded better so that’s what I put, even though I knew the right answer. One recess, Victoria and I were in this patch of yellow grass pretending we were dogs, just burying our invisible bones and ignoring the teacher’s whistle as all other classmates were ushered inside.

“Do you want to know my secret?” she asked suddenly. I saw a ladybug on her shoulder but was too afraid to brush it aside.

“Sure.”

She smiled even more brightly. “I know who I’m going to marry,” she said as she walked over to the swing set and sat down.

“Oh?” I asked, a bit interested. “Anyone I know?”

“Yep!” she beamed. “Nicholas Schroeder—that one boy with the dark hair in the fourth row and he always answers the right questions and he’s so great at soccer and Miss Carol loves him and I do too. That’s who I’ll marry.”

She was swinging now, lost in the clouds but with pieces of herself dropping to the earth below. And I felt like I could trust her.

“I—I have a secret too,” I stammered. “I—I love to brush my teeth.”

Victoria was silent for a moment. “Why? I like eating brownies and chocolate chip cookies and tiramisu and even fruitcake if the mood strikes me. I mean, if you brush your teeth, you throw in the towel. You say no more dessert for the rest of the night. How could you make such a decision? No. I don’t brush my teeth.”

She swung herself higher.

“How can you not brush your teeth? Don’t you understand how important your molars and incisors and bicuspids are? You must brush! That’s how you protect yourself from cavities.”

Victoria laughed like she had just shot a hole in the moon. “I don’t get cavities!” she screamed triumphantly. “I’ll never get cavities! I’ll marry Nicholas and we’ll have four kids and none of us will brush our teeth and we’ll move to the Land of Marshmallows and we’ll be the happiest people in the world! You’re so silly, Edgar.”

She jumped from the swing into the gravel and landed on her two feet. I wanted to take an X-ray of her mouth right then and teach her about the importance of taking care of her smile but she ran back to the classroom, fearless of the glucose warriors in the nightly buffet.

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That night, I had the first in a series of recurring dreams where Victoria and I were both adults. She had made me a delicious birthday cake—but it wasn’t yet my birthday and I wasn’t even fond of icing. I wouldn’t eat my slice because I had just brushed my teeth. We argued
some more and then Victoria threw the cake in my face and it stung my eyes and there was Nicholas on the sidelines, cheering her on.

Two weeks later, at my second dentist appointment, I found out I had my first cavity.

“It’s really small,” Dr. Nelson told my parents. “It’ll only be a minor filling—next Tuesday work for you?”

I started protesting immediately.

“This can’t be!” I screamed like a hyena with an impacted wisdom tooth. “I’m not like Victoria! I love brushing my teeth! I do it for ten minutes in the morning and twenty minutes in the evening and it’s more exhilarating than reciting the presidents in reverse chronological order! I love my teeth and they love me. You take your comments back. Please, Dr. Nelson, this can’t be!”

“Well, it’s just a molar way in the back, which are hard to get to sometimes.”

“I get to them just fine! We have an open line of communication.”

He didn’t acknowledge my reply. “And also, your parents should have already told you by now that you never have to brush for that long—a few minutes should suffice. I think we went over this the first time you came in, too, since I remember you said something about how ‘emotionally close’ you feel to your teeth.”

This dentist didn’t understand me. But, actually, he probably did.

“Well, I’m going to go home tonight and brush my teeth for thirty minutes with Pepsodent and we’ll see if you need to fill my cavity then—an outrage! An inexplicable outrage! I take umbrage at your inexplicable outrage!”

Dr. Nelson gave us a sad grin as we left and my parents did their best to console me on the drive home. As I was looking through my goodie bag, I saw what looked like a tube of Pepsodent but labeled with this peculiar word “Crest.”

“The dentist didn’t give me toothpaste!” I erupted, clenching my fists in the process.

“Mom! Dad! Turn around right now! This says ‘Crest.’”

“No, that is toothpaste,” my mother said. “Just a different kind.”

My first thought was, ‘How dare they.’ How dare they not tell me about this whole spectrum of toothpaste flavors out there for me to discover, enjoy, appreciate, cherish. I demanded they take me to the supermarket then and buy me two or three in every single kind and my father drove on at the same, steady speed and my mother just kept saying, “No, Edgar.” And I was screaming “Yes!” all the way home and trying to determine where I had made the mistake.

***

I figured it was all my fault. I blamed myself for that cavity and was too frightened and hurt to eat anything at dinner that night, not even the succotash made especially for me. I spent the entire night terrified and wondering about the next day and the next. The Crest tasted like cinnamon but it didn’t help.

“Listen,” my mother said as she tucked me in, her voice shining more brightly than my teeth. “It’s OK if you get cavity. It’s not like we’ll punish you or love you any less. Your father and I have each had a few and we got the fillings and now we’re fine.”

“No!” I hollered. “Not you two! Please tell me you’re lying to me! I’ll forgive you if you’re lying to me!” I sprung from my covers and lunged for the toothbrush.
“Edgar!” she shouted. “Everything is going to be fine. And I’m not going to hear of you thinking otherwise. So sleep and rest up for school—you have that test on the Mexican War tomorrow, don’t you?”

Sure I did. But that wouldn’t change anything. Somehow, I got to sleep and figured it would only be a few more moments before I was tasting cake again but instead I found myself in a bright white room. For once, I felt at ease, like I was on a distant shoreline looking at the horizon and pledging to God that I had it all figured out when I really hadn’t the slightest idea.

And then—right in the middle of the room—I saw it. A giant tooth, bright red, covered in blood.

“Oh, don’t be frightened,” it spoke softly. “Please don’t be frightened. I still love you even if you don’t love me.”

“How—how can I love you?” I sputtered. “You’re covered in red! You’re bleeding! You’re going to die! Why can’t you be bright and white instead? Like this room? Like the doves? Even like the marshmallows!”

And then it told me it was my choice. I didn’t get what the tooth meant until I looked down at my hands and found both of them were stained ruby. I already knew I did this. I already knew the tooth was right. And I collapsed to the floor and began to weep bitterly. “Everything will be all right,” it said. “This is more than a tooth, this is more than a tooth...”

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I awoke feeling comforted, slightly, as if something inside of me had been captured and released. The rest of the days after that were a blur. I got a C+ on my test, played chess with my father (he let me win), and still brushed thirty minutes every night, though I began to question why.

Tuesday afternoon rolled around and Dr. Nelson asked me how I was doing. “Better,” I said. “Nervous but better.”

“It’s clichéd and all—but it won’t hurt a bit.” I had to trust him and as I closed my eyes tightly and waited for the procedure to begin. I saw the giant tooth from my dream then, completely white and sparkling in the sunlight. “See?” it said. “Everything is fine.”

And Dr. Nelson told me it was finished.

“Wait, what? It can’t be.”

“Told you it wouldn’t hurt. Cavity’s filled and you’re good to go. See you in six months, Edgar—oh, and don’t feel bad about it either. I’ve had three cavities and a root canal and I still feel fine every morning. It happens to the best of us.”

As my parents drove me home, they showed me a bottle of Aquafresh that I could keep all for myself. I smiled and thanked them, even though I could have a connoisseur of toothpaste if I wanted to and it wouldn’t change the fact that I’d still need to see the dentist and even floss regularly.

The next day at recess, Victoria and I were in the fields again and I noticed she was pouting. “What’s wrong?”

“Had a dentist appointment yesterday,” she sulked. “Four cavities.” She was probably too rebellious to cry—but I wanted to tell her that it would be OK. I took her hand and she didn’t refuse.

“Listen—it will be all right. I got my cavity filled yesterday and I...I feel terrific, Victoria.” She smiled. “Thanks. I’m afraid, but—it will be fine.”
It was the only moment from my childhood worth remembering. I didn’t need to know if Victoria would marry me. I didn’t need to ask her any more questions. We both made a pact right then that each of us would brush for three minutes a night from then on. That would be enough. That would be all we really needed.

I’m not sure what Victoria’s up to now—maybe she’s a dentist. I’m not but that’s fine too. I do the best I can, mouthwash and all, and it’s not even the cavity that matters in the end anyway—it’s how it’s treated.
The Other Fantasia

Mickey Mouse and Daisy Duck are just friends and they'll find their soul mates eventually, but for right now, they're sitting in the back of a blue pickup, staring at the stars that look too near tonight. "You think about justice?" Daisy asks him. "I pray for justice." Mickey has never prayed for justice but it doesn't sound like it could harm him. "One of these days," Mickey says. "I pray for justice," Daisy repeats. "I met this really nice duck named Derek but we had to break it off but not before both of us went too far—and I know God forgives us and I've got a nice contract but I still love him. I don't know. He got along so well with Disney too." Mickey nods. "I know the feeling." "You do? I didn't know you were in a similar relationship." The mouse sighs. "Well, not exactly. Here's the thing. Every night, I dream of the days of Steamboat Willie and I know I could never recapture that innocence so I take my pet snake Fernando out of its glass aquarium and tell it to inject venom into me. I've hurt so many people, made so many mistakes. And Fernando always says no and then he makes me an iced tea and draws me a bath and tells me that it will get better. And in the bathtub, I bang my head against the wall and hope that he's right. But the pain remains, Daisy. It's like a mousetrap, I guess—not because I'm fooled by the trap but because I feel kind of sorry for the cheese." Daisy watches her companion unflinchingly. "True story," she says. And then she hugs Mickey and, in that tender embrace, something changes. The stars don't shine any brighter but animation is harder than the real thing and, for now, they've both succeeded.
a lesson in punctuation

question mark is talking
to exclamation point, but it's not helping.
"you understand how many
people i've hurt these past few days?
see, there i go again. i ask questions,
but i don't expect anyone to answer—
i expect that bowling trophy
above my mantel
to burst into flames. i expect that
when i marry semicolon next year,
things will change—but they might not.
i expect that nobody wants all
the answers. punctuation is truth
and lies—and all i do is sit and wait
for the tears. 'how long do i have
to get my stuff out of the office?'
'how many times have you
cheated on me?' 'how long before the harvest
actually makes it through another drought?'
'is anyone really listening?' and every time i appear,
people snap like twigs and shudder
like a dark breeze in a utopia.
'what is x in this problem?' she didn't know,
she didn't pass, she didn't get into the college
of her choice. 'why did you eat the cookies
before dinner when i told you not to?'
he's too afraid to say he's hungry.
he's too afraid to say that he saw his best friend
shoved into a locker at school—
and he was too afraid to do anything
then too. i'm just a ski mask and gloves
and i replace your hope with pain
that hasn't yet fallen into the sewer.
'did you know this would hurt me?'
i did. semicolon used me against me—
and she was missing at the scene
so unless you think
conjunctions can never take a day off,
the noble semicolon never takes the blame.
but i do love her and we were
at a romantic candlelit dinner last night.
she was talking about wedding plans,
and i kept badgering her
with visions of myself. ‘do we really need that large a cake?’ ‘why do i have to rewrite my vows?’ ‘who said ampersand gets to come? all he cares about is and, and, and, and...’ and there goes the ellipsis because words unspoken are promises not broken, just little tiny caterpillars inside your head. they munch on leaves and don’t try to haunt you—they were just born that way.” exclamation point: “it’s a vicious circle,” he says. “and i’m not usually that excited either—but it’s the next-best thing to being an actor.”
Snakes Without Venom

So I don’t have to be serious now. This was supposed to be a serious poem and I was supposed to talk about life and chocolate milk and instead I keep talking about Cinderella. I’m sorry. I just can’t get her out of my head. Maybe that says something. Maybe whenever I walk into the room and you say it’s too cold, I want to turn up the thermostat not to frustrate you, just because I think it’s too hot. Maybe I don’t want to trim the hedges because I think you already did a wonderful job. Maybe I still call our pet monkey Hidalgo when you’re not around because I didn’t think “Monkey” was all that creative. But that’s just a minor victory, not a victory at all, really. Maybe when I go to the store next time to buy batteries, you won’t complain because I counted last night—and there are currently twenty-two batteries in the junk drawer and none of them work and you say you’re keeping them for the clocks in the house that don’t require that much energy. I’d like to be a clock. I’d like to tell you that it’s 9:07, not that it’s probably 9:07 but it could be half-past three or that I know it’s 9:07 but how does it feel now that I’ve told you it’s 9:07 and how does that affect our relationship and what steps should I take in order to overcome this struggle that because it’s 9:07, I wonder why I’m still uncommitted to certain things. These are snakes without venom and all they want to do is love the sky the way I love you. And I do. Or maybe I’ll be a clock with a little cuckoo bird inside and when it’s the top of the hour and you talk to the cuckoo bird, he tells you what kinds of emotions he’s experiencing—but only because he knows that once he goes back inside the box again, it’ll take twice as much effort to get him back out.
A Handful of Rosaries

I almost fainted before, though not at the sight of blood. But I admire how you fill out the paperwork in blue and then sit down and close your eyes while the doctor sticks the needle in. You say you love daydreaming and that’s when you see this box of vampires and keep telling them that there could be a better way. They want to be generous like you but can’t stand your homemade garlic bread. “But we all have dreams,” you remind them. “Some of us give blood, others go to law school.” And then you give the vampires a handful of rosaries and they’re not afraid anymore. One even smiles at you. You think he might be O-negative—even so, he’s really looking to be an English professor one day. And then you open your eyes and it’s all over. “We’ll see you in six months?” the volunteers ask. You say yes and walk over to where I’m reading a copy of Popular Mechanics. It’s my turn. And it’s pretty much the same, except I don’t see the vampires, just the sun and moon colliding like a wildcat and a tax collector. And then it’s over once again. I return out to where you’re waiting patiently, like always, and ask how you’re feeling. “Fine,” you say. “I mean, it’s not like I’m the only one.”
Elvis and the Triceratops

And so it’s Tuesday afternoon and I should have fixed him a peanut butter and banana sandwich while he waited outside his dressing room. He’s tapping his foot on the plush carpet, thinking about his set list. He knows that shrine with the newspaper clippings and the lipstick kisses won’t last and it’s been a couple of hours since he’s went inside.

Just then, he notices a wandering dinosaur and he thinks about the history of fossils, how many ten-cent dreams can be stored, forever hidden, underneath a priceless mound of dirt. “I’m Elvis. I’m afraid. What’s your name?” The dinosaur stares at him a moment and tries to blink but doesn’t know why. “I’m a triceratops. I’m in debt. I don’t have much to my name, except these horns and two unhatched eggs.”

And that’s how it begins. After all the concerts and mediocre films, Elvis learned to appreciate those Tuesday afternoons when he could put a nickel in the vending machine and out poured a stream of dinosaur food and Kit Kats and suddenly, the day was complete. He only owned a guitar, which calmed his suspicious mind, but this creature was prehistorically majestic and he could play the mandolin like a gentle thunderstorm.

He named the triceratops Theodor. Theodor didn’t mind—he enjoyed his new alias because it meant he was loved and he could now find hope on Christmas morning. Nobody ever bought him a yo-yo before, because they all feared he could be beautiful in a non-Jurassic park. But Elvis did, promptly teaching him to walk the dog and even Fido didn’t mind, just watched the palm trees sway and wrote to Snoopy, said life was wonderful here, even if he was still imagining his own Blue Hawaii with some melancholy coconuts.

But then the floodgates opened, somehow. Elvis spoke to Theodor less and less, other commitments, other deadlines, and didn’t that shrine look frightfully nostalgic in the moonlight? Theodor only wanted a landscape he could call his own but he couldn’t find it here. He traded in his mandolin for a shiny new harmonica, got Bob Dylan’s phone number, and started fantasizing about
the carnivores, even though he was too hungry to eat them.

Elvis never knew this would happen and sent his regards, dancing with the lady in red until two in the morning—a pair of strangers united through unspoken words and shimmies that tore Jack's Bungalow down. This all occurred the same evening that Theodor walked back to the lion’s den, even forgetting all the precautions Daniel warned him about. He was not killed there, just badly wounded, hurt like the razor blade of a bearded man who found the wrong way to shine.

That’s when Theodor wrote to Elvis, telling him it was over—not for Elvis but for him. Skeletons could only carry him so far and now all the pterodactyls mock him and ask him why he can’t fly into the clouds like they can. Opening his mouth to speak, Theodor roars like a hurricane and if he ever could find the words, they wouldn’t suffice and even then, the tyrannosaurus would find a way to criticize his dinosaur grammar.

And now it’s like it always was. Elvis is getting married next Tuesday afternoon to the lady in red and I’m supposed to give a toast to them. But all I can see before I wish them a happy life is a pile of Fido's bones and visions of the triceratops, no longer named Theodor. The last I saw him, he was crying on the roof of his condominium, trying to comfort his two newly hatched children with touching hymns and meaningful apologies.
The 12:01 Truce

So it's their six-month anniversary and their pumpkin coach jalopy awaits outside. "You made the reservations for Chez Royale, right?" Prince Charming asks his wife.

"No, I thought you did."
And so it begins. Cinderella laces up her brown sneakers, much to the chagrin of her husband. "Wait, what are those?" he asks.

"Sneakers. Found them at the Goodwill—they're a nice fit. Plus it was half-off day so I bought an extra pair."

"Why? What happened to your glass slippers?"
Cinderella bolts off the rickety front porch, accidentally kicking the lawn mower on the way to the pumpkin. "Threw them out—come on, we're married now. You know I'm not perfect, Prince Charming. I burned last night's pizza, I can't separate the laundry properly, and Rapunzel's probably a better mother than I and we don't even have any kids."

"But they're sneakers. You're Cinderella. You need glass slippers and evening balls and evil stepsisters that still send you angry letters."

"I am Cinderella." Her voice a subdued whisper, her face pale in the moonlight. "And these sneakers fit just fine. Besides, the fairy godmother's coaching the local basketball team and I might try out next week."

Prince Charming sulks as he gets into the passenger seat and throws his crown out the window. "Fine. But if you do that, then you can no longer call me Prince Charming. My name is now Melvin."

She rolls her eyes. "That's ridiculous."

"No, seriously, I'm Melvin. You're not the only one that gets to be imperfect. Last night, I didn't take out the trash like you asked, I forgot to swing buy the store to get more iguana food so I just fed Izzy some Cocoa Puffs, and I watched that hockey game until midnight—and I didn't even kiss you before we fell asleep. 'Charming.' Right. Just call me Melvin—Mediocre Melvin."

"Absolutely not. You're forever a prince—charming, alarming, quite disarming."

"There's no way you're making all the mistakes in the relationship! And you're not playing basketball either because you just want to be a little saboteur and miss every lay-up—you should try foosball instead. You know how good you are at that."

Cinderella laughs as she puts the key in the ignition and speeds to the restaurant. "Never! You let me win last time because you love how it feels. I won't give you the satisfaction again. And tomorrow I might not even use conditioner either—I saw how much you've been admiring my hair these past few days."

"Oh yeah? Well then, I'm trading in my tuxedo tomorrow for a pair of blue jeans with holes and a T-shirt with an obnoxiously esoteric nineties pop culture reference on it—and I won't call the exterminator like you asked and I won't help you open the jar of pickles either because I'm just too lazy."

"Fine!" Cinderella zooms down the highway, ignoring the road signs. "See that? Ten miles over. You're not the only one getting tickets anymore."

The one formerly known as a prince fidgets. "It's not about the tickets. I just wish you'd learn to be the perfect one."

"But that's only half the battle." Cinderella flies past Chez Royale. She has somewhere else in mind.
Razor the Awkward Yet Relatively Enjoyable Pony

He’s in the backyard, right? He talks a lot, often unintentionally, and dreams about stuff he’d like to do, pony stuff, breathing, doing the laundry, drinking pony vegetarian shakes, running in the fields while an orchestra plays this sad symphony and the credits roll.
You remember the first movie I took you to, Ellie? We cried at the end but it wasn’t about the movie. It was a relentless howl and now I’m just making things up. I should probably go to bed because I’ve got an early shift. Did you feed Razor? No. I forgot it was my turn. It’s always my turn and, last night, I dreamed I was a microwave. We should get one. Bean burritos at seven in the morning, bean burritos at seven at night. Your cuisine is delicious, especially your watercress salad, but I can’t always have you all the time, just part of you part of the time. I’m not sure what that means. This won’t make sense tomorrow, but I’ll pretend like it does and I’ll even load the dishwasher for you, provided Jeremy repaired it. He’s a good brother, he just needs to settle down, maybe buy himself a pony or a deck of cards with all the aces removed.
**Ophelia's Totem Pole**

The lumberjacks are eating their ham and cheese sandwiches with a side of mixed questions when they first notice the tantalizing structure, right in the center of the abandoned lot next to their favorite peeling paint diner named for the town's first mayor.

"It was supposed to make a lot more sense," the inscription reads. "I could’ve turned away from love and blue sky parades, those ballerina wishes that pirouette in the limelight—but I embraced my eloquent sorrow and this mystery resulted. I hope you realize it's not really here. Signed, O."

Rebecca and Elizabeth stare at it, deconstructing dreams and chopping down more cherry trees in orchards that God has plans to save. "What do you suppose it means?" Rebecca asks, hoping that the lemon meringue is edible and that her husband still adores her.

Silence, the awkward kind, the pleasant kind that fills a room when two siblings try to reminisce about their schizophrenic gerbil but come up with nothing but a handful of regrets and you know it was never his fault. You know he loved everyone he saw. But the structure still stands and it grieves.

Rebecca thinks the middle face looks like Aristotle. Elizabeth's lost in her thoughts, in what her psychiatrist told her earlier, in what to pick up at the supermarket, in landscapes engraved in winter. But some things are better left unsaid and Ophelia has finally learned to laugh as she dances with the moon at daybreak.
Harbor Before Dawn

A red sky we didn't ask for.
A couple of crates of oranges and kiwis.
An anchor for our bodies—
we could leave the dock before they catch us
and the sun bangs his gavel,
even if this lake wouldn't understand.
But hoist the sails anyway
and tell the salmon that everything will be fine—
as long as they can swim upstream
or at least know how to resist the bait.
A View from the Branches

The temptation always hit hardest on McNielson Avenue, where the beautiful oaks grow. But Lydia often just kept walking home. She thought of her kitchen sink, full of pink and yellow plastic dishes sulking in cheap stroganoff residue. Something somewhere in her inner sanctum probably required dusting. Perhaps Cleo and Barnabas needed feeding and she didn't want to starve her guinea pigs. Lydia always created a new excuse.

“Let me tell you, Friday night could not have come sooner,” Rachel said to her silent friend, keeping a steady pace beside her. Lydia knew what that meant. Last Friday night, she shoved her bulging briefcase under her leather sofa, where the extension cords writhed in tangled agony and the dust bunnies played gin rummy until dawn. She had vaguely remembered that Bruce demanded “a detailed proposal for the new spending budget by noon on Monday.”

“Plenty of time,” she resounded Saturday morning after eating some week-old Life cereal and spending most of the afternoon drawing new species of animals in her sketchpad.

Then, after using most of Sunday to watch The Little Mermaid two or three times and write some bad poetry about the ocean, she finally remembered her other life and retrieved the briefcase. Statistics sweat from her brow and business strategies zoomed like a fighter jet through her veins. She knocked over the glass of Hawaiian Punch on her end table at 3:30 in the morning—but she didn't care. The proposal was complete. She moved the ugly orange rug to cover the stain and called it a night.

“Miss Russell,” Bruce's gruff voice filled her cubicle after the meeting the next day. “How in the world did you come up with that business plan?”

Lydia minimized the spider solitaire window on her computer and pulled up a random spreadsheet. Her supervisor didn't seem to mind.

“It wasn't my best work,” she said.

“You must be joking.” He took a big bite of his protein bar and didn't bother brushing the crumbs off his paisley tie. “You understand that nobody has submitted such innovative ideas as you have had in at least the last decade, right?”

“Oh, I—”

“You're a genius, that's why. Keep this up and you'll be the vice president of finance in less than three years, I guarantee it. I know that's what you want. Others come into our waters and they're guppies or goldfish at best. You're a piranha. That's what I love about you. Piranhas always win.”

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Lydia was thinking about the pet goldfish she never got for her tenth birthday when she stopped in the middle of the road. She could not avoid falling in love with this one tall oak tree that almost seemed to murmur her name whenever she sauntered past. The urge tonight was unbearable.

“You don't sound too excited about the weekend,” Rachel mused after checking a text message. “I could tell back at Uncle John's Pub. I had to finish the rest of your ginger ale, along with my two whiskey sours and most of the hot wings. It's the weekend, my friend. So I'm ordering you to be excited. Rock the casbah and live for once. The world is your helpless little oyster so shuck it until it sings your praises in three-part harmony and gives you a pearl
necklace. Oh, and I'm thinking of inviting Derek over to your place tomorrow night—you don't mind, do you? Doesn't your sofa pull out?"

Lydia didn't hear her. She was ready to give in. Taking off her business suit, she found no challenge in letting it fall toward the ground like a dollar bill that had lost its value. Dropping her briefcase in the grass was even easier. “I must,” she whispered. “I must.”

“Must what—go to the Krypton House with me tomorrow and party on the dance floor? Wait, what are you doing?”

She didn’t answer. She climbed. The first branch was the most difficult. When she grabbed it, she felt gnarled ecstasy pulsate beneath her hands and reveled in the heartbeat of nature. But she also heard her mother’s voice bleed into her brain.

“Real people don’t climb trees,” it warned. “They build skyscrapers.”

“No!” she shrieked. “That’s a lie!”

“What’s a lie?” Rachel yelled from below.

“This is my tree,” Lydia boomed as she ascended, ignoring her companion’s question. “This is truth and life undiscovered and I see my face in every moonlit leaf and my future in every step.”

And she continued to climb like the child she always wanted to be, naming every star and thanking God for moments that the world despised. She never reached the clouds but she understood that this was her only true path to freedom.

Rachel tugged her hair in desperation below. She screamed at Lydia to quit being ridiculous but was only met with lazy crickets who chirped their twilight symphony without remorse.

“Come on!” Rachel protested again. “This is ridiculous now. Just climb back down and maybe tomorrow I'll buy you a snow cone or something.”

Her words never reached Lydia, who had wrapped herself in the atmosphere. The climber gazed below, noting the skyline dotted with specks of apathetic light. She prayed for whoever owned that light. She prayed that they’d be able to climb trees and excavate caves and sing Billy Joel songs with the car windows rolled down. Closing her eyes, she imagined she was a dove who painted itself green just to be different. How beautiful that flight would be, slicing the mid-afternoon air with the color of the forest. The sky and trees would be one and she would be one too.

She closed her eyes in reverie and leaned back. And fell.

No scream escaped from her lips, but if one did, she would have given nature the credit. She just enjoyed the natural descent, a slow tumble back to her false reality. She scraped her right arm on a couple of the branches and she could not think of a better injury.

“Lydia!”

The girl instinctively flung out her arms at Rachel’s voice and clutched the first thing they could touch. Lydia had grabbed the first branch once again and dangled two feet above the ground. She wasn’t letting go.

“OK, wow. You’re—you’re fine,” Rachel stammered. “Now let’s go back to your place. Enough with the games.”

Lydia closed her eyes even tighter but a couple of tears still managed to grace her face. “But this is who I am! I belong here. And I may not be beautiful but embracing your inner child is.”
Rachel stood there motionless with her mouth agape. “So is this what you’re going to do the rest of your life?” she finally asked. “Climb trees? Do jigsaw puzzles? Watch Disney movies when you don’t have a four-year-old daughter who believes she will be the next Cinderella forcing you to? Enough with this, Lydia, OK? Peter Pan never gave you his calling card. This isn’t what grown-ups do.”

Lydia didn’t let go. An immense clarity filled her body as she her pictured her precious view from the branches. She saw the green dove again and contemplated the dangers of living a charade.

“I’m not a grown-up.” Her eyes were still closed.

“You’re twenty-seven.”

“Nobody is a grown-up,” Lydia began. “We’re all children. Some of us don’t admit it because we don’t have the strength or the time and we spend all that energy writing dissertations on the loss of our innocence. We take down the tire swing in the winter, sell our kites at our neighbor’s yard sale, and look down on those who still paint by numbers rather than by experience.

“You see a tree and it stands proudly and you never question it because that’s what it does. You see another human and you exchange a fake smile and a trite sentence because that’s what you’ve been tamed by society to do. How dare a human climb a tree, how dare you sleep in the lion’s den and wake up unscathed. You’re trying too hard to domesticate your identity and that’s when you lose it.

“Because who chooses to believe that life is actually a fairy tale? Why bother yourself with a sliver of hope? You pretend to read the headlines and assume that somebody long ago probably confiscated everybody’s auras and traded pixie dust for asbestos on the stock market. But then you sit back and look in your bedroom mirror and you don’t have any reflection but, somehow, you don’t think you deserve one because you’re not really there. And the next morning, after dreaming about your worst failures, you don’t know why—”

“Stop it—just stop it!” hollered Rachel. “You’re not making any sense!”

Her train of thought had derailed. Lydia paused for a few seconds before letting go off the branch. She felt like a stranger on the ground.

“You climb all the trees you want,” Rachel sighed. A lone dog barked somewhere in the distance. “Just remember how easy it is to fall down one of them.”

Lydia bit her lip and thought she should’ve been an astronaut.

“But it’s probably easier to fall down if you don’t climb at all.”
The Architecture of Catnip

Mittens needs some courage and maybe his catnip.
"I'm scared," he says as I pour him his breakfast.

"I'm sorry? Usually you don't talk until after two in the afternoon."

"I know. I just had this horrible dream last night, either I turned into a human or you started meowing but the more I consider it, the more I can see the beauty in that, you know?"

"Not really. I thought you said the dream was horrible."

"I did. What do you do all day?"

"I'm an architect. I work with scale models of mansions that you'll never purr in and blueprints of oversized breakfast nooks. I take my breakfast to go."

"Are blueprints like paw prints?"

"What? I don't think so."

"I want macaroni and cheese. I want to fall in love with a cocker spaniel or a princess or both."

"But love's harder than it looks, Mittens. It's like a marshmallow inside of a thunderstorm inside of a daffodil."

"Whatever happened to Laura anyway?"

"Eat your Fancy Feast."

"Did she leave you because of me?"

"Probably. Now eat up like a good kitty"
and I'll give you some catnip."

"I don't like catnip. We've been through this before."

"Well, I keep forgetting."

"That's OK. You're only human."
The Bells Still Ring

for Nick

Spanish class was delightful,
but I can promise you I don't remember
all of the verb conjugations—
and I always wanted to speak
in the infinitive anyway. Perhaps you did as well.
Perhaps you saw the cardinals in the spring
and you smiled until the train
called you home. Maybe you rode the train
in the winter, maybe not at all.
It's sad what brings us together,
sadder what tears us apart, like two vultures
fighting over the same cut of meat
because it's what they do best—but you know
one of them, if not both, is an herbivore.
One of them is waiting
for the curtain to fall but most of us
have left the auditorium. We're waiting on you too
and each of us have memories—
some dancing in the water,
others floating in the breeze. It hurts,
but you understand that peace comes in the mourning.

This is how we comfort ourselves.
This is why the bells still ring.
Thinking of Chamomile

How you sip your tea, confusing me for all I’m worth, a dime in the jukebox, a ride in your Cadillac— savoring the wind, dreaming of the first highway you met, cool, inexpressible. Road signs to nowhere except that diner with the eight pm omelets and the Monet on the placemats. The waitress orders coffee for you, but it’s decaffeinated so you’ll smile at her. She won’t understand and I know this from experience. Give her a chance and she’ll open up, like a butterfly’s cocoon or the tides at dawn. What a shoreline we used to have, boats that lingered delicately like origami, nomads who hoisted the sails.

I was going to ask for the cider but the waitress leaves, probably for good. There’s only so much in this town I could show you anyway, the unfinished mural, the windmill closed for repairs.
Newfangled Pioneers

“That man in the booth
has been here before.
Cider, light on the whipped cream.
It’s Friday. That’s his usual and
I’m done for the night.
Kelly, take over. It’s not that difficult.”
A nervous laugh,
much like her grandmother’s,
and then she’s gone.
Even the tumbleweeds are puzzled.
“But she was just here.”
Only she couldn’t have been
and that red leaf glued to her dashboard
reminds her of something.
“I’m sorry,” she says to herself,
but the highway doesn’t speak—it just curves a little bit more.
She doesn’t count the headlights,
though she used to. Low moon,
a sheet of frost on the fields.
Autumn’s confused.
But she keeps on driving.
She would’ve planned this differently,
maybe played some tennis
or sipped a milkshake at a diner
other than her own.
But this is a new harvest,
something far beyond the ferns.
This is the arrival.
She knocks on his door
and he’s not surprised,
mostly relieved. “Here,” she says,
handing him a horseshoe painted green,
something they both understand.
“I believe this is yours.”
Lassie Visits a Psychologist

"The first thing I want to do after I rescue Timmy from the local well is read a novel." Dr. Abernathy looks at me oddly. I sprawl out even more on his leather sofa and contain the urge to quote Shakespeare. I've read all his plays. *Twelfth Night* is my favorite.

He scribbles something down on a notepad and says his favorite phrase. "And why do you want that?"

I can't believe they're making me do this. June Lockhart told my trainer that I missed a few of my cues on the last two episodes with the bank robbery cliffhanger. I really could care less about a bank robbery. It's not like I deal in dollars.

"Because I want to read a novel," I repeat. "I want to bite into those delicious words and revel in a plot that isn't my own, tell Hemingway that he was really on to something. I want people to shut off their television sets, stop admiring my ugly coat, and read the papers. What are we going to do about the Cold War, President Eisenhower? Is democracy really that much better? And don't you dare send me over there to talk to Khrushchev. He frightens me."

"So you think your coat's ugly?"

I watch a couple of bluebirds chirping outside the window and I long to play backgammon with them, only because Lassie wouldn't do that and I'm not Lassie. I'm a shadow on the wall. I dream in black and white, but I want to live in color.

"I'm not chewing up bones and going on lazy walks like I want to. I'm not even real. So of course my coat is ugly. If you were living a lie, you'd be ugly too."

Dr. Abernathy scratches his bald head and adjusts his paisley tie, a drab olive and teal. He's about to ask another question but I cut him off.

"And another thing—we're sponsored by Campbell's soup. That's outrageous. I've tried their beef stew—it tastes just like dog food and that's not a compliment. Do you eat Campbell's soup, Dr. Abernathy?"

"Occasionally," he mutters as I roll my eyes. "But what do they feed you at the studio?"


I stare at the clock. Just three more minutes. "And what do you want to eat?" he asks, his voice as clear as the whistles that I always suffer through each night.

"I want to eat macaroni and cheese." He looks surprised. Good.

"Dogs don't eat macaroni and cheese."

How dare he insult me like that. You can take away my freedom and denounce my dreams but how dare you criticize my menu.

"Why not?" I ask. "Why can't Lassie eat what he wants to eat—that's right. I'm not the pretty little girl you think I am. And you know what? Lassie doesn't want to come home," I growl and resist the urge to chew on Dr. Abernathy's leg. He probably wouldn't understand the message. "Lassie wants to go away. Lassie wants to elope with that cute golden retriever Samantha that chases tennis balls all day. Maybe we'll be the first dogs on the moon. We'll have four children, all of us will eat all the macaroni and cheese we want, and maybe I'll reclaim my name."

"What do you mean?"

"My name isn't Lassie," I confide in him. It feels like I dropped the atom bomb. "My name is Pal. And I'm not a very good one."
He adjusts his thick-rimmed glasses and scratches his overgrown beard as if searching for the collar I never wore. He doesn't succeed.

"But you're supposed to save those you love."

He leans forward in his swivel chair right as the cuckoo clock on the wall strikes nine.

And I'm finished. Just one more thing to say.

"Then tell me exactly how I'm supposed to save myself."

I heard Dr. Abernathy quit his practice a week after my visit. Good for him. Maybe now he'll finally become a gourmet chef or a poet or whatever it is his mother told him he could be. My mother told me I would be man's best friend but, unfortunately, man never gave me that chance. And that's fine. I don't need to fetch my owner's slippers. I don't need to rescue the world. I just need a few paw prints on the shore and maybe a better place to sleep. When Timmy grows up, I'm sure he'll be the first to understand.
If this night
were any longer,
I’d have to learn to live
with myself.
Sorry, Benedict.
I know you’re not
a traitor anymore—
and I know
what this is all about—
but I’m just not ready
yet. One root beer, that’s all.
Then I have to go,
nowhere in particular.
John Hancock is holding
a luau, but I can’t dance,
though I want to.
It’s just my shadow now
and the bald eagle
returns
to his nest,
the one hidden in the oak tree
behind my church.
After last week’s service,
Betsy Ross congratulated me,
though I’m not
exactly sure why.
Fermenting

You ask me for a bedtime story
and I’m afraid but mostly confused.
I don’t have a story you haven’t heard,
only ones I’m still editing.
I’m not supposed to show you those yet,
but I’ll try. Once upon a time,
there was no time
for all the secrets you could hide
in your closet, shoved in the shoeboxes
with all those old postcards of Hawaii.
You tell me the story doesn’t make sense
and ask me where the “happily ever after” is.
It’s coming, though I’m as frightened
as a frog who doesn’t want to be kissed.
And you smile at that
so I make it the ending,
one without a bucketful of confetti.
I wish you a good night,
though I’m not sure where we’ll go from here.
But I’ll wake up like usual
at half past three and migrate
to the backyard. No tire swing cliché,
just an empty space
and a sad skyline.
You’ll appreciate it someday,
but you’ll ask me what it all means.
That’s when the moon won’t be enough.
And from then on, whenever I pour myself
a glass of wine on the back porch,
I’ll think of you
and do my best just to take a sip
before letting the rest
ferment under the stars,
ever to be tasted again.
Impulsive Brushstrokes: Artistic Statement

During my final spring semester at Ball State University, Tuesday afternoons consisted of Chick-fil-A sandwiches, chocolate protein shakes, and meetings with my poetry advisor named Peter Davis. Peter and I go way back, sort of. I met him three years ago when I first came to Ball State and decided to pursue a minor in creative writing. He walked into the classroom and I thought, “Hey, a fellow student. He looks pretty cool.” It turns out he was the teacher. As I got to know him, I soon realized that he was the kind of person you’d want to high-five walking down the avenue while going to get your oil changed. He was a decent fellow and helped me further appreciate the wild wonders of poetry, something I had formerly thought was confined to Shakespeare’s sonnets and Dickinson’s quatrains, art forms preserved but abandoned. Plus he had also nicknamed his sideburns at one point Lefty and Chavez so it was a win-win situation for everybody involved.

I knew my honors thesis was going to be a creative writing project since the very beginning—but what I didn’t know, or didn’t quite understand, was that I was going to be making an artistic statement in an attempt to dust away some of the shadows from my work and explain at least part of the method behind my madness. I remember talking with Dr. Emert a year ago, when I first proposed the project, and he mentioned that my artistic statement describing my work would be significantly longer than my abstract. I fidgeted in my seat, sipped whatever beverage I had at the time, and didn’t say anything.

The artistic statement was one of the last things I worked on as part of this project, mainly because it was cold and daunting and I had never really taken a magnifying glass to my own work before. That was something best left to an English class, I assumed, masters in the art that had already honed their craft and knew a little more than I did about symbols, motifs, and theme. Originally, in fact, I had the following snippets as part of my artistic statement: “Your best friend of almost twelve years has become addicted to cotton candy” and “Your dog Don Quixote Jr. only stops barking when the Weather Channel is on.” That wouldn’t have made a very convincing artistic statement but, in contrary, perhaps it would have made a more convincing statement than the one I am about to write because of its disconnected images, surreal undercurrents, and poetic nonchalance. I wanted to mask even the most honest part of this thesis because there is a vulnerability in letting yourself be exposed to the elements, to a jury who’s never met you, to the harsh reverberations of a judge’s gavel. But I will do my best to explain the rationale behind this set of writings that has become the culmination of my study here at the university, this splattered paint, these impulsive brushstrokes.

It’s difficult to write about one’s own poetry and, while that doesn’t negate the artistic statement, I think personally that the more important part of this thesis portfolio is the set of poems itself but the more illuminating part might be the statement. Nonetheless, there is a peril, however subtle, in illuminating one’s work too much—or attempting to illuminate other individuals’ works in a similar fashion, for a poem cannot lose its purpose but it can lose its identity. When given the choice after writing “Poem A” to write “Poem B” or to write a companion piece explaining the meaning behind “Poem A” and the themes I was trying to express, I would almost invariably choose to write “Poem B.” Dissecting poems is a difficult
business—necessary at times but dangerous at others, sometimes the rose and other times the thorn. I naturally believe that all poems contain a mystery within them; “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” exclaims T.S. Eliot’s iconic J. Alfred Prufrock. It will be impossible to express exactly what I have tried to do with these poems, partly because at times I have tried to do nothing other than unleash creativity regardless of its practicality, partly because I am often unaware of what I do and why I do it and it is that brutal, relentless self-examination that swirls the dead leaves, peels the skin off of the apple.

Of course, this doesn’t mean I have to be confessional; if I write about a sponge under the sea who wonders why it can’t sprout fins and swim away—even if I never intended it to be any kind of metaphor for anything whatsoever—there is still some meaning behind it. If you asked me what that poem means, I might reply, “It’s about a sponge under the sea who wonders why it can’t sprout fins and swim away.” Sometimes, there’s a lot of value in face-value; other times, poems are just tips of icebergs left unexplored because the ocean is too vast and we might have to scavenge elsewhere to fully understand ourselves.

In one of the very first workshops I attended here at the university, I brought in one of my poems and was told something like, “Yes, these images are nice and there are some good lines in here—but I don’t really get it.” I sympathized with her completely. If I do not perfectly understand a poem that I write (and I often do not) but I find it beautiful, that beauty becomes its meaning. And if a poem is so shrouded in meaninglessness that I actually cannot find any beauty within it, then that meaninglessness paradoxically also becomes its meaning. This isn’t to say that I will intentionally write a poem with layers of hidden meaning, though I can’t promise that a few of those haven’t slipped into this final product. I’d much rather promise that a few probably have but, in the end, I won’t promise anything because it’s often easier that way.

My first encounter with writing poetry was in fifth grade when I told a little vignette about a mysterious insect who needed to get away to examine his own fragile psyche and then fell in love with an artichoke and moved to Tahiti, sipping coconut juice in the morning and playing the ukulele at night. Not really. I think I rhymed “bug” with “mug” and called it a day. There was no spark, no trademark stamp. If you asked me today to write a poem that contained a bug and a mug, I might start out by relating the tale of a praying mantis who always begins every day with a cup of coffee and the sports section before he asks his caterpillar wife which leaves he should chew and which leaves he should use to conceal his most shameful memories. I want to try to break the mold as much as possible because I believe it is both poetry’s greatest release and its most sensitive underbelly. After all, I can hide behind metaphor but I can’t hide behind a sparse haiku such as, “My mother told me / Not to worry anymore / But I just can’t help it.” Indeed, I’d rather paint a picture than frame a photograph, which is undoubtedly an opinion. If my goal with this thesis were to capture reality perfectly, then I can assure the world that I’ve failed miserably.

This isn’t to say, of course, that poetry can’t be grounded in reality. One of my former poetry instructors mentioned that it’s only a matter of time before someone in workshop brings in “the dog poem” (fittingly enough, I had written one of those about a week before he said that!). I don’t think there’s anything inherently unoriginal in writing a straightforward poem about one’s pet dog in which the entire narrative is bathed in sunshine, though there might be something unoriginal in using the word “inherently.” But sometimes we long for a little conflict,
not just to stir the pot but to add flavor to our meal, to taste a thunderstorm so we can determine how to survive it.

One of my favorite poems by Stephen Dobyns is “How to Like It,” one of the first I read by him, because it touches upon deeper themes of love and longing and the essence of life in general in his typically absurdist style. This poem does have a dog—and it talks and encourages its owner to make “the tallest sandwich anyone’s ever seen.” But it isn’t just delightful imagery without a purpose, something I have the longing to scrawl out at a moment’s notice. It goes deeper. It can even be beautiful, a swirl of loss and the possibility of self-discovery with the closing lines: “And that’s what they do and that’s where the man’s / wife finds him, staring into the refrigerator / as if into the place where the answers are kept— / the ones telling why you get up in the morning / and how it is possible to sleep at night, / answers to what comes next and how to like it.” This moves me in ways the first proposed dog poem does not, namely because I enjoy working within a surreal and perhaps even fabulist groundwork (yes, I write about talking animals—a lot, apparently—some with more insight than others). But it is not and cannot be my place to denounce poetry that doesn’t play by my erratic and rather nonexistent rules. Similarly, it would be pretentious of me to discount other forms because they still might resonate with others. Everyone has their own poetic vein, doubly important for reading and writing. After all, if all poetry looked the same, it wouldn’t be poetry at all. It would just be a handful of gray, cookie-cutter words suspended in a solution that tells us nothing and shows us even less.

Our realities explode on the page—and in the brutal but necessary aftermath, we find out that some of those realities might not be realities at all. So no matter how much it dances with reality, poetry should offer some form of much-needed escape and it almost invariably does, perhaps from the drudgery of the world but not necessarily. For example, John Q. Poet might be folding his socks one day and have an insightful, passing thought that life is just like doing one’s laundry. So he writes a poem and hands it to his brother Bob and Bob remarks, “Wow! I totally understand what you’re saying here. I’ve never thought of life this way before—but this is brilliant. And I can actually see you folding your socks when I’m reading the lines too. And that final image? That was beautiful. This is a great poem.” Now whether that is a great poem is purely subjective—for I’ve done my laundry several times but I sometimes forget to fold my socks so I fail to make the connection. But Bob has been offered an outlet of escape here. We can assume that Bob also does his own laundry and that he’s stumbled upon what he considers to be a new truth, even if his perception is skewed because he has a strong emotional connection to his brother and wears mismatched socks all the time (which I applaud him for). But now Bob’s world has been altered, not permanently or monumentally—but a slight change nonetheless, a change we can attribute to discovering that poem and becoming mesmerized by its hypnotic cadence or its unflinching message.

Of course, the more common form of escape is one where we become lost in the power of a gripping poetic landscape, regardless of how rooted it is in reality, and we see that its beauty originates not necessarily in its power to reflect the world as it is but an alternate world, a poetic world. The term “alternate world” might conjure up a dreamland immersed in Cinderellas who wear sneakers instead of glass slippers because they want to play for the local basketball team of which the fairy godmother is the coach and outcast dragons who breathe water instead of fire, left to forever wonder why they’re different. But an alternate world might be just as real—if not more so—than the ones we currently live in. As an exercise, I wrote a poem once in where I talked about a deep emotional connection I had with my math tutor during my freshman year of...
high school, who was then a senior and presumably died a couple years later. Nothing in that poem was surreal in any way—but the poem was a complete work of fiction. I had created an alternate world and tried to construct one that was as realistic as possible. There were no talking dogs, no houses made out of raisin toast, no convenience stores that accepted paper clips as legitimate currency. But still that poem served as a form of escape for anyone who would read it, not necessarily because it spelled out a novel truth such as John’s laundry poem, but because it offered a shift in reality—and even a poem that attempts to capture reality perfectly still provides an escape from that reality by offering a diversion, a recreation of reality on paper with little splotches of ink called letters that spell out words—which may not even be a reality at all.

It is this reverie of sorts that draws me into poetry—and it doesn’t let go until the train pulls back into the station and sometimes I don’t even get off then. I usually can’t chart what I’ve learned on the journey until after it’s all over and I walk on fertile ground again. Until that point, it’s such scraps and self-indulgence and such.

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My advisor caught some recurring themes in my work that I didn’t notice at first. He noticed my love of personification of just about anything, especially animals, as well as attention to various names, the presence of food, and the subversion of typical allusions and metaphors. I didn’t notice any of that—at least not at first. I try not to get too attached to what I’m writing because that should never be the point. I like to distance myself as much as possible from what I do and take a step back because then I can view the panorama more clearly and see what is beautiful and what isn’t.

Poems don’t necessarily have to be beautiful but they should ideally express the potential for beauty, which most poems invariably do anyway. There’s probably some proverb out there that says, in some way or another, “The morning is always more beautiful after you’ve faced the night.” And there’s a great line from a Billy Joel song called “You’re Only Human (Second Wind)”: “You’re not the only one who’s made mistakes but they’re the only things that you can truly call your own.” It’s almost a meta-message because I’m not perfect and neither is this thesis. I’ve made mistakes along the way, but I dust off the debris and try to move on. I do often write from a Christian perspective, as I believe that trying to be perfect for one’s own sake—especially if it is to flaunt that perfection and worship the image in the mirror—can be a dangerous poison, not just within a particular faith but within any given person’s life. The higher the pedestal, the higher the possible fall. We will all make mistakes—that’s a given—but those mistakes should not be an open door into regrets but rather into reconciliation. Mistakes are not the end. And if we do strive to be perfect, we need to understand that there are many times when we might have to begin again.

And some of these pieces, such as “How to Regain Consciousness” and “Delilah’s Translucent Utopia,” obviously do not look like poetry. Then again, maybe that’s not obvious enough to be important or maybe it’s too obvious to be mentioned. I fell in love with prose poetry, accidentally, when I thought I had created a fantastic invention from this past summer. I wrote what would become “old blind charlie and the things he loves” without line breaks and thought I had created a new art form—but really I didn’t. In all honesty, some of these pieces aren’t poetry at all but are arguably short stories and flash fiction. And that’s fine with me because if artists don’t change the canvas, they should at least refashion their palettes now and again. It’s important to step outside our comfort zones, essentially in all that we do, and I’ll
admit I didn’t do that as much as I would’ve liked with this manuscript as a whole. I found a niche and settled into my bed while visions of sugar plums danced in my head via either the conga or foxtrot. My sugar plums? Winding, surrealistic, abstract narratives—or at least peculiar moments frozen in time. Toward the end of this thesis, I let some of my writing “breathe,” I suppose. I was writing things that I didn’t normally write—sometimes it worked, other times it didn’t. But it was still worth it.

I also didn’t accomplish it fully but I tried to scribble down at least one poem every day that would be at least considered for this thesis. It’s a crazy feeling and I didn’t always live up to the challenge. Some days, it’s like there’s a bulldog inside of you—and the only way to release it is with a little sweat, a lot of ink, and the proper bone. But sometimes you can’t do it. It just won’t come. Maybe the bulldog’s there but he’s asleep under the shade of his favorite oak tree and not even a tantalizing tennis ball could get him to change his mind. And then later that evening—or maybe a couple of days later—I’ll get a line stuck in my head and write it down, followed by another, another, another. And then after the dust settles, I’ll usually mutter something like, “Wait, what just happened?” as I stare at the poem that greets me in return, whether an embryo, an adult, or someone in between. I believe writers—any kind of artists, really—need to be on guard with whatever kind of armor and stray arrows they have. It’s not as if art doesn’t pull any punches; it just always wants to keep you in the ring.

As a quick example, I wrote a poem for a portfolio in 2007 that was only 36 lines—and I remember this because it was twelve three-lined stanzas. It was about a red leaf on the sidewalk and each stanza’s first line began with the leaf doing something. “He forgets the last few nights,” “He caresses his sore veins,” “He smiles a bit inside.” Structured poems are not a bad thing; I admire haikus, sonnets, and sestinas for they’re all great writing exercises—but I never want to become a slave to structure. I do believe in writing every day—but often, I’ll write a few lines and hit a roadblock and actually give up. It doesn’t mean there’s no wine left in the jug—it just might have to ferment a little longer until I quench my thirst a few days down the road (my beverage of choice is green tea, not wine, but green tea doesn’t ferment so I took artistic license with that metaphor and I hope you’ll understand). “The Red Leaf Pariah” took two to three hours to write, maybe more with all the minor edits. Two of the first poems from this set that were accepted to literary magazines, “Eve’s Fruit Salad” and “Razor the Awkward Yet Relatively Enjoyable Pony,” each took about ten minutes to write. The former took about another five or ten minutes to edit after a workshop; the latter was never edited at all.

Does this mean that the only poems I can now write are those that I scribble down in under fifteen minutes? Not at all—because some people work that way but others might not. There are probably n ways to write a poem, where n is a number greater than the total number of people who have ever lived on Earth. I’d even argue that there are multiple ways that even one person, such as myself, can choose to write a poem. It’s not always the process but the product that matters. But I do believe that it’s also possible to revise and overanalyze to the point of exhaustion, to the point that you’ve planted an oak just so you can play the lumberjack. I’ll never forget what Peter Davis once told me in my first class I took of his. “You shouldn’t think about what you’re writing. The writing should tell you what you’re thinking.” It doesn’t mean that we never stop to ponder a particular word or image—or let our writing dissolve into a puddle of vapid clichés—but it does mean that sometimes it’s all right to leave home without a map because there’s some beauty to be found in any destination. The way I see it, a good poem
is better than a mediocre poem, however subjective that is—but a mediocre poem is better than a blank page.

I don't think it's very constructive to talk about one's own individual works in great detail, but I will say that one of my favorite pieces in this portfolio is "A Few Shades of Pink"—and that's because I know I had a different pathway in mind for it. Eventually, I was going to have the husband wake up his wife and the wife would question why the husband had a large green horn coming out of his forehead and the husband would contest that he didn't and that the wife is dreaming and the wife would ask him why he didn't pick up the tartar sauce like she asked and on and on and on. And then I included this talking dog and wrote a line, another line, another line—and I just couldn't let the creature go. And by the time I got to what I considered to be the end of the piece, I figured, "You know what? This is not what I expected to write—but that's OK. In fact, it's probably better that way." Imagination is not a dictator but it does know the power of a well-placed veto. I've learned not to be surprised anymore by what I write because what I first envision any piece of writing to be is almost always completely different than the finished product, which—in all actuality—is never really finished, just left to face the wilderness on its own.

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Of course, there is also what you don't see—but I assure you it happened. I owe a great deal of thanks to Peter Davis for his valued assistance and insight during the construction of my honors thesis. This thesis has seriously been one of the highlights of my academic career, in part due to the one-on-one attention, constructive criticism, insightful feedback, poetic knowhow, and everything else I received on those iconic Tuesday afternoons. Though it might not sound academic to say so, it was just plain fun. Our first unit in my junior year of high school English was something called "The Search for Identity." I probably scoffed at it some then—but, in retrospect, as obvious as it is, there's something primordially heartfelt in discovering who you are, unearthing bits and pieces of yourself like decorative chocolates out of a secret stash. We write, paint, nurture, dance, sing, run, live, talk, grow, and breathe to the best of our God-given abilities. It'd be dangerous to discover ourselves all at once like a rush of wildfire uncontained. We just need a few gentle flames to warm us until the winter is over. Writing is one of those for me.

Also I did something that I never thought I'd do before: I let complete strangers see my work. I submitted to about twenty-five literary magazines, more than I had expected to, which was an absolute thrill. There's a raw but important vulnerability in letting others be exposed to what you create, both the bad and the good, both the chaos and the calm. And that's also coupled with the fear of letting go, like tying a yellow ribbon to the end of a helium balloon or putting a message in a bottle that won't return to you after you send it out to the vast, immeasurable sea. And that's the point. Whether I received a rejection or an acceptance from these literary magazines, nothing changed the fact that I believed in the poem. And it got easier for me—to be honest, by the end of it, I didn't care what happened. Receiving a rejection letter from a literary magazine is like falling off your bicycle for the very first time, I suppose, since I thought it was time for an extended metaphor. You might get a little bruised, a little broken—but nothing changes the fact that you were riding your bicycle before then and, so long as you can trust the pathway ahead, you'll continue to ride after that. You don't need your training wheels anymore, just some good brakes and the occasional maintenance. And perhaps, one day, you'll even write a poem about your journey after that, filled with varying peaks and valleys.
Or you could take the other route. That is to say, I have never been rejected by a literary magazine. That’s not denial; it’s just realizing the truth. Because I have never been rejected; only my art has. Anybody has every reason in the world to despise my art and that is by no means an implication that they despise me as a person, even though the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Not every painting is Louvre material or even refrigerator-bound. But every single work is an artistic, learning experience. Carry the map if you wish but expect the detours.

And, nevertheless, I am not my art—in fact, I try to depersonalize my art as much as possible, which doesn’t mean that I remove all imaginative influences out of my poetry or that what I write hasn’t had some basis in my own experiences. A line in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* states, “An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them.” It’s a little extreme—but it’s an important lesson. Depersonalizing my art actually allows me to be more creative because I can distance myself from this force inside of me that calls itself a writer. That may make it sound like I’m up on my high horse, but—in all honesty—I can’t even reach the saddle and don’t really need to either. After all, if I thought I were a great writer, then there’d really be no point to write any more. I’d already have my reward. I don’t write so that I can be praised. I write so that I can write.

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In a rare television interview with Oprah Winfrey, author Cormac McCarthy said the following with regard to the writing: “You know, you always have this image of the perfect thing which you can never achieve, but which you never stop trying to achieve...this interior image that is something that’s absolutely perfect, and that’s your signpost and your guide. You’ll never get there, but without it, you’ll never get anywhere.”

That’s how I feel about this thesis—and even writing in general, as I probably already voiced. I first started writing poetry in 2006, only four years ago, and looked back on some of those pieces with absolute disdain as I was putting this thesis together. I had written several poems (if you can call them that) my first couple of years here at the university, but very few of them made their way into this manuscript. Naturally, we shed our skin over time and only the elements truest to our self remain. I abandoned some styles, toned down rhetoric, explored other territories, and enjoyed the bumps and bruises of the craft a little bit more. That’s how it usually goes.

And it’s quite possible that in 2015 or so, I might look back on some of these pieces and mutter, “Wow—what was I thinking?” And I don’t yet know if that question will have an answer then—but maybe it’s not always supposed to. Maybe the question is the answer. Maybe the answer doesn’t matter so much as the thrill of seeking it. And that’s fine with me. After all, these are just photographs from the side of the road, long after we leave the masquerade and consider the memories. Lights have flickered, unicorns have sent in their taxes, and Cinderella understands that her glass slipper was much too fragile to begin with. Long past midnight, it’s probably better that way.

Mike Graczyk

April 30, 2010
Works Cited and Inspirations

Works Cited in the Artistic Statement:


Inspiration:

I’ve always been drawn to the peculiar, enigmatic, and surreal. In retrospect, I heard a lot of Aesop in elementary school while growing up and, while I don’t consider myself a true fabulist, I appreciate how unique the fable can be (though I try to be more subtle if I ever want to express or delineate a moral). I’ve also been influenced by the quest narrative found in Homer’s Odyssey and the insightful verses and life lessons found in the Bible. I remember first reading “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as a junior in high school and having absolutely no idea what was going on. Since then, though, it’s been one of my favorite poems and I’ve been drawn to both the crisp yet peculiar uniqueness of its imagery and the wide range of allusions, from the Bible to Shakespeare. I also recently discovered Bob Dylan’s music about a year ago and treasure his works not just for the musical output but for his delightfully poetic and profound lyrics.

Specifically, “that new car smell is like a” was inspired by E.E. Cummings and “Symbols” was inspired by Billy Collins. While working on this thesis, Peter Davis gave me Russell Edson’s The Tormented Mirror to read, a collection of rapid-fire prose poem pieces, all of them relatively short. One of my bad habits can be overwriting so I attempted to emulate his style some with “Crossing Delaware Avenue,” “Leftover Pizza,” and “The Lucky Ones.” The first line of “Confused Pastures” is taken from a Jennifer Knox poem (whose title is that line) and “She Shall Inherit the Earth,” one of the older pieces in this set, is based on the 1650 painting Meekness by French painter Eustache Le Sueur.
Publications

As of the completion of this thesis, poems in this manuscript (which may have been published in a different form) that have previously or will soon appear in magazines include “Cupcakes and Casanovas” (*The Broken Plate*), “Eve’s Fruit Salad,” “Razor the Awkward Yet Relatively Enjoyable Pony” (*Writers’ Bloc*), “The Festival of Wallflowers” (*Mad Swirl*), and “Thinking of Chamomile” (*Leaf Garden*).
Tonight’s Dedication

This thesis is dedicated, quite simply, to everyone listed on the acknowledgments page, to everyone who’s taught me how to love. I’m not an island and only occasionally a peninsula. And even when I play the ostrich with my head stubbornly buried in the sand, I know that I could never go it alone. I thank them for reminding me the skyline still exists. I thank them for everything.
Photograph of the Author in an Introspective Pose