

Fiction, Essays, Reveries

THE APPLE & THE TREE

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Written between 2012-2016-, and under the influence.

Foreward

My father was a writer, a photographer, a rebel, and on occasion—, quite the drinker.

While I did follow in his footsteps to a point, it was the negative instead of the positive qualities which I embodied most.

For a decade's worth of wasting away underneath the flames of fire-water, I didn't write as much as I'd hoped to. I don't think drinkers ever do. We may set out with a fresh sheet of paper and pen at the beginning of the night, only waking up several hours later to find the page still blank and our thoughts still trapped inside our hazy minds.

At some point within the self-induced delirium, the madness must come to a sudden and abrupt end. Finally on May 4th, 2016-, I decided I'd had enough. Enough of the headaches, the racing heart-rates, and the many mistakes which come with living such a recklessly rebellious lifestyle.

In the six years since, I've learned more about overall life and my role in it than the previous decade-plus. It was only after sobering up that I finally began realizing how beautifully intricate everything is. Every thought, action, and human connection we make with one another leads to something greater, something grander.

This world is too wonderful to live our lives in a constant state of perpetual drowning. Things make more sense

sober, I feel more of myself, and I see in such a wider scope through clear, unaltered eyes.

With all of that said, there is something about crossing consciousness-wires that keep a person coming back into the fog. Whether it be the different types of thoughts one thinks, the new angles on old emotions one experiences, or the overall feeling of flying one succumbs to—, there is a lot of potential creativity waiting to be discovered through foreign chemicals.

The question then becomes; “is it worth it?” From my personal experience, no. Anything I had to say under the influence I only said better after becoming sober. Either way, there are some thoughts, scenes, and rationales that deserve a once-through by the curious reader. So here is my anthology of dreamy and druggy realities.

Maybe the writer in my father would be proud. Maybe he wouldn't. However, I truly think that above all, my father was a dreamer. So they say; “the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.” And in my case, it certainly didn't.

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Fiction

UNFORGIVING FATALISM

“How will you leave your mark on society and what will it say?” Matthew heard the cynical undertones his voice naturally attached to such a question. The professor stood with confidence at the front of class, waiting for reasons to believe, for valid in-depth dialogue. Nothing.

“Okay, let’s switch gears and assume that we’re not in control, and that free will is an illusion—how does morality fit within our day-to-day choices?” He scanned his class for expressive faces, raised arms, or silent contemplation. A few seemed lost in honest thought, the rest didn’t. Finally, fearlessness;

“Why worry about consequences and ‘leaving your mark’ if nobody’s truly free though?” asked the class-clown-turned-savant only when the conversation fit his interests.

“Yeah, I can’t be held accountable when I’m not even in control of my own body!” said the girl with a four-month belly. The professor stared at the clock on his desk with a nodding head.

“Good point!—One that we’ll resume Monday. Be safe this weekend.” Just like that, he signaled their release. The symphony of ruffling papers and stuffing books filled the room. One by one the students emptied into the University’s main hallway outside Professor Matthew Ellis’s Humanities undergrad class.

The middle-aged man sat quietly behind his tidy desk. His chiseled face looked down at a flattened-calendar taking up most of its space, his eyes searching for something, and like always, finding nothing. The month was blank, next month's as well. He wanted to loosen his tie, to unbutton the top of his shirt, but never did until the last of his class had left. It'd taken him fifteen years to remove his blazer in front of students and faculty, another five to roll up his sleeves. To unbutton was going too far and as petty as he knew it was, it gave him something to look forward to when he'd exit the school completely—a sign of freedom.

His last few students were walking out when a high-pitched voice called out from mid-room.

"Professor Ellis, are you staying behind for a second, or—," she trailed off intentionally hoping he'd finish her question himself.

"I've got a bit," he replied, still looking down while gathering his files and folders for the walk home. Finally pausing, he looked up and saw whose invitation he'd just extended. She was the class perfectionist, the straight-A-student who still managed to maintain the "popular-status" at school, perfecting the balance between academic and personal-responsibilities. It was the way she looked at him during class that signaled trouble. She was his 'secret' admirer—smiling at every line, laughing at every joke, unbroken eye-contact, an unquenchable thirst for time alone.

He'd never faced this kind of energy before and didn't have the right amount of guts to put the girl in her place—as lovely as she had been—it ultimately made him extremely uncomfortable. She approached his desk with perfect posture.

"Hi professor, I'm leaving today—going to Miami," she said, eyes glued to the ground.

"I know. You'll be excused from Monday's paper, just make sure you hand it in by the end of next week." He zipped his bag shut.

"Right—well, I wanted to catch you after class because, well—I wanted to give you something," she said with difficulty. His eyebrows raised. "Last week your favorite pen broke after class. I know because you left with red fingertips that weren't red during our lecture. I know how much you loved using that thing and—" she reached into her dark denim pocket with a smirk, producing an aluminum-covered precision pen. Matthew looked at his last-minute gift with honest surprise.

"Wow, you really didn't have to do that," he said in vain.

"I know but I felt so bad for you."

"That's very sweet Alexis, but your paper's still due next week." They exchanged quick smiles. She gently took the new pen out of his hand, pulled off the top and began doodling on his desk's calendar with confidence.

"Oh, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised with me," she said. He'd be pleased with her work all right, but it'd

come as no surprise—he knew this girl juggled a different extracurricular activity every day of the week.

“We’ll see,” he said. Her doodling made its way into the second week of April; bubbly hearts and crude squiggles outlined the calendar. He realized the silence only after it had already established itself with curious tension.

“Listen Alexis—”

“Lexi come on!” a girl burst into the room with excitement. “We’re gonna be late!” she said, motioning her friend to hurry. “Hey Professor Ellis.” Matthew snapped at attention.

“Jacqueline,” he said nodding his head in acknowledgement. Alexis gathered her books and nestled them safely between arm and hip.

“Have a great weekend professor,” she said walking out.

“What took you so long?” Matthew heard Jacqueline asking in the hallway, before the two girls’ voices became indistinguishable from the mesh of audible discord.

The department flourished with beautiful, intelligent teachers—ready and willing. They flirted with him, they teased him, they played the part perfectly. The permanent ring on his finger meant their advances were ultimately failed. Some took notice of this, most didn’t care to. They didn’t get his relationship with his wife. He understood their misunderstanding, considering the simple creatures they were. Each walk past the “Professors’ Table” reminded him why he kept the marriage together;

They'd met when both were hired for a local newspaper within the same week—she as essayist, he as fact-checker. Fate's been begging Matthew's acceptance since adolescence, so it follows that they'd been placed on the same story. She couldn't stand his sarcasm, at the same time—her wit's what did it—he instantly fell for the fire-breather. The sharp-tongued redhead reeled his heart onto ground with arrogance.

Retrospectively, it all seemed so scripted—the art school-scholarship he'd turned down in favor of a philosophy degree, the scar Charlie's bullet left on her father's ear, just missing its target—innumerable factors which would've altered their meeting, their course, their births. No question the story was writing itself out in real-time, but he couldn't ignore the distant, unceasing sense calling attention to itself from the muddled depths of his mind—that it had always been and always will be designed.

Her writing was humble. Its message came across to the barely literate as it did the scholars. Being a borderline-feminist, her printed voice was a widespread, equal-opportunity recruiter—grabbing any bystander within earshot by the collar, demanding attention, respect and by article's end, a treaty of alliance. Her gift was the moment a reader began thinking her thoughts as his own. The phrase was always different, depending on the audience. They'd gravitate toward their own individual tone and the fuse was lit. That phrase; so full of passion, so artful they'd miss its tattered edges completely. They'd pull its ideology out from its boundaries of black ink, constraining it strictly to

print, and wear it proudly as badges of courage and defiance.

She'd become the mouthpiece for whispering cowards too afraid to stand up and shout. The tyranny of local police, commercialized outsourcing of crops, the Senator's sealed records and expunged harassment charges, the congregation's collective blind-eye in favor of a false prophet's inflated bank statements; she'd protested all with unrelenting fire.

She was an unstoppable hail of truth and morality. A fervency no amount of desperately sticking duck-tape could silence. Now; embers holding on for meaning through concern over his blazer-shortage. It burned a painful hole inside Matthew's gut.

"Matty," she'd deliberately say, "their having a sale on sports jackets this weekend at that place you love so much. You promised me you'd try on a couple of new ones."

At that place I love so much? he thought. They'd walked past a small store in the mall once that sold cheap blazers. He hated everything he saw, felt cramped by the lack of space and agreed to buy two sports coats Rachel picked out just to leave quicker. She didn't remember the store's name but somehow stayed on top of its sales. Yes, it was something she'd mention for him, because she was so selfless that she made it a point to remind him of his dwindling wardrobe. Ugh. A hollowness in the pit of his stomach turned violent.

She alone saw him as the 80-year old wrinkled man with a cane living inside an early 50s body with a BMI of 23 and knew how much he despised 'Matty' and the aura it carried with it.

She crumbled with her career—let the failure spread into her daily life. She gave up for many years, and lately it's been the once-a-week salon visit and new heels every few days. A sudden overwhelming interest for the mundane that ultimately felt distant; lack of wardrobe, refiling of taxes, etc.

The undeniable stench of fine-tuned fabrication lingered in the air every time she spoke. He worried but didn't allow for obsessive examination, searching for and scrutinizing each misstep she made. She was human. Humans miscalculate order of errands, hours of grocery stores, and why it took an hour to make a ten-minute drive.

He accepted the probable as inevitable, but chose to focus in on the doubtful instead—that his wife remained faithful to him, that a union spanning a quarter-century still meant on day 8,012 what it had on the first. It sounded far-fetched, flimsy, and pathetic that a man in his "position" should cosign such mistreatment. When the sun would set however, it served as the lubricant—greasing the rust-enveloped gears of his marriage—providing transitional ease from Home to Office to Classroom until the sludge of everyday life could stretch no further, whipping back toward its locked position on the unbalanced treadmill of existence.

It was a 24-year marriage imploding from the chaotic thunder of the world around it, and its inability to match that loudness. Their home was collapsing from quiet weakness, unable to fight back or spark a fuse. They married, made love on their honeymoon, and moved in together. Stick to the script. His career flourished, hers didn't. They doubled their income every four to six years. New cars, clothes, and kitchen cabinets. When national philosophy-based journals published Matthew, they would fly out to new locations, taking deep breaths of new air their future lives would become accustomed to. New cars, clothes, and kitchens. Stick to the script!

They'd keep in touch with the old friends and make dinner plans with the new. He'd tell her how they changed the billboard at the I-75 onramp. She'd tell him about the new four-dollar-deal at their favorite two-dollar-carwash that included adhesive tire spray. "It makes them last longer," she'd say, not knowing the slightest bit about tires, much less care. She just wanted to have a little something to contribute over dinner which Matthew understood, even appreciated. She still tried to save them back then. After years of consistently reshooting the same scene repeatedly, day after day, he couldn't take it anymore and willingly shut off. A person with no opinions living in wait for the ugly shades of uncertainty.

She sat him down on some snowy day when her nerves were going to break and proposed having a child. He struggled to hold back a rush of tears, knowing this is exactly what they needed. That being parents was

something both of them had dreamt about—that it would reunite and recoil their shared energy. For that entire winter and most of the spring, they remained active and optimistic. They tried reading books, keeping a schedule, eating right, drinking less. A quiet, incessant doubt crept out from shadowed corners into the room every time they'd fall asleep. Both felt its presence but refused to acknowledge its threat with arrogant tenacity. The dam wouldn't hold much longer—they needed direction. The man grabbed hold of his life's reins, eager to feel in control of his own fate. An impromptu visit to a local clinic while walking home led to the first secret Matthew ever readily kept from his wife. *She won't know how to handle this.* He didn't want her to feel the same hurt and lack of individuality he felt of himself.

A year after they decided to have a baby, Matthew sat a confused Rachel down and revealed his infertility. He said everything he could say while still loving her and trying to understand the situation they'd been given to work with. Everything crumbled to a deafening toleration after that. An acceptance of life, of situation and worse; of fate. He didn't want his wife to "tolerate" him—he wanted to be needed and vice versa.

His voice had been stifled down to assessing midterms and mediocre arguments via red Xs, checkmarks, and letter grades. Worse than it disappearing completely, his desire for conversation too had vanished. Interesting that their voices should swap. A tradeoff neither anticipated for, much less pre-approved.

“Hey it’s Ellis!—Professor Ellis I’ve got something for you!” A gesturing boy called out across the walkway, signaling Matthew over. Cameron sat with back against a cement bench which was taken up by a girl who laid flat on her back, her long legs stretched across the length of the bench. A wrapped bandana around her forehead kept the long-streaked locks at bay. Matthew walked towards the two with a shaking head of disapproval all the while holding a smile.

“Mr. Cameron and Ms. Timbre, what you have for me are both your papers from last week, correct?”

“Well, it’s funny—I was just sitting down to start mine the other night when I realized, you already know that I know,” Cameron smirked.

“I already know that you know what exactly?” asked Matthew.

“That I know the material, that I can handle myself on the floor in there,” Cameron said, pointing toward the building. He was arrogant but true to his word, intelligent. He could handle himself with the school’s most “celebrated” faculty, assuming they’d ever give him the time of day. He was a “troublemaker,” and a “disillusioned youth,” other professors once warned Matthew about in private before the semester began. Instructors didn’t give him a chance, so he’d always returned the treatment.

“It doesn’t matter what you think you know. I need to see that you can express yourself and convey your take on these ideas to strangers off the street.”

“Let’s do it! Right now, let’s go up to the first five people we see, they can grade me themselves,” Cameron said, full of sincere enthusiasm. When Matthew did stumble upon the rare paper he’d turn in, it’d prove to be a diamond amongst dust. He didn’t hold Cameron to lower standards like other teachers, he expected more from him. He could see the youngster taking the words to heart when his teacher would express either disappointment or pride.

Cameron loved debate, as did Matthew—not for the sake of crowning a champion, but for something to think about on the way home. He challenged the professor only when he had something valid to say—Matthew appreciated this.

The girl giggled in random spurts, sighing loudly in-between humming to herself. Near-closed eyelids freely admitted foreign chemicals had taken her body for hostage and her mind as playground equipment. A mother’s dream realized on cement benches the nationwide. Matthew figured her out by the semester’s second week. She was a poster child for the collective would-be beauty queens-turned-drug enthusiasts, detesting their individual households while simultaneously holding each other in jealous complexion.

Her knees pushed through the ripped holes toward daylight. Opposite the message their torn and tattered jeans tried to convey; they showed no scrapes, no signs of struggle. Her dazed humming instantly turned charming as Matthew stared at this social-soldier who’d went AWOL before the war even began. She wanted to believe in her

fight against conformity, but couldn't back up a single ideology her nihilism stood for.

She searched for acceptance everywhere except the bathroom mirror—through every substance, in any stranger's lap willing to hold her tired head. It was organized tragedy in three acts; starting with the wittingly unkempt hair which could've served as inspiration for poetry in another life. It traveled downstream to a cliched waist; so thin and precious the ribs above worked overtime. Tension built downward toward climax—her toes; exposed for everyone to see except herself, who'd seemed interested enough in painting them new shades of neon green or bright orange every few days but never cared to notice their bruised track-marks smearing their worth.

They must've said something when she'd lay in bathtubs filled with warm escape—poking out above the water, looking her in the eyes—appealing the master's decision to misuse them as evil entrance. Even if they did shout in protest every time her eyes met their cracked polish, she'd hear but never listen.

Matthew heard bits of talk on occasion; how "a court-order required the Greenwich Girl's arms to be checked every Monday before class in the nurse's office," or if passing a particularly pretentious group—how "she wouldn't live past 26."

Then the new semester started and he finally met this "supposed-waste." She didn't doodle, didn't check her cellphone every five minutes like the rest—she just stared

down at her empty desk. Searching for something that wasn't ever there.

He remembered the only time he'd seen her father in person; a spur of the moment meeting nearly two hours after he'd normally close his office. The heavy knock allowed no acknowledgement as the door swung open.

"Ellis?" the pompous man asked Matthew.

"That'd be me." Matthew never understood why 50-year old men still insisted on flaunting an irrational amount of chest hair. The half-buttoned shirt, of course he would. The look was missing its mandatory 14 karat-diamond necklace with matching pinky ring needed in validating the full-caricature. His Royalty sat down with crossed legs and pulled out a Blackberry.

"So about Timbre..." he continued on with his speech, delivering each line with less energy than the last, never once breaking eye-contact with the glowing screen in his hand. He went on about how Timbre's school habits don't consist of turning in each paper, showing up for every test or giving the best presentations when she does show up for class. That given her recent academic record—a 3.8 GPA—it follows that he'd do anything he can as her father to make sure this "streak of genius" continued, including but not limited to; any plane, concert or cruise tickets, any car whatsoever or just a friendly deposit into any account.

Matthew clinched his hidden fists, wanting nothing more than to throw them across his desk rather than keeping them underneath. He hated this man's attitude, his self-imposed show of support for his daughter made

Matthew sick, but managed to come up with reasonable words of advice;

“Timbre is a bright young woman Mr. Barnett, she’s got every resource available to help her maintain that GPA. I haven’t got any doubt she’ll do it.” The man finally met Matthew’s fixed gaze with curiosity, anger, and surprise.

“She will maintain it if you allow her to, Professor.”

Matthew made certain to keep his manners, mindful that this perfect opportunity for an exercise in unrestrained opinion wasn’t worth losing his job over. He wanted to lash out and accuse this pathetic man unfit to be called a parent that his daughter’s rebellion was his cause. That the realities of their household was his failure and not hers. He wanted to say a million things that would’ve ultimately made this poor girl’s life even more miserable. So when he opened his mouth, all that came out was—

“She will if she wants to. I am running late though, you understand,” Matthew looked at the digital clock on his desk that’d been silently yelling at him louder and louder with each passing minute. The oily man stood up, instead of reaching out his hand in agreement, decided that nodding was the best he could offer and left—slamming the door in his exit.

Now staring at the ruined girl before him, Matthew couldn't help but forgo the easy route of passing judgement others in his place would happily take. He wanted to pity them but felt envy instead. The craving sensation to be that young again—to be so sure of yourself and of how the world worked. How did the youth always

have inside knowledge, and why did it always dissipate with age? Timbre's eyes widened, seeming to snap right into their conversation without missing a beat;

"What about the sick?" she asked. "Why would someone who's knocking down death's door want to think about consequence? Aren't they just numbering down the days anyway?"

He looked at the girl with concerned eyes. "Is she okay?" he asked, expecting a brush-off.

"Yeah, Timbre always gets like this on opioids. Listen though—say a kid throws a brick through a Straight Camp-recruiting office's window, or spray paints 'MURDERERS' on a cigarette company's buildings," he said all within the same breadth while lighting a Marlboro. "Does it make the illegal crime less illegal because he's doing it for the good of society?" Impressed by Cameron's complete obliviousness and his nonchalant approach, Matthew gave the contrarian his philosophical fix.

"Well, let me ask you this; you had two routes available to you earlier, you chose to get high. Both of those routes had their own set of consequences, like all choices. So, just because you made a choice in the moment, does that constitute that the decision was always predetermined for you?"

"You'd be a fun trip Professor Ellis," said Timbre with slow pronunciation.

"Hey, yeah! What're you doing later?" asked an excited Cameron. "Forget whatever plans you've got, come

hang out with us. We've got some new party favors that'd blow your mind!"

"Cameron, go home. Type that paper up and shoot me an email." The teen sarcastically placed fist-under-chin, looked down in deep thought and gave his teacher a thumbs-up. Matthew was off-heading toward the subway station a few blocks north.

Amidst a stew of street traffic and intangible sounds, Matthew trekked his way through a concrete labyrinth; over steaming sewer lids and past blind beggars he couldn't refuse giving extra change to. Through the sharp and calloused—he'd eventually find his warm sanctuary. A soulmate-turned-good friend to meet him at the front door with offers of dinner and hot tea.

The display windows shot back a sad reality; no person walking past could fit into their advertised box. The blue dress was too expensive, the jeweler's watch told more about the wearer than it did the time, the clutch purse embellished the girl's sexual tastes more than it did itself.

Throughout the walk a thought lingered above Matthew's head; *What about the sick?* Timbre's words followed his psyche like heat-seeking missiles, aimed solely at his heart. He couldn't help but think of the girl, lost in a haze of unreliable logic and misunderstanding, or of Cameron's future or even Jennifer's misguided innocence. Such wasted talent.

The depressing reality that no employer would ever consider him a serious candidate without a proper degree,

the fact that these students had decades to live, to fail and learn, to shine brighter with each passing chapter and how instead, they'd trade in the long-term fulfillment for fleeting moments of temporary euphoria—it seemed counterintuitive. Maybe he just grew up with the wrong generation.

He paid the fare and was walking toward his train's waiting pad when his peripherals proved their importance. He froze and looked toward the picture he'd walked past and almost didn't-notice; an ad for a product—, for toothpaste.

He reexamined the advert; an ecstatic preteen, gorgeous blonde mother with big hazel eyes looking at her counter-model filling the 'fun-loving husband'-role whose upper-body said he was spending more time at the local gym than he did his daughter's school plays. Regardless of subjective opinion; they seemed so 'happy' and 'in love.' They were perfectly placed together, smiles and all. Behind them towered the most meticulously decorated Christmas tree a person's ever thought up. It was the camera-obsessed extra in the background of restaurant scenes whose gesticulations border on embarrassing in plastic, inanimate-form. Underneath sat more Christmas presents than all the empty display boxes in the local mall, each obviously wrapped by the hands of the Gift-God himself.

At their feet sat the center of attention; their innocent-looking daughter with a face so shocked it made Matthew wonder if she didn't use the advert's irony as direct inspiration. Outstretched arms were captured mid-

moment of her pulling off the top from one of the larger presents. A small Yorkshire puppy poked its head out from inside the box—pink bow atop her short black and brown hair.

He stood back and drank it all in; the perfect amount of accumulated snow on the window sill, the plate of half-eaten sugar cookies, the lit candles on the fireplace housing a burning pile of logs. Everything was sticking to the script and he felt a furious urge to destroy it. To help it achieve some sort of—realism. Matthew reached into his bag, feeling around for its shape, and pulled out his new shiny pen. He smiled with cruel eyes and attacked with fury. His anger shot out in globs of red. He hammered the canvas with his pen and smeared the ink with his fingers. He was Cameron throwing bricks through windows. He was a broken Timbre shouting out “Why can’t you miss me?” at an indifferent father. He became his wife raging against artificial moments of emotional attachment.

The station’s whirlwind of sounds disappeared; there were no trains, no strangers, only an artist and his work. People in near proximity took notice. Some pulled out cellphones to capture the ‘crazed man at the station, writing on walls.’ Most just gawked.

When he finally stopped and stared at his work, he couldn’t help but explode into a burst of laughter; a toothless family of rednecks with uneven horns and crude mustaches hung displayed for the world to see—a rush of emotion that comes around with less frequency the older one gets. It felt good.

When people approached the defaced artwork—needing to see for themselves what great alterations this drunkard must've made—they shook their heads in disappointment. They were looking for something clever. This was something they mastered in first grade and no longer impressed anyone. This man was obviously bored, crazy, or both.

Matthew walked off feeling a bit silly, a bit embarrassed, and completely alive. Simplicity. No affair, no chemical, just a working red pen and an elementary school-sense of humor to realign his logic.

As he walked, every miserable thought that'd haunted him, begging him for resolve within the past few years washed over with eerie clarity. He pitied the wisdom of weaker men. The insecure that prey on the lonely. The disrespected wedding rings collecting dust in dark corners of empty pockets.

Free will, fate...it didn't matter anymore, not for that moment—it was too pure and honest to be placed under a microscope for "further analysis." Matthew felt organic and realized the sheer influence his own actions had on that space in time carved out just for him. He gave into it wholly, knowing it'd soon be over. Then afterward, the next moment would be waiting.

THE PASSION FLOWER OF LUCCA

Though she'd die in a matter of hours, Gemma kept her eyes as open as she could, focused on the guardian angel at the foot of her bed. She'd never asked the angel her name, but had always been able to see her somewhere nearby. During infancy, her beautiful friend would float above her wooden crib at night. Italian thunderstorms were rougher near the sea, but even Gemma's parents thought it weird their child never cried. During adolescence, the bright-haired angel would appear at random, in corners of rooms, at the end of long hallways at school, from second-story windows when she'd go to the piazza. Always looking directly at the girl with eyes that felt warm.

After both her mother and Gino—her older brother—had died from tuberculosis during the fall of 1885, Gemma was sent to live with the Sisters of St. Zita at their boarding school across town. Not long afterward, she received her first communion.

"But she hasn't lived here long enough!" Sister Catherine would bark out, throwing up her boney arms. When Gemma noticed her angel sitting in the last pew behind the Sisters, smiling like a proud parent, the girl felt warmth again. This continued for the next thirteen years. She excelled at every topic. The Passionists wanted to make

her a nun. She'd seen her angel regularly. So when she learned of the spinal meningitis decaying her body from deep inside, she looked around anxiously for the friend only she could see—nothing.

Soon after her father too, passed away from illness, the orphan became a housekeeper for the wealthy Giannini family. She was still a month away from turning 18, hadn't seen her angel for years, was still recovering from her sickness, when the first vision happened.

It was of the Master hanging himself with the rope from the shed.

It'd been months since the Master had started looking at her with a twisted stare. Something in the way he'd watch her from across the room while she cleaned, it made her stomach hurt. In the morning, she heard the Misses toss awake in her bed, followed by a long, shrieking chorus of screams and shouts.

"He won't wake up! Girl—come in here! Help me!" Gemma heard all of it, but couldn't move a muscle. Her eyes felt as if they'd been stretched open all night. Her limbs, paralyzed. A constant vision of a dead man who now, apparently laid as lifeless as Gemma had seen him the entire night in her mind's eye. Suddenly, a figure approached the bedside. She couldn't shift her eyes to see who it was, but a familiar warmth overcame Gemma's body and instantly knew her angel had come back.

She didn't speak, like always. Still, a voice hummed gently throughout Gemma's ears.

'You are a Victim Soul, my Gemma.' The girl didn't understand. 'You will suffer for those around you, because your strength can handle their transgressions.' The angel raised her hand to Gemma's forehead, brushing her hair away slowly. 'But as long as you shall live, dear Gemma, no mortal of woman born will ever dare harm you.' A thunderous boom sounded as the Misses burst into the housekeeper's bedroom and suddenly, Gemma bolted free, sitting straight up in her bed, sweat dripping from her face and neck. The angel was gone. Only the two women and a dead body were left in the entire home.

The Misses kept Gemma around more out of loneliness, but after the visions increased in the years to come, they'd become harder to snap out of and the signs of stigmata which had started were impossible to hide. The day the Misses found droppings of unexplainable blood on her kitchen floor, she made the girl pack up and leave, wondering what type of demon had been living within her home and if maybe she'd killed her poor husband in his sleep.

After meeting Reverend Germanus Ruoppolo, Gemma finally began feeling that possible happiness wasn't out of the question for her. The Reverend took her in, fed her, clothed her, kept her spirits up. The visions seemed to fade away in frequency. No more scars on her hands and feet. She began wearing a crucifix. Finally, two nights ago, the Reverend crept into her room to check on the sleeping girl and found her levitating high above her bed, in a trance, limp arms and legs hanging beneath her torso. As he leapt

for the front door and howled all the way down his street towards the Church, waking his neighbors, Gemma's angel crouched in a corner, watching an unconscious friend from the invisible realm she was forced to stay in.

All guardian angels have borders—both, emotional and spiritual. 'Don't watch over her too often, you'll get attached to a Victim Soul.' The angel had heard those words for thousands of years, but never until Gemma, had she worried to keep her distance. Now in this specific room, she understood the depth of how painful losing this child would be.

As the sickness took over Gemma's body once more, she finally dropped back down onto the bed below, a heavy thud and asleep she'd stay, for hours on end, only waking up periodically to cough up mucus or blink away tears. The angel knew it wouldn't be long. She walked up to her friend of 25 years and cupped the girl's rough hands inside her own, Heavenly palm.

The two met eye-contact like they used to before Gemma could even stand. She wanted so badly to ask the angel's name, for once at least, but couldn't find the strength.

'I've been given many names by people over the years. The only name I care about is the one you'll remember me by after you leave here.' No point in explaining that angels like her can never enter where the girl's heading soon. Their only reward is eternal rest after their last soul is delivered, as hers was preparing to be.

Gemma's lips were barely able to mouth two final words before her body finally expired. The angel floated above the bed, out and beyond the room and into the Tuscan winds that carried her across the lands and seas and skies until she found her own place of eternal rest. A small field of forestry nestled deep within empty woods, overgrown with lush greenery, far away from sickness and evils and regret. She came upon a small plate of marble that'd been set as a base for some sculpture long ago which was either forgotten about or given up on entirely. 'Perfect,' the angel spoke inside her mind. 'I too, am forgotten.' She placed her head down on her tired arms and thought back to Gemma's parting words.

'You're welcome,' she said, as the Ethereal mass that once made up her body turned to Earthly concrete and stone—covering her chest, legs, arms, hair, and wings. She'd no longer be invisible now.

FLASH FICTION I

Maggie twirled the spaghetti around her fork on the plate, round and round, afraid of taking the first bite into the last meal she'd have with her husband before leaving him forever. Round and round. Over and over.

"It won't give ya any black eyes babe, try it." Alan's words disgusted the other three around the table, but none let on. He snickered to himself, proud of his wit. She'd spent nearly an hour's worth of applying makeup in the bathroom mirror before heading out that evening. It wasn't a one-time thing with him. Ten years ago she thought, maybe, maybe it is just a phase. Maybe he's just stressed from working so much. The promotions came, more money came, the beatings continued. It wasn't a one-time thing, ever. And now, he'd gotten so used to it that it'd become something to joke about at dinner with the Cascellas—their only good friends.

"Well?" Alan asked. "See how you like it." Maggie ripped a piece of bread from her loaf and tried it with her spaghetti. She chewed and nodded in approval.

Alan resumed his analysis of the stock market with Anthony Cascella. Judy smiled at her with the warmth only she could give off. Stay strong Maggie, her eyes seemed to say. Of course Judy and Anthony knew about tonight. Judy had even helped her pack everything she was going to take with her and filled the car up to the brim with brown

boxes. The two had moved quickly, in and out, three hours at most. Alan had left for the afternoon to do God-knows-what and planned to meet Maggie and the Cascellas at the Grand Lux for dinner later that night.

"We'll have dinner," Judy had repeated to her for the twentieth time earlier that day, "and then we'll go somewhere else for dessert. Maybe that cute yogurt shop Alan likes. We'll take two cars. Anthony can take Alan in his new two-seater. It'll be perfect, you'll see. They'll get there, and we'll never show up."

"How are you going to explain yourself? What about poor Anthony?" Maggie anxiously asked, pacing back and forth.

"Don't worry about Anthony, he's got no part in this. Me? I'll just say I had to run back in for my purse or something and that when I came out, you were gone. Maybe you left all of us, not just him. You know?" Judy smiled.

"I...," Maggie couldn't keep it together, her eyes soaked over. The two women hugged, Maggie squeezing tight. "Thank you," she whispered.

Now that the moment had come, her knees were shaking underneath the table. From fear, from anxiety. Mostly they shook from the excitement. She'd never been the type to overstep boundaries. Her own mother taught her that, and if there were any lessons she'd skipped, Alan had come along to eagerly reteach. She'd been the quiet girl all her life. The good girl who didn't cause trouble and didn't bring home boys with pierced ears. She fell in love

with the first man who'd called her "sweetheart." Now she was married to someone with zero tattoos on his skin and constant whiskey on his breath.

"I tell ya..., if my old man were to see the type of girl I sure chained myself to...", he'd often say, "pew..., poor guy would be rolling over in his grave. You're lucky, you know that? He would've hit ya twice as hard if you were his girl." She knew he was probably right. She knew the apple doesn't fall far from the tree with these men. They didn't just sprout out of the ground overnight though. They must've been around during her mother's days. Why hadn't she steered her daughter clear of something so ugly? It'd been a question Maggie had asked herself over and over through the years. The closest she'd ever gotten to an answer was that her mother hadn't known how. She'd married one herself. Though Maggie's father never laid a hand on his child, he made sure her mother knew who was in charge. That woman had all the courage in the world, all except the little bit she needed most. The little bit that Maggie was going to muster up tonight, in the next few minutes. She was going to do what her mother was never able to. What Alan's mother was never able to. Just a few more minutes, she thought.

"Wow...", Anthony said, patting his stomach, "I'm stuffed." The time was here, the check was paid. "Whose sweet tooth's acting up?" he baited.

"Oh yeah," Alan chimed in on cue. He gulped down the last of his drink. "You can go with Judy. Anthony's gotta show me that beautiful new machine he just bought." Yes, I

can, can't I? Maggie looked at him, knowing everyone else's eyes were on her. She stood up.

"You know..., it's so beautiful outside, with the snow falling, wouldn't you want to walk instead?" She didn't have to look at Judy nor Anthony to know their faces lit up with shock. She felt Judy's eyes though. Maggie quickly looked at her and saw the shock melt away into disappointment and anger. She had to do this..., just one last try. "Alan..., sweetheart, did you—"

"Beautiful?!" he shot back. "What's so beautiful about freezing yourself stiff in this weather?! You're getting crazier by the day, you know that?" Maggie kept a directed stare.

"Alan..., are you sure?" she asked.

"Of what, woman?!— I know you're not deaf. No, I sure ain't walking in the snow." Maggie let out a sigh of relief.

"Okay babe..., if that's what you want." She returned Judy's smile to her and began wrapping her scarf around her neck. As the four began walking down the stairs toward the front doors, Judy's hand squeezed Maggie's arm. It was warmth, strength, and love—something Maggie had almost forgotten she could feel.

FLASH FICTION II

'Please God...,' Debra prayed silently, 'not tonight. Don't let him drink tonight.' Louis and Debra McCluskey had been married for twenty-two years last month. Five of those were magical. They married young though, had a baby young too. The pressures of being the provider weighed on poor Lou's shoulders when the money was little. He was a good man, a good kindhearted man. Still was. Debra was convinced of it. The world's hard on good men. After those first five years, Louis—never being a boozier before—turned to the bottle and though he never so much as touched Debra, he lost everything else. Jobs, money, stability, respect.

Neighbors would start looking at her funny when she'd fetch the morning paper. They knew he was away, getting help. She didn't care though. When the first few times in clinics didn't go as planned, they decided to move suburbs.

"Maybe somewhere closer to the city, huh Lou? Keep you moving, keep you active?" In hindsight, she realized that'd been a big mistake. More drunks and derelicts than she could bother to count. He'd always find them, and when he was consciously trying to stay away, they'd come find him instead.

Finally the talk had spread throughout the old community—"Deb's married to a sponge, even had a kid

with it too." She didn't care who talked about her, she was tough. But her baby boy? Or poor Lou? One was as defenseless as the other as far as she was concerned. They moved again. Somewhere north. Far enough to make new friends with different circles. So when they'd finally met Mark and Jackie Pearlberg from down the street, Debra's hopes of new, fresh friendship were renewed. Tonight was the first time the four were to have dinner together, as couples do, as normal people do. Tonight was also the longest Lou'd ever gone staying sober in seventeen long years—90 days. He'd tried dozens of times before, but the Devil wasn't ever too far off. So Debra prayed, silently, to herself as the four took their seats at the table.

"Whoa..., swanky place huh Deb?" Jackie was a New Yorker like Debra. Both had grown up in Brooklyn at one time or another. After her wedding, Deb moved out to the Midwest with Lou to settle down. He used to talk her ear off back then, saying anything to hear that loud laughter of hers. Now he just seemed uninterested, unmotivated.

"Heck yeah! Lou, whaddya think? Nice or what?"

"Nice Deb, real nice."

"Yeah. Boy look at you and Mark, you sure dressed up!" The Pearlbergs were working stiffs like they were, Debra liked that. They also knew how to still make good impressions, Debra envied that.

"So Lou, how 'bout that '64, wanna come down to the shop and help me put some new wheels on her next week?" Mark liked Louis. Deb could tell that he wanted to help the guy out as much as he could, get him out of the

house, get him happy about doing things. Mark didn't know the whole story, but who needed to? Lou's eyes were pretty drained of their color.

Through her peripheral, Deb noticed the young waiter taking a nearby table's drink orders. Pretty soon he'd make his way over here. He'd introduce himself, unknowingly ask the worst question in the English language and because Lou hated going out and getting along, he'd trick himself into having "just one." Deb prayed harder. In the back of her mind, she was yelling. On the front of her face, she wore an armor made of diamond. Nobody could crack that. Nobody but poor Lou. She'd stayed up too many nights for a wife, crying, wondering where he is, when or if he's ever coming home. Now that the baby boy was off to college in Rhode Island, the nest was quiet again. She wanted, needed tonight to go well. She craved friendship. She wanted Jackie to call her every now and then, to check up on her, to go have brunch or take in a show together. 'Please God...'

If he'd trick himself into having one, then he may as well just open up and force a thousand down his throat. He'd broken promises before, and even though she wanted to stay angry at him, she was mostly just sad that he'd lost so much of his old self. The man she married wasn't Poor Lou. No, she married Louis 'The Muscle' McCluskey! Three-time State-champ in college wrestling. The man that sat next to her now was content just making it to day-90.

"90 days Deb! That's all they say it takes! Make it to 90 days and you're cured!" he'd say. He'd never made it before though. Not before tonight. God forgive her: she didn't want him to feel cured. Not tonight. Not ever. She knew it didn't exist. All that exists are his decision in the next minute or so. She won't make a scene either way, but if he'd start acting—

"Hello folks, my name is Danny. I'll be your server this evening." Deb didn't see him coming. She was too busy staring off into space. "Can I start you off with any drinks this evening?"

"You know what? I've been dying for a daiquiri all day!" Jackie said. "Yeah that sounds great! Everyone else good with one of those?" Mark followed up quickly. "Four strawberry daiquiris please!"

"Not for me." Deb's eyes widened, hearing Lou speak. "I'll do a mint daiquiri instead. Always wanted to try one of those," Lou said, not looking Deb's way, then suddenly, "oh and make mine a virgin please. Almost forgot that." A smile. A smile so wide and beautiful that it made Deb open her mouth too.

"Virgin for me as well, please." The waiter nodded an approval and went to fetch their orders.

"Mint daiquiri," Deb said, "that sounds delicious."

ONE ONE-THOUSAND

I'd been among the few stuffed animals that Mrs. Carmine had placed inside the crib when she first brought little Cynthia home. The others lining the rest of the room hadn't been as lucky and so the toddler rarely played with them in the years to follow.

Her bright blond curls stood out in family portraits when set against her adoptive parents' straight dark hair. They adored the child. She was showered with attention. Always given new toys. It didn't matter, I remained her favorite. So on the day the screams started, little Cynthia came running for me first.

The Carmines had a television in their living room, but if I wasn't placed or dropped on the floor in its line of view, I'd be stuck having to piece things together just by listening. What I heard was horrifying. Mass violence overseas. Some type of invasion. Enormous power outages leaving entire countries in the dark. I'd hear Mr. Carmine talking about a potential war and how they'd have to start coming up with an escape plan would it ever reach Stateside. I'd hear Mrs. Carmine sit up crying for nights in a row. Cynthia held me tighter than ever before. After she'd fall asleep, I'd stare at the other stuffed animals in the room with me, all of us with the same blank expressions we'd always worn. I always wondered if they too, could think like me. If they were stuck inside their own bodies like I was,

unable to move or speak, just observe and process. I assumed they could. But of course, I'd never know, just like they'd never know if they ever wondered the same thing about me.

"Sam!" I heard Mrs. Carmine crying out to her husband from another room. "Get in here now!" She sounded petrified and began sobbing loudly. Cynthia stopped her coloring, scooped me up by one of my floppy ears and ran out of her room towards her mother. From the poor girl's arms, I watched the television but struggled to make sense of what I was seeing. A helicopter was transmitting a live feed from high above. It showed a gigantic gaping hole in the middle of a desert. I couldn't make out how large it was until I realized the small specks surrounding its outer edge that I mistook for ants or bugs turned out to be people. Millions of them. The camera zoomed in as far as it could onto a cluster of them. I could almost make out their faces when Mrs. Carmine shrieked again, covering her mouth.

"They're digging!" She yelled to herself. Cynthia and I were made to go back into her room, though I couldn't help but think about what I'd just seen. Who were those people? Something about the way they were standing wasn't normal.

In the coming weeks I tried piecing together what little information I could. Mass suicides were happening globally. People were voluntarily walking into the oceans without trying to swim. All heading towards the hole that had gotten so big it now covered half of Egypt. Mrs. Carmine began sleeping next to Cynthia at night. She'd

taught her daughter to count from ten one-thousand all the way down until she'd hit zero. She told her how that was the magic number that could instantly slow her racing heartbeat if she ever got scared. But how she could only use its magic once in her life. How the fewer numbers she'd need to count, the braver she was. Cynthia never needed to get past six.

One afternoon I heard shouting. But it sounded different than ever before. I quickly realized it wasn't coming from anywhere inside the house. Just then, I heard the front door open and slam shut.

"Carol--get Cynthia now! It's here! It's come here!" I heard Mr. Carmine running through the house, gathering things.

"What?!" Mrs. Carmine's voice from their bedroom.

"Now Carol! Go!"

"Tell me what's happening!"

"No time, I'll explain in the car! Get Cynthia!"

The sound of the bedroom door bursting open woke the sleeping girl. Her mother grabbed her hand.

"Come on baby, we're leaving." I watched the two hurry out of the room, down the hall and around the corner out of sight.

"Wait!" I finally heard. The sound of little footsteps ran back towards me and a minute later, I was in the girl's arms as the three of them headed for the front door, bags of food in hand.

"Straight to the car." Mr. Carmine said. Then, sunlight.

Since first arriving to the Carmines', I'd been taken outdoors twice. Once for a trip to the park and once to play with Cynthia in the backyard. For the past year and a half however, we lived with the world turning into utter chaos. Now, I finally saw for myself the reality of it all.

The first thing I noticed were the screams coming from half the houses on the block. A few cars had broken windows. Then, a man running, another chasing him while flailing his limbs violently, saying something over and over in a gurgled voice.

Mr. Carmine jumped in the car. Mrs. Carmine opened the backseat for me and the girl, then slammed it shut and hurried into the passenger seat.

I tried to see where the two men ran to but couldn't find them. When the car backed away from the driveway they reentered my line of sight.

"Mommy!" Cynthia howled. The gurgling man had caught up to his victim, pinned him to the ground and was now forcing himself atop his head to get to his ear. He began chanting the same phrase over and over again. A language I'd never heard. In a matter of seconds the man trying to fight himself free stopped moving. He stiffened out. Then, his limbs cracked into a position they weren't made to take. He began to utter something. His voice had changed into the same demonic growl as his attacker's. He jumped up and the two began running again. But this time, together, and in complete syncopation. "Drive, Sam!" Cynthia's mother yelled.

"What's happening?--" Mr. Carmine muttered to himself. As the car pulled away from the house, I looked out passed the back window. Trees whirled by. Homes on fire, cars overturned, we were nearing downtown. More packs of those gurgling people, all chanting the same thing, all with cracking limbs running in a form no human body has ever taken before. No blood stains, no wounds, just the same expression on their faces as I had seen on those people surrounding the huge hole in the Earth. It looked, evil. Muscles I'd never seen a face use held their features in place. Unsymmetrical eyes. Lips that snarled. Crooked noses.

"They're saying whatever it is reached Manhattan last night. By this morning it was here in Florida and an hour ago just outside Sarasota." Mr. Carmine relayed the news to his shocked wife, too paralyzed to cry. "They turn into these things by some signal the brain picks up when it's close enough to hear it. Then they go after others, turning more until they have enough and start heading East."

"Why East?" Mrs. Carmine asked.

"They're headed in that hole's direction. Whatever's buried there, they're digging for it constantly, day and night, even after some have their arms fall off, they continue to dig. It's..., this is it. This is how the world ends." The car continued to race through the city streets.

"Don't talk like that, I'm sure they've started dropping bombs on that pit by now."

"It doesn't work! New ones find their way to it! They just--"

Mr. Carmine had been in the middle of catching his breath when an SUV barreled into the driver's side. We slid to a complete stop with broken glass covering the inside of the car. I couldn't see the aftermath but by Mrs. Carmine's hysteria, I assumed the worst.

"No! No, no, Sam, my God!" Cynthia had never been quick to cry. But now I started feeling her chest rise and lower quicker and quicker. "Baby get out of the car!"

Mrs. Carmine flew out and grabbed her daughter out and into the street. Cynthia held me tighter. I could see the driver from the SUV's body had smashed through its windshield. "Oh my God, oh my God. Where? Where?" The girl's mother was frantically looking for a place to run towards. Screams came from all around us. The storefronts were all broken into and looted. Gunfire from both near and far. "There!" She grabbed her daughter's hand and the two of them ran inside a neighborhood deli. The chairs that were once stacked up against the door had been pushed to the side. Mrs. Carmine looked around in a panic. Then a voice.

"Over here! Hurry!" From behind the counter, a man stood waving his arm. We ran towards him as he pointed to the walk-in freezer. "My wife and son are in there, come on!"

The two pounded on its outside and a few seconds later the thick door swung open. From back out in the dining area, a loud crash rung out then windows being broken, then the faint sounds of deep gurgled chanting filled the room.

"They're in! Hurry, get to the back of the freezer!" The man yelled. His wife, young son, Mrs. Carmine and Cynthia huddled together in the dim corner as the man pulled the freezer door shut and stacked as many crates as he could find in front of it. He kept the light on and I watched him kneel down in prayer. Cynthia squeezed me tight and I noticed the young boy with us looking at her in worry, he too held a stuffed bunny in his arms. I made eye contact with it and it with me. I didn't know what the young boy had named his furry friend or if they'd made as many memories as little Cynthia and I had over the years. I didn't know how close the two had become or if the young boy had ever been able to read the bunny's blank face as well as Cynthia had been able to read mine. I didn't even know if the bunny could feel emotion or think thoughts like I could, but still, we stared at each other in silence. Outside, gurgled chanting neared closer to the freezer.

"Ten one-thousand...," whispered a shaking Cynthia. "Nine one-thousand...eight one-thousand." Pounding on the door began. The man prayed faster, louder, with more aggression. The chanting, though in unison, sounded like it came from a dozen or more voices. "Five one-thousand...four one-thousand." The man began crying, the chanting grew louder, the pounding turned into violent scratching. Panels began getting pulled off in all directions. The bunny held his blank expression, still looking at me, and by the time Cynthia reached one one-thousand and hadn't yet stopped, I wondered if it knew how truly scared it should be.

Essays

OTHER MEN'S IDEAS

Not only is it a gorgeous day outside, but it's also my mother's birthday. While driving around enjoying the sun, she tells me a story she's recently heard from Romania.

Apparently a new law was passed not too long ago, where it was made illegal to bring any gifts to a doctor or person performing a service. That's all fine. But if you grew up under Communism during the 60s, 70s, and 80s until their revolution, that custom was basically written in stone. A doctor or dentist wouldn't even see you if you hadn't brought wine, meat, eggs, or whatever you could afford as a way of showing your gratitude. It was second nature for most.

This brings us to a few weeks ago, when an elderly woman of something over seventy years old was arrested and sentenced to six months in prison for showing up to her doctor's office with a bottle of champagne and a small jar of honey. Something she'd probably done her entire life and something she thought a civilized person would still do—, as a sign of her gratitude.

Out of the immense embarrassment she felt for being sentenced to jail, (which is a devastatingly depressing place in Romania), the poor elderly woman took her own life.

Rather than spend six months in a concrete cell she evaded for seventy-plus years, her old bones now rest underneath the dirt.

It turned my stomach and made me think of how the countless examples just like this one, fill my veins with blind hatred for grown men, probably in their 30s and 40s who still refuse to reason for themselves and accept the law of the land like sacred holy text.

From the "good Germans" of the Third Reich, to Nebuchadnezzar's Romans laying siege, to the LA cops who used the '92 race riots as a backdrop for getting out deep-seeded anger and rage.

All "men." All men who stand on the shoulders of other men's fallible ideas and feel a sense of pride when they go home to their wives at night and pound away with their hips and grunt like gluttonous pigs.

Were it not for them, my own mother wouldn't have lost four years with the one person she loved unconditionally throughout her life—, her father. When at the age of ten, she had to say goodbye to him because under Communism, if a worker in a hardware store steals even \$20 and the drawer is short, the manager is held guilty. And being the manager, my grandfather was sentenced to four years in jail.

A precious memory my mother has, is the day she was able to visit him, and was wearing her new pair of deep green pants she'd just gotten. Proud to show them to him and how lovely she looked, she eventually had to turn away and hide the tears streaking down her cheeks when she

finally saw him behind bars, like a caged animal, for something another person had done. But Communism and Totalitarianism doesn't account for a child's heartache. It isn't important to its ideology.

All of this because of men following orders. Simple minds who know nothing of common sense and only care about filling their guts with whiskey and bread.

My mother's memory isn't unique. There are millions more like it spread throughout the world's timeline. But today, on her birthday, I'm just glad that while our reality isn't perfect, at least it's far removed from the horrors of Gaza or the Ukraine or anywhere else where we're not smiling and laughing, knowing this memory will be a good one.

For all the tears and bloodshed that's been spilled at the hands of other men's ideas, the only ones that my heart convulses in anguish for anymore are hers.

Hopefully next year she'll have a different story to tell me.

IT'S NOT ALL EQUAL

"It's all equal today, what're they complaining about?!"

"They" could stand in place for a lot of things; black, gay, Shia, Catholic, etc.

In a conversation taking place in Southern Mississippi, it probably stands for being black. If it's being said by an extreme conservative, it probably stands for being gay. Or Shia Muslims if we're back in pre-2003 Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Or Catholics during the Protestant Reformation of 1517 in Germany.

One of the most poisonous lines of thinking is – "it's all equal today."

It's not all equal. People with wider scopes on the big picture know this. A good example are the Germans who blindly chose to follow Hitler's mission and thought, "What are the Jews complaining about? They can still buy bread and milk like the rest of us." Until they couldn't.

We don't need to isolate any of the many different names saturating the headlines these past few years. All it takes is one good look around through realistic lenses to see that the division is still here and wide. It exists between Hispanics and African-Americans, North Koreans and South Koreans, etc.

The perpetuation of this "everything is equal"-myth comes from those who want their cake and to be able to eat it too.

Example: an elderly white woman living in the confines of a gentrified community sees the on-going protests happening in Missouri and doesn't understand what all the commotion is about. "Aren't they all given the same rights that I am? Can't they go to the same schools and apply for the same jobs that my own children have?"

She is oversimplifying an incredibly complex situation. Of course no law exists which restricts a person from applying for any job or student loan available to all. To be in such a position to do so however, is an entirely different story. Somewhere deep within her subconscious, she thanks God Almighty that her children were born white and that they have had the advantages that she knows their darker-skinned friends may not have had, though does all she can to ignore this realization.

Why? If she took the few steps back and looked at the big picture without those rose-tinted glasses, she'd not only come face-to-face with reality, but she could also arm herself with information and knowledge and become a fighting ally in the war against discrimination. She could do something to instill in her children that we're all human beings and that we all deserve access to the promised land. But of course, when the dusk sets on the recesses of her mind and she shuts her eyes to fall asleep, it's much easier to take the ignorant path out of bearing any responsibility.

This example can be applied to the father of a gay child who refuses to understand why those people hold parades and chant and shout for fairness. Don't they have two arms

and two legs just like the rest of us? Nobody gives him extra acknowledgement for the things he does behind closed doors with his wife at night, why should they be given any extra help? But his anger and confusion and misunderstanding prevents him from stepping inside the shoes of his own son who is just as angry, confused and misunderstood. Ironic, really.

We're all so divided from each other, especially when we see difference. But that's the reality. The crux of it all is that most people have good intentions, but not everyone acts like a decent human being. We're allowed to get annoyed and a little frustrated at the guy cutting in line up ahead, but before he's of a different skin color or religion or sexual orientation, he's a jerk. A person who doesn't think about others. When we can leave it at that, then we're free to assess the case based on human-to-human interaction, as opposed to pure discrimination.

That exists too of course, because it's not all equal. It may never be. But the more people who can open their eyes to this, the more we can begin allowing ourselves to get annoyed at each other based on our own actions and not just because of the way we look.

THE GREATEST CONVERSATION

There is a conversation taking place throughout the corridors of time. A meditative body of work that can only be built upon by listening with acute hearing. Great minds are speaking, asking one another what it all means. I have a dream where after I pass away off this realm, my spirit floats high above the stratosphere and into a cosmic warmth where strangely, I feel so at home.

Once there, I am surrounded by other energies, other spirits, other feelings of warmth, and even though they don't appear to me in flesh and bone, I can sense who they are.

They are my idols. They are the great speakers that have kept this conversation going since the first dawn. They are the minds I envied in my youth, and now that they're gathered here, I praise them again and hope they know just how deep I listened, how much I absorbed, how heard they were, and always will be.

Averroes--dear brother of secular thought, dear rebel who was touched by the Heavens. You, who brought Aristotelianism back and let it flourish with beauty. You, who together with Avicenna brought about the Golden Age. You kept going against the grain, following your heart. I wanted to be just like you growing up. You are heard.

Descartes--Godfather of modern philosophy, we all kneel at your feet and look into your tired eyes with

respect. I'd dream of you, sitting at your cold desk, writing away, even as the frigid air took hold of your frail body. Still, you thought onward. No mind has inked a new chapter since. In all of philosophy, there are only two eras. Before and after you. You are heard.

Saint Augustine--no light in the spiritual sky is brighter than the one which would shine down upon you when you were deep in thought, putting feather to ink. You understood Original Sin like no man ever before. The way you spoke about the body & soul and equating it to marriage made my eyes shimmer: "Caro tua, coniunx tua." (Your body is your wife.) You are heard.

Spinoza--the great 17th Century rationalist. Author of the last indisputable Latin masterpiece, I used to think it arrogant to go against Descartes, then I read and finally understood your elegance. You died too young, at just 44. They now call you "The 'Prince' of Philosophers." You are heard.

Schopenhauer--who was convinced that the truth had been discovered long ago by the Sages of India. You thought us all continually dissatisfied, that we were driven by Will and Will alone. I always thought of you as my disenfranchised, angry Uncle who'd laugh maybe twice a year. But it'd be a magnificent laugh just the same and whoever was lucky enough to hear it would remember it forever. You are heard.

And of course, in this dream, I am finally able to see Socrates and Aristotle speak to each other. They have a great back and forth. Socrates asks questions. Aristotle

answers above and beyond with great detail. But it's Plato that I focus in on. He just watches from the middle, easing back in his chair. A proud mentor, listening to his pupil defending his theories against his own teacher from so long ago. It's magic. And everyone in the room knows it. This is where it started. This is where it all starts again. We are all heard because we listened to them speak first.

It's so glorious that I want to explode with questions and laughter and friendship. But then, I wake up and re-open my eyes and again, I'm inside my bedroom, still alive, still alone. The self-pity doesn't last long though, because more often than not, I look at my bookcase and choose another favorite and re-hear one of my idols speak again. It sounds beautiful. Maybe someday after I've lived a bit more, I'll begin preparing my own voice to speak as well. Hopefully I'll have something to contribute. Hopefully somebody will listen and fall in love like I have, so many times over. Either way, the conversation continues. Its ability to shape itself with the times is rivaled only by how well it picks its speakers, its thinkers, its minds. It's an eternal conversation and the most important one mankind will ever have. How amazing that we get to hear it.

HOW TO TURN PEOPLE AWAY

Maybe it was the lack of having a strong father figure growing up that I immersed myself in books written by both opened-minded men and women and so, I've always respected various viewpoints and objective thinking.

That doesn't mean I haven't been a complete idiot at one time or another. I lacked discipline growing up, so when I woke up one day and realized the world wasn't the perfect reality of being raised in the liberal city of Ann Arbor, I lashed out. Pent up anger and rage for all the unfairness and hatred I witnessed all around me came out through me by keeping my mind in a constant haze where I could put off using my reasoning. I was afraid. Lazy, too.

Nowadays, I'm thankful for the mental faculties I have. They are a gift. It's a shame to drown them in a permanent fog. I feel the same towards everyone else's. Which is why when I see grown men and women still refusing to think for themselves and pushing their beliefs on one another, I can't help but feel that post-High School fire surging back through my veins.

You've met these kind of people, I'm sure.

They are the ones quick to point out the many things you're doing wrong with your life. They add up your sins with glee like young children composing their Christmas lists. They tell you to turn your life over to their own version of a higher power. But they don't open their sales pitch

with the one (and only) truth that should matter, that God is love. No. They judge you and tell you how their Almighty will continue punishing you if you don't straighten out and repent, or in other words, become like them.

It's infuriating and makes me empathize with every atheist or agnostic out there who uses their own mind and simply hasn't come upon something which has made them change their stance. And that's okay. It's not up to you to change every person you come across because based on your theology, the more converts under your own personal belt, the bigger your mansion will be in the afterlife.

Simply put: you're making your God look bad.

A strong mind will be able to reason that this is still just one man's understanding of said God. They won't throw the baby out with the bathwater. So I'm not trying to pick on entire theologies. I'm sure Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and even a religion some random guy invents where he prays and has compiled a Holy Book based on how that's helped him live his life can all provide a sense of peace, a degree of wonder for the world and fill a person's heart with passion and love for their fellow human.

The moment you impose your beliefs upon a fellow human however, and God forbid, they disagree, so you turn toward violence and hatred, then you've lost all respect. Perhaps your religion is beautiful and your Holy Scriptures have deep truths which can turn lives around, but you're a terrible mouthpiece for it and you've just

proven that you should have no say on another person's way of life.

Let's not solely use religion as a backdrop for this way of thinking either. Political systems too, are guilty of this type of oppression. The people who blindly follow suit are to blame. Let's be completely honest with ourselves--everyone grows up at some point. Everyone hits an age, whether that's 18 or 80, where they no longer need to hold onto their parents' hands, or Pastors', Priests', or governments'. They can begin asking questions.

"Why do I believe this?"

"Why do I think the way I do?"

"Where do my prejudices come from?"

An intellectual won't be afraid to ask those questions, which may or may not reveal some uncomfortable answers. The truth will always stand up to scrutiny however, so if you find that, throughout your journey of self-reflection, you come back to your initial way of thinking and can call it truth, then that's the mark of a mature mind. You've reassessed the situation, you've looked into opposing viewpoints and now, you can defend your position that much more, with added confidence and persuasion. That's the type of person who merits respect.

But when all you know is a single book, a single text, sacred or not, and expect to defend it against a person who's not only read your book, but a thousand others, I guarantee, they will win. They will pose questions which you're unfamiliar with and you'll be left standing there, unable to explain why you believe in what you believe.

They'll look at you with pity and say, "that's exactly why I don't hold your God in the light which you do." And who could blame them?

Not all atheists are world scholars though, and not all believers are fundamental loonies. I don't mean to sound bitter, but it makes me so sad to know that they are the ones being written about in the news. That those with the most hatred and least amount of understanding for a God who should be all about love and forgiveness, get the most attention. These people are ignorant. They don't know why they are what they are, they've just memorized other men's words that they've heard, without questioning them one bit.

They condemned Socrates to death because they thought he was poisoning the minds of the city's youth. But he never imposed his beliefs on anyone, he'd ask questions and let you come across the holes in your argument on your own. Isn't a mind that comes across the truth on it's own that much stronger and more valuable rather than one that's been trained to say certain things when provoked—, like a cold, calculated robot without emotions?

You'd be put to death in Mussolini's Italy if you questioned the way things were. Same in Nazi Germany. Same in Communist Romania or present day North Korea. These people are afraid of questions. They are afraid because deep down, they know something's not right. Something isn't thought all the way through. The truth can stand up to scrutiny and so, if they're this afraid of being

scrutinized, maybe their way of doing things isn't anywhere near the truth at all.

The day you let someone convince you that an entire group of people need to be extinguished based upon the pigment of their skin, the Holy Book they meditate with or political ideology they adhere to, is the day you allow yourself to be brainwashed because of laziness. Laziness and fear to ask yourself, in your bed, at night, when it's just you and your own thoughts: "does this really make sense?"

THE FINE LINE BETWEEN AWARENESS & FANATICISM

11:32am -- I checked the clock on my microwave twice before sitting down in the desk chair with my morning coffee today. It was still steaming so as I began blowing a gentle stream of cool air into the cup, I hopped on YouTube knowing I'll have some time to kill before beginning my day.

A good headline should be attention grabbing. It should pop out at you amidst a sea of other unrelated clutter. More often than not, if it doesn't stand out the first time my eyes glaze over it, I won't even know I missed it much less give it a second chance. So I begin to skim--typical Vine compilations or foreign music videos or news segments of world events fill up most of my screen. Then, something along the lines of, 'How the CIA manufactured Isis.' *Here we go*, I think to myself, almost rolling my eyes. I know I shouldn't. But we've all been through this exact minute in one way or another. Maybe you're running to the grocery store to pick up some milk or whatever and there, in the checkout lane sits The National Inquirer, shouting at you from its rack--"HEY! I KNOW EMBARRASSING THINGS ABOUT FAMOUS PEOPLE! BUY ME AND READ ME!" You know you shouldn't, that you're above it. But its got a picture of a pot-bellied Brad Pitt on an exotic beach

somewhere with another unrelated snapshot of a black-eyed Angelina staring down in some type of shameful pose. 'Could it be true?' your mind thinks. 'I NEED TO KNOW!' I don't blame you. In return though, I ask that you give me the same courtesy during my own display of attempting to show zero self-restraint and giving in to that guilty pleasure which goes against my better judgement. I click on the video as I prepare for the next few minutes.

It's what you'd expect. Decent graphics, a fancy set designed to emulate a respectable news studio and an expensive diaphragm microphone with a very animated man shouting frantically behind it--arms flailing, voice heightening to new peaks every other sentence, all while the overly-agitated speaker spews opinions dressed-up as factual reporting.

It's interesting to see these people work themselves into such a frenzy, such anxiety-riddled rants that they must feel as if they don't hit every single angle and theory, then the "sheeple," or "uninformed" audience will miss their point entirely. I don't want to pick solely on this specific man, there are hundreds of like-minded people who dedicate every free moment of their lives to producing new content for their YouTube channels, blogs, podcasts, or if they're super edgy, their still-in-circulation zines. I'm not knocking the passion. Their dedication is honorable. Even their motives, I suppose, are admirable--to merely wake up the sleeping. All fine and good. It's their processing abilities that they've shrunk down themselves that signals a loss of a perfectly valuable mind, before it had baseless

theories pelted at it from all sides--and worse, forced to accept.

Though I'm perfectly satisfied with *The Divine Comedy* as is, I'm sure if Dante were to have gone any further, the tenth circle of the *Inferno* would consist of nothing but having to convince one single conspiracy theorist of rethinking his arguments, even for a moment. It just isn't possible. Their world is just as sick and chaotic as everyone else's, they don't need to look any farther to find a news story ripe with injustice. We then, begin to differ on how we mentally process such things. A balanced brain can admit the sadness of the story at hand, they're also able to leave it alone, as is. They don't need to attach any extra narratives to make sense of what they've just heard or seen. It is what it is. Tragic. Or a miserable example of human interaction. To a conspiracy theorist, there must always be something *else* that we're not being told. We aren't given all the facts, ever. Surely, certain words have been blackened out of the official transcript before the cameras went live. Everywhere they look, there's a connection to be made. It's all run by the man behind the curtain, down to the very last detail. Nothing is under-thought or left to chance. Big Brother is very real and is watching them even in this very instance. Like the final shot of Hitchcock's 'Psycho,' Norman knows he's being observed, analyzed, so acts that much calmer. Not even a fly can break the man's concentration when it's time to put on the poker face.

Their incessant warnings have fallen on deaf ears for so long that they've adapted the same formula they profess to

be exposing: fear mongering. They say mainstream, State-run media is all one huge sham. That their stories are used to advance hidden agendas. The irony is that they are employing these same tactics themselves. It takes a willful eye to pick up on the hypocrisy, but it's there. Was it really necessary for this newscaster to keep reiterating his validation of a particular politician again and again? Say you respect the man's views once, then move on. Things like that. It's bothersome, not because they hold allegiance to their own political figures as the big boys do, but because they do it all while making such a huge fuss about how honest their aims are, how thankful the general public should be toward them because of their unwavering courage in exposing the truth.

Well, "*the truth*—", in my opinion—, is that they're just as scared and bewildered and let down in humanity as the rest of us are. They don't understand how such pure hatred could go unnoticed for so long, how so many innocent lives are lost for the furthering of poisonous ideologies. That much is completely understandable. However, they get diluted with fantasy—, that if some shadow government was behind it all, everything would make that much more sense. There would be a pattern again. Life would cease to be so chaotic and they'd be able to sleep once more. They're amazing talkers who have no interest in exercising any reason whatsoever, so a good conspiracy theorist is quite able of convincing even himself that up is down or that the sky is actually bright red. Once connections are drawn from seemingly unrelated events, they begin seeing

it goes farther than planes flying into buildings. That it's bigger than the gas chambers and extermination camps built solely with the purpose of wiping millions of innocent lives off the face of the planet. In fact, it's the most extraordinary piece of knowledge ever--and *they're* the ones who stumbled upon it. They will expose these criminals hidden-in-plain-view to the rest of the world and because the assassins must already be on their way to their homes, they'll go down as martyrs for humanity. Truth seekers who saw it all before anyone else.

Either way, listen to any one of them talk long enough and you'll quickly start getting tired of hearing about their sure-deaths. How they'll be used to cover-up the truth they were trying to expose. They say it with such certainty. From the mouth of this man himself: "When the nuke finally goes off, expect every last one of us leaders to be killed within an hour. That's all it'll take. An hour. You'll see!"

With all of that said, here's the whole point of this essay: after sipping the last of my coffee, I looked up from my computer screen; 12:47pm.

More than an hour later and I was still jumping from video to video, listening to mumble I could either poke holes the size of these men's egos in or--, while trying to give him the benefit of the doubt--, not only accept, but strengthen his arguments with much better logic on my end. Both were incredible wastes of time. It was useless trying to reason with hyperbole. So how did I lose track of time? The sheer arrogance of it all engulfed me. I was in a trance. Much like flipping through channels and stumbling

upon The Wiggles or Teletubbies or any Kardashian-centered show, you can't help but take a few extra seconds to admire the awkwardness. 'How does anyone watch this?!' you ask yourself, while watching it. Not even noticing the seconds ticking by, turning into entire minutes.

As I closed out Safari and began getting myself ready for the day, all these thoughts swirled around my head. 'This is how honest, good-natured people get sucked in,' I thought. The need some humans hold in their black hearts to see Western Civilization burn down to nothing but ash is a terrifying thought and a properly-wired and working, down-to-Earth mind tries to make sense of such a thing. The reality of there being no good motive behind these crimes against humanity is a tough pill to swallow. So the armchair geopoliticians flock to their keyboards and offer their skewed theories, promising the truth. The ones with louder personalities and intrusive characteristics eventually build a following, get noticed and maybe get a talk show, with real producers, because *someone* will still listen to a complete stranger's opinion, no matter how much lunacy they radiate.

But a true thinker considers all viewpoints, no matter the source. So, let's play Devil's Advocate and for a minute, humor these people and their delusions. Even a shadow government is still compromised of human beings. Even if they're secretly praying to evil deities and placing subliminal symbols in everyday environments, they're still two arms, two legs and a torso with a talking head. Even if they perform Satanic rituals at meetings of the world's

utmost elite, they're still buying weekly groceries, eating at their favorite diners, trying to stay in shape, arguing with their wives or husbands, accidentally backing up their toilets, walking their dogs, oversleeping, getting sick, getting old, dying. These Devil-worshippers draped in scarlet robes who wear animal skulls as masks and chant in ancient tongues are not real threats. The real danger is a poisoned ideology.

Those are what this speaker and Co. should be concerning themselves with dispelling and eradicating. Those ideas are what live on, much longer than that of the men who spend entire lives living for, spreading and eventually dying for. Hitler is no longer with us, so why are Neo-Nazis still sprouting up randomly? His theories can be called out for the sick rhetoric they are--but as long as they hold weight in sick hearts, they retain enough power to destroy lives. An internet show or podcast built around the discussion and dissection of ideas doesn't pull in the masses though. We're talking ratings people! YouTube has been writing out some hefty checks-- let's get in on that action! Instead of exposing *why* and psychologically *where* these monstrous acts of violence come from, taking the time to destroy their threads of logic from the inside out and exposing their followers as blind and ignorant, they choose to paint a picture full of hidden plots, mystique, secrets, connections that are so outlandish, they just might work. And of course, they do. Every time. They speak to an audience who doesn't like thinking for themselves.

Unfortunately though, these are the types of people they replace their innate intuitions with.

Just the fact that people lose their lives, isn't that enough of a news story? Isn't that enough to bring out the best in us? Why does there always have to be even darker, ulterior motives? No matter what the event, an even grimmer truth is waiting underneath the surface. Look long and hard at something and a person will trick himself into seeing exactly what he wants. If there are governments in bed with each other who also invite Big Pharma and The World Bank for one huge orgy and their ultimate goal is the enslavement of 99% of Earth's population so that they can feed us nothing but that weird paste fast food places pass off as beef, then I'll be a pretty bummed out slave. But until the day comes where I am taken from my home by MIB-looking agents dressed in expensive Gucci suits with sunglasses to match, why obsess over the possibility and eventual rise of this New World Order? Why spend all my waking hours and gorgeous summer days listening to Apocalypse-enthusiasts who make it a point to dream up the most brutal scenarios they can, as if its a sport? The end of the world is never close enough for these soapbox preachers. Disease! Famine! The fact that Joan Rivers once had a joke about Scientology in her set! Can't we see how simple and related it all is?!

Which brings us to the end of this long diatribe. I left my studio and stepped out into a sunshine so bright and invigorating, so powerful and lifting, that I suddenly felt more alive just standing outside my front door than I had in

the entire past week. The sounds of the city flowed in and through my head; laughter, birds singing, Church bells, an airplane high above taking people I'll never meet to new places they've never seen. It was all so real, so perfect. It reminded me what life truly is. Or at least, what it can be if looked at with the right frame of reference.

There's been so much sadness lately. A million reasons to just break down or shout at the sky or give up completely. I've realized that the continuous stream of bad news will never stop. There'll always be a tragedy waiting to happen and be reminded of in the weeks afterward. You get mentally and emotionally exhausted. You forget how important it is to be able to appreciate a nice day outdoors. The trick isn't to disconnect from the mainstream media by just jumping ship from these opinions to those. Rather, it's to disconnect entirely. No more theories. No more "strange" and "curious" camera edits. No more tracing back the paper trails and who was whose distant relative. It may all be related, sure. But that's because they're all things vying for your full attention, energy and heart. All of which are so precious and valuable and nobody but yours.

Of course it's important to be aware of the world you live in. Of the evils which are possible and those carried out everyday by tyrants. But to know is one thing. To fill your life with them to the point where they've consumed all you are is another.

If these men behind the microphones ever allow themselves to truly experience a moment's worth of honest happiness where they aren't looking for connections or

hidden plots put in motion by scary men in the depths of dark shadows, I've never seen it caught on tape. Maybe at some point they too, chuckled at something funny. Or maybe they got home one day and instead of their usual B-line for the conspiracy websites, they grabbed their wives, spun them around and while in their arms, planted a huge kiss on the women's lips for no reason other than to make them smile, just for that moment. Maybe. Who am I to assume to know these complete strangers? I just wish they and the millions of similarly confused theorists would just take up a hobby every now and then. Something that doesn't involve a computer or a webcam. Crocheting circles? Then they could harness those beautiful brains of theirs on who keeps using all the green thread or why the jar of raspberry jam that they're all supposed to share always turns up mysteriously missing. At least it'll keep them busy.

THE FEATURE PRESENTATION

As vital a moment as it was, the last-minute coughing fits and readjusting of strange bodies in creaky seats would still happen, every time, without fail. The lights would dim, our minds as well. Automated unseen machines roped in the cheap velour curtains to the sides of the now-wider screen. Though it had every last pair of eyes in the theater glued to it like cement—, mine included—, I now retrospectively wonder to myself, how of all the inanimate objects in the known universe; the immeasurable amount of toys, towels, shoes, and large plastic Starbucks straws, how among the zillions of products one’s mind can imagine, the simple concept of the screen deserves humanization more than any other.

Personifying a screen—, more specifically, a theater screen—, should be easier than it sounds, and make more sense than it does. Had it only known how many different pairs of strangers’ eyes it’d attract over its lonely lifetime, maybe it would’ve fought harder. To be fair, it did fight. Unknowingly, it fought incredibly hard for its well-deserved attention, many times. A canvas, however, has no say in what color its artist chooses to splatter across its blank slate. It must sit there with a silent smile and accept the work at hand, regardless of personal taste or opinion. Realistically, a giant roll of white vinyl offers up no critique whatsoever, so our own are then perhaps, projected onto

its face, shoving for space between mindless dialogue and senseless explosions. The screen—, assuming it could—, would probably try to hear your thoughts, most likely agree with you that, “Yes, the original was much better.” Though, it cannot and will never possess that humanistic trait, to cease communicating others’ thoughts and ideas and begin belting out its own logic, love stories, and musings. Heart-wrenchingly, the mere ability to possess a skill doesn’t promise it ever being put to good use. A million human beings are thinking the exact same thing right at this very second, and because they know this very fact, will continue to do so, simply because a million different independent minds can’t be wrong. However, how many of them are projecting organic ideas and not merely playing the quiet canvas, sitting idly by, allowing and even encouraging some artist to splotch away at their unique mental-prints. How many of them don’t realize they can be their own artist?

What you aggressively allow no other person to see, the screen takes all in. It devours the tiny details that may have never crossed your own mind. The boy’s shaking arm slowly reaching around the back of the girl’s seat but stopping just short of full-contact, palm-to-foreign-shoulder. The man who’s been fidgeting since he sat down, one moment a ring on his finger, the next, after reaching into his coat pocket, gone. The woman in the next seat over seems to be enjoying herself, as well as having a bare finger all night, not noticing the man’s inability to decide whether he should be here at all.

I'm no different. It's looked back at me many times before. It's peered into my wistful eyes, themselves peering at a seemingly safe object. Through them, it's seen my soul and read every line in my subconscious library of secrets and regrets. I imagine some of the more bold-faced phrases included such gems as: "Do I really love her?"

Its method is absolutely genius. There are lovers embracing on its widened-face, having just gone through an experience that nearly killed off any possible future of them reuniting again, and yet, here they are, on high-definition display for the world to witness. Most sets of eyes are at the very least glazed-over, mine are not only dry, but rolling as well. The screen sees this. It processes it with remorse. It doesn't want to see that much cynicism radiating from a single person, no matter how corny the scene may be. Perhaps it's not of two newly-weds at all, and instead shows a short transitional scene of a not-so-happy average person pulling into a parking stall at their not-so-spectacular job. A ritual they've performed for many years and will continue on with for many years to still come. Maybe the movie's supposed to be a comedy. So why is this unimportant scene making me unconsciously tear up? The screen knows, even if I never will.

It's witnessed my upbringing. It's been there for my maturation, regression, ups and downs. First dates, excitement for sequels, anxiety-filled precursors to a talk I'll have to eventually have tonight with a girl who'll be completely blindsided—the screen's been there through it all. At sixteen, it saw my blood-shot eyes and unusually stiff

demeanor, correctly deducing just how paranoid a few hits off of a water-bong earlier in the day can make an amateur like myself. At eighteen, it saw my date do things no person should ever feel comfortable doing at a midday-showing of Kangaroo Jack. At twenty-two, it saw my expressionless face in vividness it probably wishes it could forget. In hopeless attempts to do exactly what it was built for and distract me from whatever seemed to be weighing on my frontal lobe, it filled its face with bright colors, state-of-the-art visuals, and swirls of different worlds, realities, and lives –, to no avail. It's been beaten down by the very kids who'd come running down its halls, shouting in excitement and picking out favorite seats in front-row sections that parents hated. Those kids grew up into cynics who aren't impressed by loud, booming noises and superhero costumes like they once were. Fair enough, maybe indie dramas and underground horror festivals? It still comes up short. At least, it did with me. I wish I could look it in its face with pure honesty, at some point before the pre-show or maybe after the credits. Those handful of minutes in-between the very end of the last show and long before the next one's start-time. I wish I could stare into its dark abyss, let my eyes relax and let the center of itself envelope my thoughts so I could tell it how much it deserves.

"You *have* always been here for me!" I'd admit. "I *do* lose myself in your stories!" I don't say anything though, I don't even think about it, because the alternate realities I've become accustomed to seeing up there is exactly the reason for my disenchantment now, and why it's nearly

impossible for my being swept away at twenty-seven like I was at seventeen, at twelve and at nine. Much like walking out into the sun after hearing a sermon that sounds like its got your name written all over it, and with even a thousand other people in the congregation, the pastor's speaking directly to you, the first time walking out of a first-viewing of Jurassic Park, Inception, or Lord of the Rings feels like bathing in a warm, bright, shimmering enlightenment. I envy those who have yet to see those classics and others, as you only get one "first time." The sermon stays with you for a while, maybe only until you reach your car, but the radio comes back on at some point, doesn't it? Or a text reminds you of something you'd been intentionally putting off for a while now. One way or another, the sun too, sets and goes away and the cold night air reminds you that while fantasies are fun in temporary doses, reality will ultimately creep back in and cause the dreamers heartache. It will thread its sickness into their mental fabric, and unable to catch it in time, they'll wake up one day and realize that those are just as they'd feared—, dreams, and that the screen is just a screen, that a canvas is and can only ever be a canvas, whether it's blank or bragging about the Picasso it holds. A canvas could never change the world, likewise, the screen sits alone, late, after midnight when the house lights are all shut off and the pitch black darkness reminds it of just how lonely it truly is. It has the widest and loudest-heard voice, but cannot speak. It's looked at in awe and wonder by the youth, the magic-drained, dreamless "average guys" of tomorrow. In the darkness though, it sits

alone and wonders, if through all the eyes it'd captivated, there wasn't one pair that would take what it'd just experienced back home, and keep it sheltered, safe from the overreaching sadness of the outside world? If even when they'd age too, like the rest, wouldn't they still look back to it with the same awe and respect and pure imaginative stare that they'd once had? Maybe today was it. Maybe it was finally the day where it got through to the one mind it needed to. Not with the story it was forced to show, of course, but with the mere fact that it was showing a story at all. Maybe its dialogue was forced, or its car-chases didn't make logical sense, or its two lovers were never guaranteed a perfect future together so the ending was filled with ambiguity, but—, it's a story. It's a beautiful, perfect story, because, it's *ours*. It may be a hollow copy with little heart, but even those are based on greater, larger possibilities. Those are our lives up there, on the big, shiny, silver screen.

For the moment, I may not be so easily swayed to believe in them again. I, however, still show up, with varying degrees of consistency, but I still show up and find a seat and wait for the lights to dim and the velour curtains to pull back so that I can see my friend again. Depending on what it's got for its theater tonight, the screen may or may not get the respect it deserves. Attention, however, is a non-issue. For the next two hours, it owns us, will captivate us and try as hard as it can to make us believe in bigger, brighter futures again. Of greater, larger possibilities. It'll watch us as we watch it. It'll notice all the small nothings

we'd never look twice at. It'll speak to couples on the verge of divorce the only way it can—not through its immediate art, but instead, the collectiveness of its art. At some point in their relationship, the screen played a vital role, its only goal tonight is to merely nudge them in reminder of it. So I sit and wait, knowing the feature presentation isn't far off now. Knowing that everything that's come before it are previews. Knowing I'm not here for *those* stories, even if I have to sit through them momentarily. Knowing the story I'm here to see is something completely different, perfectly specific and something I've waited an agonizingly long time for. I look up at the screen and though I may or may have never seen this unique screen tell a story before, I know it recognizes me, like it does everyone else in the theater. The screen is all of them at once, showing thousands of different stories at the same time. Alternate realities. I inhale a deep breath and feel strangely comfortable, like I'm at home. I'm just realizing how much I envy the screen's strength, to know how powerful its canvas can be, yet to never be able to have organic, original thought displayed. I'm just realizing that if it could, it would pick my body up and shake me into the understanding that I have the ability to do what it will never be able to. I'm just realizing how thankful I am to it when the lights begin to dim. Someone coughs a few rows back and a smile stretches across my darkened face. Maybe I'm becoming the screen myself.

COMPLEX CREATURES & THEIR TORMENTING NEEDS

Here's how the scene's set up: your beloved husband who you've been very happily married to just got bumped up in the company with a generous raise and a bigger office for all the dedication he's brought to the job these last few years. He can't wait to get home and give you the great news! You'll finally be able to upgrade to the types of cars a power-couple like yourselves should've been driving all along! Maybe he'll even begin thinking of that next step and start looking into adding on a nursery to your already perfect dream home you've lived in for the last X-amount of years. Or maybe there'll be more time to spend together now that more money will be coming in. Life is perfect! Everything is perfect! You *are* living the storybook fairytale you always knew you'd have, from as far back as you can remember, you willed this fate for yourself. What you couldn't possibly know at the present moment is that in your husband's new office is also the new desk that's made entirely out of cherry oak making its maximum supported weight nearly a dozen times that of the two half-naked bodies currently atop its smooth surface. Of course, you'd never even heard the name 'Jennifer,' let alone know she'd been recently hired as a new project manager or secretary or whatever, it really doesn't matter if she's the new janitor

for all it's worth. The reality is that she's eyeballed your husband from Day One. He's an average-looking guy with decent hair and a nice-enough smile. He doesn't hold doors open but doesn't let his yelling at the waiters get too out of hand when he has to send food back at restaurants either, so he's got his good qualities too. Above everything though, is the simple fact that he's a man in a newly-acquired position that comes with a bit of power, with a bit more pull and influence than his last one had. Top that off with the fact that he didn't turn away when Jennifer bent down the other day to pick up the notepad she'd "accidentally" let slip out of her hands and right to his feet and there you have your textbook example of unsuspecting prey.

Though this scene's just an example highlighting how quickly a "perfect" and "sturdy" life can be torn to pieces, it's also realistic and accurately representative of many more marriages than we probably want to admit. The point we're going to examine isn't the wife's delusional dreams of having attained the perfect man, but rather, that man's acceptance of that same delusion. They bask in a shared mania; that power puts a person above the need for a moral compass. They don't need to see where the bar's set, they *are* the bar. The deeper problem and the crux of this reflection into the human psyche is what that delusion eventually does to an otherwise, levelheaded person.

It turns a man into an animal. In an instant, he loses all self-control and every ounce of self-respect. He manages to spit on his wife's loyalty, his reputation that he's worked

years at building up and his own dignity all in the same breath. It's almost artful, to possess such selfish, destructive talent. Almost, but not the slightest bit admirable to be considered quite "art."

I realize how easy that scene is to write though. Men in power almost always let their egos spin out of control and the inevitable cheating on their wives is almost cliché at this point. So how about the wife herself? Or worse yet, how about the mother? Yes—the mother who's so far removed from the bored housewife trope that it's painful to even let our imaginations go down this path. Thankfully our thresholds have Olympian impenetrability and our sense of sympathetic understanding will guide us along.

What's the mother of three to do when in the midst of her ridiculously hectic schedule, she too, allows herself just a measly ten minutes to grab some midday coffee and the chance to catch her breath? Deny herself the most petty of pleasures? The small shop is packed yet she spots the lone chair that's still available in the back corner. Our exhausted woman with the chipped nails, the unflattering "Mom Jeans" and the pair of plain tennis shoes she wears to run errands with shuffles forward and sits down with an unassuming smile and starts sipping her caramel macchiato, trying in vain to clear her head of what else needs to get done today.

Just ten minutes of quiet time to herself, that's all she needs to walk out of here recharged and ready to continue on with her day. All is going well until she lets her eyes roam around the room, looking at the random college kids

poking away at their laptops to the teenagers wearing green aprons working behind the counter and finally to a lonely mirror placed on the wall across from her, set facing her direction, dead-on. A pause, her gentle stream-of-consciousness now broken. The reflection looks back at her with the same wide-eyed disbelief. She stares in silence with a nonthreatening focus until finally, sighing a long, loud exhale of pure dejection before dropping her eyes back down to the floor.

No wonder she's gone untouched for these last few years. He'd stopped holding her hand in dark movie theaters let alone wrap his arms around her until she'd fall asleep, like he used to long before the kids ever showed up. Nowadays they'd say their 'good night's with such monotonous delivery that it'd make her insides want to convulse, like metal nails scraping across endless chalkboard. After they'd separately crawl into bed, it was every person for themselves. She'd be left to fend the approaching darkness on her own, again. They weren't the team from their first years together. When they'd be each other's soldier, watching each other's backs, guarding for anything that'd stand in the way of making the other smile as often as possible. They'd stand up for each other, even when it was hard to. Even when they'd bicker themselves, they'd never let anyone outside of their marriage know or see any sadness. They kept it private. They only wanted to exude positivity to their friends and the world around them. Their business was their own and nobody else's. Their heavy and active sex life too. Nobody else's. Their closest

friends would never guess, even in a million years how this depressed blob of a middle-aged man used to take his neckties after coming home from work, throw her on the bed after a few long kisses and wrap it around her eyes, tightly tying it behind her head. What difference something as small as a makeshift blindfold made back then. He'd let himself become feverishly engulfed in that passion, that carnal lust that they used to be able to see in each other. Now? He'd probably deny of anything ever happening. How that's the kind of disgusting things these kids are up to today. An eighty year old slumped man in a mid-fifties shell.

So why should she go out of her way to get her nails done? Who'd notice anything at all? Who would she be dying her hair for anyway? Even if she wanted to do it, nobody would ever notice. The background noise of the coffee shop which she hadn't even paid attention to since arriving was getting on her nerves now. Stupid caramel macchiato! The one thing she lets herself have during the day and these idiot kids can't even make it taste halfway decent?! She didn't need to check her phone to know that the ten minutes she needed had been up long ago--it was time to leave. This was a silly idea to begin with. Who drinks coffee in the middle of the day when she still had the dry cleaning she hadn't even picked up yet? Stupid. Stupid waste of time! That's all this was. She walked out through the front doors with an agitation she didn't have on her way in. Lesson learned. No big deal. Tomorrow she'll skip this entirely and the next day and the day after that. Why would

she even deserve her ten minute coffee break anymore? She's been repulsing to touch for years, coffee was the last thing she deserved.

Hopping into the driver's seat of her car, she pushed the engine on and before being able to throw it in reverse and back up and away from the parking lot, she felt an oncoming wave of bottled up hatred. It was so sudden and took hold of her ability to choke down anymore tears that she accepted the inevitable and let herself burst into a ball of uncontrolled sobbing. Hands covered her floodgate eyes and soon was soaked and an even bigger mess than before. She hadn't noticed the man sitting in his car directly across the parking stall in front of her own who was now stepping out and walking over to her slowly with a concerned look on his face.

At this point he doesn't need to have any tissues on him specifically. All it takes is for him to simply approach. No matter what follows next is irrelevant to that first decision he made to interact with a complete stranger. His presence has now become a permanent part of her life, no matter how insignificant it seems at first.

So maybe he offers to find a napkin for her in his car. She thanks him though reassures him she'll be just fine. It doesn't look like he has any so insists that he'll be right back. That he's just going to run and bring her a few from that coffee shop nearby. She tells him it's no big deal—he tells her not to be silly. Two minutes later she sees him in her rear-view mirror walking back with a small stack of napkins and a large cup of coffee in his hand. He thought

maybe she'd like to catch her breath before going on her way and that he wasn't sure how she took her coffee so just got her a caramel macchiato instead. It's always been his go-to drink so figured it'd work just as well as anything else. He then stands by her driver's side window for the next three and a half hours getting to know this woman. Getting her to laugh, to tell him about where she grew up and sharing stories from his marriage which ended up in divorce nearly a decade ago. They talk. And talk and talk and he makes her feel something new. He tells her how he'd love to be able to do it again soon, next time over dinner. She doesn't quite understand, she'd been upfront with him about having a husband and three children. He is sincere. No hidden agenda. Everything as it truly seems. He gives her his business card so that she doesn't feel any pressure to give him her information just yet. Before parting ways, he slowly holds out his hand, waiting patiently to take hers, shake it, and while letting her know what an honest pleasure it was to make her acquaintance, he brings her hand to his lips and kisses it goodbye--chipped nails and all. She blushes like a second-grade schoolgirl, naturally. This handsome man gets in his car to leave, pulls out of the stall and before taking off into the sunset, gives her one last wink while smiling. Our woman is left sitting in her seat, grinning, fiddling with his business card in her hands. Knowing she should just rip it in two, throw the shreds out her window and just go on her way. Just leave this parking lot and not let herself make something out of nothing. She sits and thinks and doesn't

even realize how she's no longer concerned with how long ago her ten minutes were up. Sitting, fiddling with the card.

What happens next is for you to decide. It doesn't really matter. The truth is that for the next ten or twenty or how many ever years it turns out being, they'll undoubtedly be filled with fiddling. It'll be both—part anxiety, part excitement. Mostly though, it'll be the feeling of having someone take notice whenever she gets a manicure, or buys a new dress, or does something extra special with her hair. The nearly-forgotten feeling of being loved again, being needed will always keep that fateful card in her fiddling hands.

It's weird because I can't blame this poor woman. Her husband truly does sound like a jerk who doesn't deserve her in the slightest and I was just coming up with him on the fly. I feel for this lady. But can we really put her in a class outside of the husband from our first scene? Aren't they both committing the same transgression? Isn't the trust that one is throwing away as if it were a piece of trash the same emotion that the other is mistreating as well?

These are things that we'll all come up against in our lives. Human experience isn't so black-on-white though. We live our entire lives in a constant spectrum that's filled with endless shades of grey. We can assign morally upstanding people as judges and have them point their own weighty fingers in the faces of those who betray us. Until we're in these people's shoes though, it's as good a guess as anyone else's. Until we've got Jennifer's seductively long nails slithering down to our belt,

unbuckling it, and letting ourselves cross into a territory where turning back from is unheard of, we can't say for sure how hard or easy a decision it must be for the man with the nice desk that's just begging to be christened. Or until we reach a level of such self-hatred and pity that the last person we'd expect to have the ability of picking us back up, dusting us off and in-fact, placing us on an even higher pedestal than we've ever reached before, is a complete stranger with amazingly broad shoulders who walks with his head held high, we're doing nothing but throwing darts in the dark, trying to hit the center of a moral compass.

Shades of grey, always.

FOR THREE DAYS...

Not long after my ninth birthday is when I first began hearing my father violently coughing up blood on a regular basis. Rarely did I hear anymore quiet that lasted longer than a few sparse minutes from the living room where he'd sleep alone in the fold-out bed. It'd been months since I last saw him in actual clothes as he now only wore different sets of the same bland pajamas my mom probably picked out for him in a few different colors. He'd probably never again wear a nice button-up shirt. What a non-issue that must be to a healthier man whose lungs weren't rotting of cancer. They probably wore very nice, really expensive shirts everyday, like my own dad used to do before he got sick. Now, he was on his way out. That much was obvious, even to me. So when one day after school, I opened my bedroom door to find my only aunt who I hadn't seen in years, standing there cheerfully humming to herself while cleaning up my toys for me, I should've put two and two together.

She stayed for the next six months. In three my dad would die in his sleep and it'd be her who'd hear the loud gasp in the middle of some random night, not realizing until morning it was actually his last living breath before his body finally gave up fighting. She stayed another three months afterwards to look after her now-widowed sister. I don't remember much from that period of my life. Since I

was strategically sent away to live with distant relatives who owned a condo in Queens, it's not like I was around to make many memories anyway. If I try to think back now, it feels like lifetimes ago. All I can tap into is seeing a lot of black clothes and faint whimpering. It feels like the sounds of sobbing were never too far off. It's eerily ambiguous though.

Still, the days I was able to spend with my aunt seemed like miracles. Those were the only times during that period where I'd feel truly happy. Like a much-needed return to form for the younger me who laughed constantly as a child. I loved "Mamateta," and even though nobody knows why I gave her that nickname, I used it for years. She adored me and took every opportunity to prove it.

Though I left Romania when I was four, I retained many more memories of my aunt than anyone else. How she'd play with me when everyone else was too busy, or how she'd nurse the many cuts and scrapes I'd get on my elbows and knees—, these things must've left quite an impact on my single-child consciousness. I specifically remember an instance where the paper cut on my index finger was so deep that I wanted to burst into tears just looking at it. While cleaning it and putting on a bandaid, I remember my aunt saying, "it feels like there's a tiny little heartbeat inside your finger doesn't it?" I nodded. "I know sweetheart, I've had this happen to me before too."

"And you were okay after, right?" I earnestly wondered.

"Yes, I was just fine my dear!"

This was her amazing charm. She was easy to talk to. Such a sweet, honest lady. Though she and my mother grew up side by side, they were different people. She took after their own mom, while mine walked in her father's footprints out of pure admiration. They were sisters nonetheless. So when Mamateta was told that she had a tumor growing within her liver this past year, it was difficult knowing the treatment she'd get wasn't going to be the world's best by any means. As the months passed, her condition worsened and last Monday she fell into a coma. I heard the helplessness in my mother's voice when she called to tell me. You try your best in these types of situations—, to console your loved ones and make sure they know that you'll be a rock-solid crutch for them during whatever may come. You try to think two steps ahead of whatever's currently happening, just in case. The spur-of-the-moment cross-Atlantic trips have to be every grieving family member's worst nightmare. Just the logistics of it all. And in their mental condition? Of course I was preparing to jump at any request my mom would make.

Life does its thing anyway though and so, 24 hours later, her sister—, whose real name is Rodica—, passed away.

My family isn't part of the ultra-wealthy in Romania. And because the country's still reeling from decades of deep-seated corruption, the middle class is virtually non-existent. Economists can explain with much more elegance than I'm able to why this is utterly unfortunate for the bottom 99%. If you aren't part of the wealthy, you're part of the poor. And

because what you do to one side of the equation, you have to do to the other, they're ultra-poor. It's a sad, sad thing.

Either way, my mom begins to explain the finer details of a traditional Romanian mourning process. It's not something I know anything about or ever witnessed in person. After the dearly departed are moved into the living room, they are generally laid down on the center table for viewing. For the next three days, while the men and other experienced woodworkers craft a coffin from scratch, the family serves non-stop coffee and treats to an army of mourners who will randomly pop in and out at all times of the day and night and next day and following night and so on. All this to a constant background flurry of crying, sobbing, sharing stories of precious memories, wails of disbelief, loud prayers, and who knows what else. It's a pure emotional rollercoaster, a dramatic play in so many scenes filled with neighbors from five villages over you may have never met before, but who've heard the tragic news and wanted to come pay their respects. It's touching but definitely not something an outsider would feel immediately at home around.

"And is the body at least covered this entire time?" I ask my mom.

"No. For three days, they live alongside it."

"Seriously?"

"They have no other options. No ambulance comes and takes them away like they do here. Over there, you look after your own dead. And when the coffin is completed,

they'll place her inside and carry it out into the countryside to her burial plot in a procession through town."

As selfish as this next feeling was, I didn't want my mom to go. I didn't want her to be apart of it, not these days, not anymore. After so much, I wanted her to just be able to rest, not have to endure something of that magnitude. I can't imagine three hours of nonstop crying let alone three days. Somehow, the Universe seemed to hear my inner-hopes. Our entire family begged her to stay put, to stay home, that there was nothing more she could do. So instead of having to finalize last-minute plans of getting her from one continent to another, she was able to hop on an Amtrak and spend this past week here in Chicago with me. To recharge her batteries I guess. To just be able to find some mental quiet and emotional peace. Now, as I'm close to wrapping up this essay and seeing her off downtown at Union Station for her train back home, I'm sincerely trying to put myself in her shoes.

I'm sure losing a sibling you've spent a lifetime growing up with is a weird feeling to have to go through. To outlive them, to think that they could've done a bit more with their life if only they would've had more time. Maybe it makes someone think about their own mortality and where they've gotten in seeing their own personal dreams coming true. Maybe my mom's running over all of these things in her mind to the point where there's nothing left to think about. Maybe. All I can try and do is my part as her only child, her only flesh and blood, to try and live the best life I can in her name. Time will tell how successful I'll be in

doing that, but an even greater feeling though, is when we can think of our loved ones who aren't here with us any longer and not feel a bit of regret. To feel a warmth and be completely calmed by just the mere thought of their name. To feel a deep need to smile because that's what they would've wanted you to do. Like, even when you want to just give in to the sadness for a second and purge yourself of tears, your body physically won't let you. A familiar presence fills your immediate space and a gentle touch directly on your heart that makes you involuntarily inhale much deeper than you have in a while. Those are the types of things I hope my mother can feel as she sits down at her window-seat and readies herself for a deep meditative trip into her inner-consciousness for the next seven or so hours.

Knowing the peace and tranquility she'll emerge on the other side of this experience with, how can anyone still harbor any doubt that our souls are indeed, things which don't adhere to neither the human concept or limitations of "time?" That they transcend realms of possibility. That whenever there's even the smallest hint of real love, not even the giving up of one's own body and leaving it behind for greater vessels can break a bond between two sisters.

THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE

I once knew a girl in high school who I admired very much. Her grades were consistently at the top of the class. She had a style all her own. Her bedroom walls were covered in magazine clippings and collages she'd spent long hours on. She didn't mind falling off a skateboard and scraping her elbow. Her creativity just shimmered through everything she did, no matter how small. She seemed like the model student. More so, the model friend. Then she started trying different things. Introducing different chemicals into her already-brilliant psyche. She figured that she may as well now, while she was young and able. That—, in her words—, she'd like to have all these things "under her belt." It confused me. She already seemed perfect, why the need to experiment if you've been blessed with so much. Stranger yet, her grades never suffered. They didn't dip once. Throughout all the psychedelics, pills, and whatnot—, she remained on top of her class. This confused me even more.

Long story short: she transferred schools and I never saw her again. I'd often think back to her free spirit and nonchalant attitude toward drugs and try to see the soundness therein. Her premise was probably that the more experiences one has, the more they'll have to draw from, hence, the more reliable their conclusions will be.

But I don't need to stick a needle in my arm and shoot up heroin to know it's bad for you. There are studies available. I've skimmed a few.

All sarcasm aside—, there actually are people in this world who won't respect an iota of your opinion if you haven't done each and everything you're describing on a firsthand basis, multiple times over. Though, nobody reaches the top of the Empire State Building and needs proof that jumping toward the street below will be the worst—, and last—, mistake they'll ever make.

It's common sense. It's engrained into our DNA. Rationale; it's there to be used, often.

So why this elitist obsession with having as many things under one's belt as possible? They claim "enlightenment" as these would-be's ingest handfuls of brightly technicolored capsules and listen to music so new that it hasn't even been given a sub-genre yet. These "brave" culture warriors teeter the edge which divides our mainstream from the scary wilderness beyond. They self-appoint themselves the true curators of cool but only because there is nobody else who cares enough to make such a huge production out of whatever the current flavor-of-the-week happens to be. Everyone else is gone. They've moved on. They grew brains and with them created goals, outlined plans, and just started taking those who chose to stay behind at their words.

"Oh..., too many counteractive drugs in your body will shut down your central nervous system?"

So I've heard.

"Oh..., you smoked three packs a day for twenty-some years and now you're bummed out by your test results?"

Hmm...

"Oh..., going through withdrawals really *isn't* fun?"

Wow.

A priori knowledge is independent of experience, a posteriori is dependent on experience or empirical evidence.

If a privileged upper-middle class teenager who's been lucky enough to grow up in an environment where the realities of drugs could be observed both through the bums that litter the streets of his downtown and the internet at large, *still* needs further empirical evidence to fully commit to a conclusion, then I would say he is deserving of all the misery he's plunging himself toward.

There are certain things in life that I don't need to experience on my own skin in order to label them a certain way. This is a priori knowledge. Anyone who sees this as whimpering away with fear is a masochist and can be my guest when it comes to trying "that new gasoline stuff."

My only guess is that people are forever trying to one-up each other. You've tried the pink powder? Well I've tried the blue. And so on and so forth. I don't admire this type of thinking. It gets you killed or at the very least, makes you extremely regretful. The one I admire is the third person looking at the two arguing idiots with a look of bewilderment that shouts out: "WHY?!"

TO DEVOUR

To devour—, and willingly allow yourself to become devoured—, completely, is truly, a unique experience for us humans indeed.

Unique in how the human spirit is unable to bear the weight of such trauma but only once. No matter the degree of self-hatred any mind may potentially reach, none is equipped with the possibility of repeatedly placing itself on a platter for another's digestion. Like death; it is irreversible. The blessed are spared from ever feeling it at all. We—, who know its face, memorized its hollow sockets where cloud-filled eyes hang in the shadows and can draw their dark swirls from memory—, are forever cursed to feel its warm breath on our napes.

Unique in that it isn't solely to satisfy a gluttonous urge of gorging our spiritual stomachs with another's soul, but rather, a craving to consume. Utterly and without pause for logic or reasoning, to consume everything. Their deepest dreams, worst nightmares, most highest-held hopes; it all must be swallowed—, no, choked down!

Unique in that much like Escher's Drawing Hands, it isn't enough to stand in pride while ingesting their very oneness. They themselves must be doing the same in return, wearing an identical smirk of self-gratification that we've got permanently plastered upon our own lips.

Unique in that we simultaneously become both The Lover and The Loved. And it's within that exact line of logic where we find our ability to continue sleeping when the sun sets at night. The guilt cancels itself out. We offered up our own bodies for consumption and without hesitation, they eviscerated our layers like lions, one by one, clawing and tearing and ripping us apart, forever digging deeper down until they reached the most hidden compartment of our hearts we hadn't even known we were hiding under so much soil and dirt. Just like we'd reached theirs. A mutual feast.

Unique in how once that specific door is opened, it can never be closed again. The heart won't allow it. The soul will change its spiritual composition from that day forward, not unlike the drug addict, we are never the same. Our eyes see through a new lens now. It's a darker shade, it makes the light harder to see, to feel. Harder, but not impossible. We must look more thoroughly for it. Somewhere, it's still shining down in our direct line of vision, somewhere that's a bit tougher to see through the newly descended smoke and ash and dense fog, but it's there. It's there and if we squint and remember that what it means to be human is both tragic and beautiful, then when we do occasionally re-find it and feel it once more on our skin, its warmth is that much deeper, it carries that much more meaning and purpose. Precisely because we know how much darkness and frigid cold there truly is all around us, waiting. Waiting for the doubt to creep back inside and

whisper through the muddled trenches of our memories;
"was there ever really any light at all?"

HIVE MENTALITY

Growing up in the city I did, at the time I did, and surrounded with the ideas that I was, I consider myself extremely lucky. Both because I was exposed to so many different viewpoints but also so much culture as well. Music that would've been harder to find outside the Ann Arbor city limits thrived there. Independent films were screened regularly at more than a couple of the city's historic theaters. There was always room for another voice, a new opinion, or line of logic. As long as it respected others and adhered to the concept of free speech, all were welcomed with open arms.

An honest truth about myself is this: at some point in my adolescence, I unconsciously became very disenfranchised with the world around me and that energy materialized into a self-destructive nature. Back then I suppose I considered myself "punk." Not for the tears in my shirts or chipped teeth I suffered at an Anti-Flag show (which I'm sure I wore around as a badge of honor.) But more so, from the way I thought. No idea or theory was too outrageous as long as the person putting it forth could back it up or at the very least, explain it in very simple terms. There was no room for ego in the circles I ran with and I liked that. We were all one great big dysfunctional family.

I knew some better than others. For instance, one friend was a singer of a local four-piece thrash band. She sported zero tattoos and no piercings. Yet, when the guitars began screeching behind her on stage, she'd let the chaos envelop her entire body and would spend half the show rolling around the dirty floor like a mad-woman.

So, appearance came second to true personality. I'd often go to the Trumbullplex—, an anarchist collective smack dead in the heart of Detroit's Cass Corridor—, for shows, art exhibits and often, just to party with like-minded people. Nobody cared how dyed your hair was or how many scars you wore atop your skin. If you were a decent human being and respected others, you'd be considered a friend. They didn't try converting hippies into liberty spike-sporting cynics. They had opinions but wouldn't bash you for not listening to anarcho-punk. As long as your message was one of equality and free speech, they'd be proud to raise their fists alongside yours.

I say all of this because the one thing we all agreed on, no matter where we'd land on political spectrums or if Strike Anywhere was getting soft, was that we were against oppression.

Oppression of any kind was the absolute enemy. A cop who overstepped his boundaries. A clergyman who preached love during the day but would whip his children senseless at night. We hated all of it. We tried to keep our wits about us and figure out ways to combat this sickness. We were passionate about our subculture.

Never in my life, however, did I ever witness one of these people attack or violently force another human being into accepting their way of thinking. If we'd come across nay-sayers (and often did), who spouted nothing but racism, sexism, or hatred of any kind, we'd simply ignore them and go about our day. Never did we consider any type of "recruitment" or "conversion" to our side of things. The thought never crossed our minds because quite frankly, it's preposterous to carry that kind of logic beyond elementary school.

Man 1: I dislike coconut cake.

Man 2: Coconut cake is delicious and not saying so goes against everything I stand for. Either you agree with my viewpoint or I am legally able to kill you.

Man 1: We can't just agree to disagree while living side by side in harmony?

Man 2: No. I am told that sometime long ago, there was a law which was passed specifically demanding that I kill all who disagree with this line of thinking. Lacking the insight to question its validity, let alone its logic, I of course follow blindly and wholeheartedly.

That isn't comedy. It isn't supposed to read as funny or witty or tongue-in-cheek. It's as sad and depressing as you must feel at this very second, knowing full-well that while it's just an example, Man 2 is very real and very ready to obliterate all who do not think exactly like him.

There is no room for discourse. All opposing viewpoints are erased like a communist regime. All talk which is against the ruling party is silenced, those individual voices

never to be heard from again. There is no living peacefully, side by side. Man 2 does not want neighbors who do not look identical to him, who do not speak and sound exactly as he does, who do not harbor the same type of hatred he so deeply latches onto.

When I'd run around the broken streets of random downtowns with my friends, so many lifetimes ago, we knew things were bad. We'd always known the world was a sad, miserable place. So we'd armor ourselves before taking on the days—, with open-mindedness, with knowledge, with respect for one another and even for those who didn't agree with us. It was a fun time in my life which I think back to often. I can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of pride in all of us. That even though we endured scraped knuckles, broken homes, and friends who we'd lose to drugs and depression, we stuck it out and loved one another and our fellow man. No matter the religion, belief, political party, or past. We were brats sometimes, but never monsters. We banded together, but had our own individualities.

Some have a hive mentality which they'll go to the ends of the earth for. They'll quite literally, go to their graves in displaying. We loved our culture, but we never put it above our individual hopes and dreams. Our hearts were ours. Our hearts *are* ours. Not a collective's to use at will and claim them in the name of oppression and regression.

I'd say I miss those days of being reckless. But if I'm really honest with myself, my mind is just as open today as it was back then. There's more knowledge and rationale

now, but the eagerness of continued learning and drawing conclusions from it is just as pivotal to my overall character as it's ever been.

Man 2 has no personality. He is his hive.

I still love Strike Anywhere and truly dislike coconut cake. I am myself.

DOES TIMBRE KNOW?

This may sound strange to someone who's never been in a similar position, but sometimes, after I finish the very last sentence of a short story I've been working on, or after I put down an old poem of mine that I'd found after many years, I actually realize that I've fallen in love with a character or specific phrase or if it's a painting, maybe just the way the colors come together and swirl around each other. A few times, I've let myself sit down and flesh out a character's personality to the point where I just begin daydreaming about them. It's a weird emotion to have, to fall in love with a creation of yours. Upon meditating on it recently though, I'm beginning to understand just how innate this feeling is within us as humans.

The deep-seated need—or better yet, craving—of having your art recognize its own artist.

I wonder if Timbre knows; the blond-haired alt-hippy stoner from a short story I wrote years ago where she showed up for just two phrases of dialogue and barely constitutes as a side-character. I wonder if she, within her own world's perimeters, can meditate on them and feel my hand and my unique mind's eye crafting her and everything she'll ever know. If it oozes an essence of "Dre" to her. Even deeper yet, I wonder if the phrases I piece together self-realize their specific ordering of consonants and vowels, alluding to all types of complexities and can

state with certainty that—"we sound like something Dre would write."

As "artistically self-defined" as this metaphor comes off, I assure you that it doesn't come from a place of ego. On the contrary, I am trying to set up a relationship between artist and art. It's so deeply important to me, that relationship. Not only because the artist in me feeds off of that specific "touch," or that wholly unique "vibe" that just screams—"you created me." I am also drawn, with every drop of what makes me my own individual, by the "art" which is me, as well. That's to say, that I am both artist (for my creations), as well as art (of my Creator.)

This is me trying to gracefully—albeit, crassly—place that relationship under a microscope and hopefully, by observing its characteristics and through defining its importance, we may come closer to attributing that ever-elusive quality of "proof" towards the concept of an Artist or Creator.

I: The Transference

It seems that we are, as humans, crafted with certain first-nature needs. To love and be loved. To express and maintain individuality. I don't think these are traits which we morally advanced into realizing and accepting for ourselves, but rather, that they were always true of our species. This is interesting as it shows that if we do indeed have an Artist to thank for our existence, it wouldn't be so outrageous to assume that they themselves, have a similar nature.

To tap back into my previous example, did Timbre always exist within my psyche as the glossy-eyed girl she is written as, just waiting for the right time to jump out and onto the page? Did her essence just wait for the right story to come along, for the right words to say? These are thoughts we as humans have about ourselves. These are things which a piece of art must wonder, had they the ability to think. Was it always meant to be written that specific way? Was I always going to be born with hazel eyes? Does it even matter as long as the art still conveys proper emotion onto its observer?

Regardless of eye color, I can only feel like a proud parent when I finish something I've crafted by opening up my chest and plopping my wet heart onto it. Much like a real parent must feel when they have those moments of standing in awe of their child. Pride. Like they want to tell the whole world—"that's mine, right there. That beautiful thing came from me." Does it sound unimaginable that our own Artist wouldn't feel the same way? How much pain would a parent feel if their own child discredited them completely? If they refused to even acknowledge their parents' existence? I imagine it'd be heartbreaking.

The need to be noticed, acknowledged—that's the point I'm trying to make. That if the Artist feels it, so will the art itself.

II: The Relationship

Upon realization that the art is just that—art, it cannot reclaim ignorance. It can sway its opinion or perception of its Artist, but once the light is cast onto the chambers deep

inside the mind, it cannot simply return to pitch black darkness. Plato knew this about fellow philosophers and tried in his way, to show this exact point with his Allegory of the Cave.

Once that direct connection is made, there are only two ways which it can affect the nature of the art. It can hinder and hold back the art from reaching its full potential, or it can help and hurl the art into becoming the most important version of itself possible. This depends upon a few factors. Firstly, though the art feels a need to connect to an Artist, and even willingly accepts their existence, if their filter isn't "Truth" itself, their perception of the world they inhabit, as well as their Artist will surely be false. Secondly, assuming they do attain the truth and through it, they discern who their Artist truly is, they must accept that their very nature of being art is enough reason to believe that their Creator has made them with purpose.

This intent supersedes anything any of my characters in any of my stories want for themselves. I know where they should be, what they should say, and how they should act to further my idea of my "perfect" story forward. Of course I know what's best, being the author. While my own story may be far from "perfect" in terms of the craft, I know that it ended how I foresaw it and that it was the way I intended it to be.

III: The Gift—and Curse—of Free Will

Finally, however, there is the gift of free will. Something which I'm unable to give my own art. Something which is so human and so wonderful, that it's what makes humankind

entirely unique in the "Artist-to-Art" metaphor. No other art can claim free will. I call it a curse also, because within the boundaries of our world, we've allowed a falsehood thread itself into our very fabric of humanity. A tragic deception whose sole purpose is to distract us away from all that is beautiful and true. This darkness—for lack of a better word—is eternally at war for our hearts. It constantly attempts to block and destroy any bit of communication between us as the art, and our true Artist. Its method depends upon everyone individually, though genius nonetheless.

To gain credibility, one needs to align themselves in direct relation with the credible. This is true of almost anything; hack filmmakers copy trends which the Masters have previously employed to such greater impact, the weight of an Ivy League degree is substantial to that of an online institution, these are ways that people and ideas build off of a pre-defined level of excellence to further themselves.

This is important because it is how the truly dark and deceptive will always build itself off of the "Truth," and by changing just enough variables, then stand up and proclaim itself the new standard by mere "evolution." Aesthetics evolve. Technology evolves. Truth does not. Up will always be up. Oppression will always be wrong. Truth does not live in the grey areas of taste. Lawyers can dedicate entire lives toward which cases deserve the definitions of "murder" or "theft." In the end, they are all morally wrong ideas, even if a specific act is successfully argued away from guilt. Light does not evolve, nor does

darkness. It either is or it isn't. It either is one of them, or it's the other. The trick is to be able to discern when the darkness comes through the shadows you hadn't even noticed were there. Suddenly though, it seems like there isn't as much light as there used to be. Only an art's true Artist can recast light. All other perceptions aim in direct opposition—to keep the art in a permanent fog and disconnect from its true nature and purpose.

Worse than a character of mine—whom I've thought so long about, fleshing out their life and unique personality, whom I love unconditionally—not realizing that they themselves are art, is letting themselves convinced of a false artist who not only doesn't exist, but is nothing like me. That's an idea that hurts deep, deep within my chest.

Reveries

THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE

Quadrant I

You're sitting in your living room. Cool gusts of air keep your home at a comfortable temperature. Outside, a scorching summer lingers on. Somewhere; loud laughter, people playing on their front porches. The bay window directly in front of the couch you sleep on shows you a lush world beyond your own grayness. A stale silence enveloped your psyche long ago, now it's touched every room you've stepped into for the past decade-plus. This one holds the most pressure. This, room. You feel it pushing down on your shoulders, seeping through the cracks in the drywall, crawling downward like a poisonous vine until it convinces you to fall back asleep, back to an underworld of muted heartache that only you could ever understand. A place that has just enough familiarity outlining its perpetual rainfall. You shut your eyes and begin to feel your body drifting off to this land, again. You begin humming some song that's been stuck in your head..., but that in reality, is just some melody you made up at some point in the far past that you've forgotten about. The notes rise and lower, like your chest, like your mind. Then, the melody drowns into a deep, thickened bass, submerged somewhere in the depths of pure pitch

darkness, hardly recognizable anymore, like your mind. Then, sleep.

The very few memories you have of your father trying to teach you lessons on 'How to be a Man' don't particularly stick out in the sea of other moments from your youth. His voice was stern, powerful, so they always seemed like important bits of information at the time, even if they weren't. You try to remember more every time you think back, but your mind's eye only sees so much. It's been ravaged by self-induced comas where instead of calling out toward the skies above, it was the chemicals which you'd praise. So now as you find yourself back in this other world's grasp once more, you cover both ears with your palms and squint your eyes, struggling in vain to hear him say; "don't fall asleep here son, you'll never wake back up."

But I'm already asleep, your mind whispers back.

This place is constantly wet. Either from the rain or sleet or collective teardrops, the water never evaporates off the concrete. It's usually a city-setting. A metropolis straight out of some type of post-apocalypse. Usually, but not always. You've found it take other shapes before, other forms of dystopian coldness.

Once you'd found it a vast highway, so enormous and gargantuan that the cement stilts holding its hundred-lane body many miles above the earth were wider than any building you'd ever seen back in the real world.

Another time it appeared as a never-ending beach front, stretching on forever in either direction. A singular structure protruding off its darkly-sanded face; a pier. One

that led out into the very middle of the largest body of water your mind could conjure up. A pier that took days to reach the end of and once there, had no railing to protect you from falling over the edge and plunging into the abyss below. Like it almost...called for you to do just that.

Usually however, its face was that of a downtown. A large sprawling place where the sun always seemed to *almost* rise, but never did.

It'd unsettle anyone else, but this is where you'd felt at home. This is where you'd kept your last sliver of security. Where Billie Holiday was always playing from some window on a higher floor inside random skyscrapers. Where Pablo Neruda's words made sense:

"I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul."

You did ... and she was.

Quadrant II

Who "she" truly ends up being is so inconsequential to her overall impact on this realm and directly, your life. "She" is everybody and nobody at once. "She" is and isn't you. A fierce sun that hangs high above the desert during midday and a frigid, lonely moon that's full of craters, devoid of any warmth; she is both of these simultaneously.

Violent gasps of air, in and out. Sucking her essence deeper with each breath. Is it any wonder you consciously choose to go comatose in her memory?

Keep swallowing—, even though it feels like something sharp.

Keep breathing—, even when there is no more air.

Keep seeking a salvation within her embrace—, even if it's an insincere one.

The ground opens up and you fall in, further. Spiraling with a strange elegance toward impending personal doom. Grime. Vile. Lust. Beads of sweat rolling off of familiar hips. Pounding. Pounding. More pounding. More wine. More excess.

It all feels so...magical. Until...it doesn't.

Then..., the hatred and self-pity ease into play. A darkness threading itself into the very fabric of your dual-existence. But do you turn away? Do you fall to your knees and pray? Never. You accept it with open, scarred arms and the fakest grin you've ever seen a face make.

Past telephone wires and rusted car parts. Past lifeless trees whose branches hang like pinned skeletal arms. All, permanently set in some type of celestial stone. Fate?

Past your laughter, moaning, and anger-filled threats. Playing, fighting, sleeping. Rinse and repeat.

These are the things love hides from newcomers. These..., secret side-effects that will grow to haunt and maybe even, destroy you. These..., compulsive cravings to bite her lower lip so hard that your teeth pierces the skin and rips apart its armor, letting your own liquid code mix in with her exposed scarlet DNA. No drop to be wasted. No moan to be forced.

By the time you catch your breath...she's already swimming freely inside your veins.

"Now..., do you still love her?," the heart asks.

You do ... and she is.

Quadrant III

If you blink your eyes for even a second, you'll miss it.

Large smokestack-factories have the run of its land. Industrialized sorrow at every turn. Her laugh, her fingers clenching the bedsheets just to feel a pull, and her sadness –, you remember all of these with an intimate, infinite energy.

Material is everything here. Red dresses. French tips. Good pills. Sweet dreams. Wasted youths. Fallen angels. And she...?

Where is she?

What a torturous self-inflicting wheel of pain we strap ourselves to. It outdoes any and all, before or after.

LOVE; loss of valuable energy.

If you blink your eyes for even a second, you'll miss it. It –, her.

You will ... and she'll be.

Quadrant IV

Where does the lover begin and the other end? In dreams, it's the instant your mind fills the room of your first kiss with two bodies. In deep thoughts, it's the snap of strange fingers alerting you to the length of time you've been quiet, subdued. In reality, it's the first time you whisper, "I love you," to another and know down in your soul just how heavy those words truly are—, how unimaginable the depth of their meaning really is.

Only then can the lover disappear completely into their other—without shame.

When does the heart break by its most anguished degree possible? In books, it's after you've read the last line of the last paragraph in the last chapter and still feel an unfilled void in your chest. In the stars above, it's being unable to make out their name anymore. In reality, it's the first time you whisper, "I love you," to another and know down in your soul that no matter how many seconds tick by, you won't hear it echoed back to you.

Only then can the heart cut off all ties with every other organ in the lover's body and willfully implode from crippling agony—, without reserve.

The true lover is vain and exposed, they rip apart all armor—, no barrier.

The true lover is appalling and full of self-hatred, they poison their own souls—, no pride.

So now, at the end of your journey, squeezing random shards of glass with one hand, clumps of hair in the other,

how will they say you lived your life? Will they fill in the blank after your name with happy, veiled things? Will they smile to each other nervously, for they all know deep down you were nothing to be proud of? Will they go on to remember you at all...or will everyone you've ever known simply, forget?

When Virgil and Dante finally reached the ninth circle of their trek into the center of our world—where the gigantic Lucifer forever flapped his enormous wings, encasing himself further in frozen ice—they didn't begin heading back up to escape, they climbed down further. When a world as dark as theirs needs an exit, even it stays shrouded in shadow.

So dig further.

Dig further down.

Further darkening your fingernails with dirt and grime.

Further letting the last bit of candlelight inside your soul go out without so much as a whimper.

Further down, past old regrets and cherished memories.

Further until you've almost bled yourself into the nothingness around you.

Until you can't keep your eyes open from the deafening silence of your world's misery.

Until it's no longer air your lungs breathe, but something thicker, like chalk.

Until the very blood that runs through your veins starts to feel cold.

Until you realize that there's some type of familiar light
shining onto your closed eyelids.

Familiar but artificial.

You stop digging and open your eyes.

You're alive.

You're sitting in your living room.

CONCRETE BRIDE

I.

It's your own business whether or not you believe God exists, but I can guarantee you that darkness does. I've heard its voice, seen its eyes, and felt my heart fill with its presence. Of the two routes, I've sought out the latter with most of my life. I can't explain its pull on me, but once my mom called last summer telling me about the third and fourth cancers growing in her body, I gave myself up entirely to the shadows.

After my dad died from his own lung cancer, I moved to New York City with distant cousins allowing Gabriela to grieve in solace. On a busy intersection in Queens is where I found and fell in love with my bride. It was all around; beneath my legs, sprawling up the sides of skyscrapers, and flooding the streets down in every direction.

The people moved in clusters of energy, always in motion, never stalling long enough for the pain of past mistakes to set in or an anger you're too young to process. I knew this is where I belonged. Once the rays of a bright glowing sun fade out to pitch black, only the stars are left to shine. Night falls over the city and I'm left to fend from within the fog. I see the sparkling punctures through the canvas, promising that somewhere down the rivers of time,

there is hope. It exists, if only through my reshaping of what is possible.

I always dreamed of it: the dancing, the tablecloths, all of the fine threads outlining the bride— everything that goes into planning everyone’s biggest day— their wedding. The moment two best friends become an official union, a partnership, a team. Placing the other’s hand in theirs and taking the leap into the unknown with breaths anxiously held for future potential.

There’s an image that’s haunted me throughout my life. Two friends laying side by side on a hill, underneath the tree’s shade from up above, watching the entire world spinning below— everything that ever happened or will happen, all working together simultaneously. Interconnecting lines of energy, independent of time and space. Then I reopen my eyes and I’m back in reality; back standing on a street corner waiting for the crossing light to turn green, back in my mom’s trashed bedroom while she sleeps in the hospital, back in my little box of isolation where the two is still one and shade is nonexistent, as contrast is nowhere.

The little box is always the same— every corner is overrun with trash, layers of dust have collected everywhere, and the silence surrounds all. There is no laughter from long-passed memories, no music to inspire a happier presence, no friend to share anything with. I’ve always wanted that best friend that knows every corner of me, every angle on every wall, which way it turns, how, and why. I know this world is unimaginably wonderful if it’s seen

through the right lenses, anyone can appreciate the beauty on their own. The little pieces of heartbreak that come with it is when you realize how much better it'd all be to see it with someone else. My life's sacred tragedy; longing for a best friend to share it with, not realizing that even if they'd existed, my misery would've just destroyed them anyway.

I once heard about a rose coming up from the concrete, so that's where I always tried to find her—, my muse. Through the cracks in the pavement I'd envision her seeds bursting open, a beautiful flower blossoming alive with scarlet petals and thorns on its spine. I never sought out comfort in relationships, I always wanted a challenge. Always keep moving, even if it was in the wrong direction. For two points of reference to make better sense than worse, they need to elevate one another as opposed to driving each other down toward the cement ground below.

The beast with two backs has pride of its own. It wastes away in bottles, pills, and chaos while deluding itself that it's found freedom at last. No line is uncrossed as the mutual narcissism grows with self-bestowed importance. Once ripped apart, the fog lets me continue the sad ritual solely for myself.

The little box will always remain locked as long as I refuse to dig up the key I've buried long ago, deep under the dirt, through grime and depression, anger and disappointment. The key to reminding me that the sun once did exist and can again; honesty. I've always thought that the more tools and gifts one's been given, the more powerful their ability is to create something amazing. I've

always ignored my one true talent in place of half-hearted attempts to create art that I knew wasn't my real calling, until now.

Months of constant turmoil and persistent guilt came barreling toward my mom and I both, a ball of havoc in attempting to purge so many of the things that've haunted my life followed suit. The off-color marks still on my wrists, the emptied fifths still stashed away in closets, the pictures of a once-romanticized era realized through saddened expressions and regretful moments. The hospitals, the medicines, exile, sickness, disease— it all interwove itself into a brilliant mess of misery to find and rid myself of all the darkness that's held such a permanent hold on my heart.

'Ask and ye shall receive,' they say. I found it and became it. Now I have no other way of unlatching myself from all the destruction I've created than through honest creation itself. The night is forever-lasting inside my little box, there hasn't been color nor light nor any sound of true happiness at all for years. The only shimmer left; sparkles of future hope. Something to strive for, to become better for, to radiate strength to as it's done for me.

Some consider Mihai Eminescu's *Luceafarul* to not just be his masterpiece, but the longest love poem ever written. I couldn't find a perfect stanza that stood out to me so I wrote one myself;

*My future love— someday we'll meet,
I'll be your endless pride;*

*Names spelled in stars above concrete,
All shine for you, my bride.*

II.

My parents grew up in a communist setting that I can't even imagine. Many nights, my mom and I would stay up and talk about all the things she's glad I didn't have to go through. I still remember seeing flashes of tanks as we drove by armed soldiers before they got me out at four years old.

"They'd follow me, everywhere I went," she said of the Securitate. "If I stopped and spoke with someone, they'd later ask them what I said." My father's writing made certain that he and Gabriela stayed in the spotlight. Oppression impedes art, especially the type that makes an average citizen think for themselves. So when Ceausescu's totalitarian regime took control of the country, all liberal media became filtered and self-expression was completely marginalized. Both of my parents were revolutionaries in their own ways. They both protested evils and the various wrongs of the world. They both stood for love, peace and freedom. They both expressed themselves through art; my Mom through her dancing, my dad through his writing.

"You'd have to be sharp and read between the lines," she'd tell me when I'd ask how he was still able to publish his work in such an oppressive environment. Though I can speak my language, I've never learned how to read or write it. What his four books truly hold remains a mystery to me, though I'm sure there'd be a lot I could learn about my own style and logic if the day ever comes when I'll be able to translate them. Though he'd published

them well before meeting Gabriela, she reminds me how he kept writing throughout his life. My father's final published piece is about the ever-presence of growing corruption within a post-communist landscape entitled *Pisica*.

"They shot him and his wife in the very street," my mom would tell me of Ceausescu's demise. The revolution was televised; its uprising, its peak, and its aftereffects. The feeling of needing to be rebellious has been coursing through my veins ever since I can remember. Generations of bottled angst came passed down and coiled itself onto my DNA.

Once the revolutions of '89 spread across the Eastern Bloc, my parents knew they'd need to leave for brighter and better futures. My mom said a little prayer once she felt the plane's wheels lifting off the runway, knowing she'd never be coming back. The Mickey Mouse stuffed doll that Gabriela greeted me with after I flew over with my dad is the only thing I've ever held true sentimental value for. If I close my eyes and try to focus, I can sense pieces of that four year old feeling still alive in its afterglow of when I see her running towards me in the big New York airport, full of joy and happiness and pride. I try to capture that moment more than any other, but it's also the one that's most fleeting.

In school, I remember my teachers always mentioning how his talent surely got passed down to me too and I hated that, so I actively stayed away from writing. I knew he was a success in his own right and the thought of

me trying to compete with him intimidated any attempt of trying away. His legacy haunted me throughout my youth; his ability to speak throughout the night, his intellect, and his charm. I once saw my mom's eyes welting up at the sight of a street vendor selling roses to passers-by.

"One time, he bought me the entire bucket of flowers," she said of my father.

I've been hugged by club bouncers and looked at with slight pity by shoe store customers when they'd found out I was his son, probably because they thought I'd eventually follow in his footsteps.

I still remember the school principle coming to my classroom, calling my name through the doorframe. We walked down the hallway and turned the corner to see my Aunt and a man who looked familiar down at the other end, distraught and anxious. My aunt began crying before getting the words out—

"Something bad's happened," as she gasped for air. I already knew. I'd felt it before she even spoke. My apartment door opened up to a scene that implanted itself into my nine year old head and hasn't dissolved since. A room I'd come to call home—, full of strangers in black, eerily gathered around the living room bed his body still lay on. Trembling whimpers amidst waves of crying. Through the crowd I saw Gabriela in the corner, sitting with a face more sullen than any I've ever seen since. She looked up to toward me and shouted out my name the way only a grieving widow can—, full of hopeful solace. My dad's hand coming out from his light-blue pajama sleeve looked

off-color, void of all energy, so I brushed up against it with my own. I can't remember much else other than it just feeling wrong. People I've never seen before stared on at me, waiting for some type of emotional response. I calmly left to go to my room and tried to escape the resumed ritual of mourning happening out past my bedroom door. A whole world out there, if one can only leave their little box to go see it.

III.

After my father's open-casket funeral they chose to go with for reasons I still don't understand, I moved to my true hometown of Ann Arbor. It's the perfect one— autumn leaves light its pavement on fire, sunsets are multi-color, and there's always music. Art is everywhere, so I was drawn to its artists the most.

I once heard someone say that big cities have a different pulse than smaller college towns. That you have to be able to stay fluid and weave through the commotion like water or else you get left behind. I thought about all the times I barely made it through my high school's fifty-two and sixty-two hundred hallways and realized that River Rats can make it anywhere.

That's when I first saw it in the far distance— a mountain taller and broader than the one I'd been climbing on my own. The peak gleamed with potential, its waves lit up the skies with green and gold lights. The Summit cast its shine upon all of the darkness below.

Its beacon split into separate pieces, each with their own energy. I never got the chance to see it in complete form— they've always projected so much hope individually. It whispers from the next armchair over inside the bookstore coffeeshop—

"Don't go to the dark side," as she looks up from the hardcover fashion dictionary every few minutes. It fistfights with me atop the dirt and when back in the car, catching

our breaths I make sure he knows that I'm most likely never getting married, but that—

“You're my best man if I do.” We hug it out and keep it moving. It beams out to itself when two years of planned sobriety are over and just want to check in on how our first night back's going—

“Meggo says hey and to pace yourself,” it relays from across the booth, bringing our smiles to full-view. It forgives when others wouldn't and remembers memories that others won't. Its ever-growing legacy has always been felt from the get go, (shout out to Marc.) Unplugging from the one family I've always known to swan-dive into the valley below is as heart-breaking as it is lonely. A truth I keep hidden to myself; that to brighten their shine, I'd need to go fully dark. Turning away and walking down my chosen path in solitude, holding onto nearly-forgotten memories, knowing that the laughs we shared underneath Huron's Arch will forever bounce off the concrete walls and echo back down to the newer generations of royal Diag Rats-in waiting.

In one of those classrooms once sat the makings of future-womanhood wearing all black and draped in a quiet sorrow.

It was a physical attraction that turned mental over time so the immediate energy wore off but underneath a forming friendship were the sparked embers of a roaring fire, patiently waiting. I'd give her hand massages during class, in the dark, where our connection was first made. She'd throw my own away from her if the teacher turned on

the lights too quickly, making me grin with all the possible potential.

We slept side by side in a room where our game would eventually begin.

"I don't think I'd ever do that," I heard her saying about self-harm. "Baby, your arm!," she broke out the next morning, waking me out of the deepest sleep. I lifted my head and looked at the small incisions that'd already begun scabbing, shrugged, and drifted back to a place full of lulling dissonance through seconds and sevenths. I felt a disappointment but only because I'd now have to cover up something that hadn't really paid off.

"At the touch of a lover, everyone becomes a poet."

Plato's words echo throughout the corridors of time – away from the originator and towards countless young couples who hold onto each syllable, until the real world finally demystifies their wonder.

Late nights dancing, ripped fishnet stockings, belts and handcuffs and a near-silent humming sound coming from the kitchen drawer outside. It called and it called and eventually found its victims, eagerly searching for their next big thrill. Refueled rebellion through capsule-form and white lines which disappeared off our stomachs as quickly as they'd been laid. Carnal desires expressed through bloodshot eyes; we waltzed around each other's ammo with impatient readiness to utterly retaliate.

A swallow doesn't make a summer but that didn't stop us from trying. Sunset-tinted fifths– one after another after the next until they stood emptied like the statues of

fallen soldiers. Like our reflections we couldn't escape; in the bottles' transparent glass, in the lonely mirror which hung behind their table-top pedestal, in all of the raindrops that fell on our bodies during those horribly-amazing, hazy months.

We stood emptied ourselves. Tired and malnourished from an unhealthy addiction to complete chaos, drawn to all that's unstable— inside and out. A romance forged from the embers of past fires, forgotten but never forgiven. Past writers of unclosed chapters from separate books that felt similar in scope, or familiar, like the anger raging inside us both. We took it out on the others' lips;

"Bite harder," it didn't matter who spoke when, those two words lived within the four walls. I've never known much about eating groceries but I stayed on that backside. Lust dripped down the textured walls like carmine curtains framing our stage of inverted vanity.

The Bled's *Red Wedding* blared out for days from beyond the room's locked door as we taught each other how to self-encrypt our hearts onto the other lover's soul— passing the flask back and forth while masking our true motives. When no unexplored inch remained, we bypassed our forced physical-separation by finding solace in the flowing rivers of our own DNA. Mixing it in slowly with a symphony that only played in minor keys. Sadness was everywhere. In the pillows thrown onto the floor from the night before, in the flipped cushions or ripped bed sheets. A violent attraction kept us coming back into the fog.

Eventually, the downward spiral leads towards rock bottom and once the haze dissipates, I'm back standing in the rehab hallway outside the recreation room with my mom as we say our goodbyes. She put her hands on my shoulders, still slumped from the war.

"Things will be okay," she said, both eyes glazing over as we hugged and separated ways before either allowed ourselves the comfort of breaking down.

"That just gave me chills," said the hairstylist watching from the side. I forced a smile and walked away, trying to keep the ice box inside my chest as frozen as possible.

She had a lip tattoo so I took to her instantly— an artsy cosmetologist that said she liked my style. I'd massage her ankles underneath grey sweatpants during AA meetings. We'd sneak kisses while sitting on the cold floor in the hallway outside our rooms before the nightly sleeping pills took hold.

"Your lips..." she'd begin before her head went limp as a nurse helped the girl to her room and me to the men's wing. There's such a strong pull to those of a similar, shared-misery. We tried staying in touch but rehab romances don't really go past it. Months later, we'd call each other from wherever we'd ended up, checking on our progress.

"I hope you're serious about your sobriety because I am about mine," she'd say over the phone to me while I stayed in my halfway home. I thought I was. Even after later

going for two years straight, but I wasn't truly ready, not yet. She sensed it.

"Good luck," were our last words to each other, ever.

The little box redesigns itself into different versions, but the vibe's always the same. Every word, a new angle shaped. Every phrase, a new wall set. When the sentence is fully complete, the room comes into view. The quickest way to purge darkness; simplicity.

IV.

The fall was too grandiose and so, produced no rise. I moved cities but remained trapped within newly carpeted rooms that I eventually too, turned ugly. Angels would come over and stare at my computer– Rossetti’s oil painting of Beata Beatrix– praying as the red dove approaches– sat center-screen.

“How can you look at that all day?,” they’d ask me before honestly telling them–

“I think it’s beautiful.”

I saw nothing but her hair at work; the way she stood up for herself the first time we went skateboarding together, I knew there was angst. I gravitated toward the cold-shouldered energy she’d give off every time she wasn’t consciously smiling. I took her hand and with my index finger drew out an I, a heart, and a U. She eventually gave me a book on heraldry that only fueled my inner-seeded flames of needing to leave behind a legacy.

With a broken front-end and wheel ready to fall off, I swerved the silver Cougar onto the right concourse towards the airport. She was landing soon from the holiday trip to New Orleans and I promised to pick her up. I wore my baby blue shirt with khaki pants and rustic Steve Madden slip-ons. She came out carrying two bags and a wider smile than she’d ever make again. Like seeing your best friend from last year on the first day of summer camp. We split an orange energy drink and lit up two fresh

menthol 100s as the car rolled into the starry night with two new lovers at its helm.

I'd traded in the firewater rum for steamed hot chocolate, the self-harm for heavy blankets on the couch with her, watching the light snow softly falling onto curvy pearl mountains on the patio outside. We shared the same space for two winters straight.

She had tears in her eyes on our last night there, as we watched the same shooting star glide across the darkened parking lot sky— knowing we'd never be the same as before, that I'd be moving from place to place, just through different forms.

The days started blurring together like the same film on repeat. A less-creative Howard Hughes— self-barricaded within my own world, within my own room. The Girl with the Epic Tattoos sat nearby, staring at my arrogant decision to stay trapped.

"It's on His time," she'd remind me, knowing I was too timid with my writing.

I'd close my eyes and see everything at once;

Seinfeld reruns on mute in the background, regularly-emptied ashtrays on both nightstands, constant cycles of clean laundry, 'Cosmonaut' on repeat, iron-on patches for her new white scrubs, breakfast in bed or at least late night guitar sessions while she ate cookies and listened to my regurgitated covers.

The daybreak blared us both awake and in the humble silence of morning, she'd place two fresh cigarettes out while getting ready. Little things kept

reminding me to stay grateful; the secret packets of sugar she'd add to the vegetables at dinner or how she'd dance on stage at Neon Trees concerts. It all seemed so possible.

I remember reading aloud the chapters in her nursing books for her to follow along with when doing homework. I remember timing her presentations in the living room, keeping them at eight minutes or less. I remember knowing about the wedding I'd promised to go to with her a year in advance, only to slam the door a week before it, forcing out with subdued anger—

“Have fun at the wedding.”

Dozens of glow in the dark stars stuck to my ceiling with plaster as my mom and I arranged them together back before Middle School. At night I'd listen to the radio playing Top 40 love songs and stare at the face in the small glowing bits of hope up above my bed. I'd let myself go there, every time; the riverwalk, the lights shining off the dark lake waters, the gorgeous landscape I'd stamped onto my frontal lobe since first seeing her many years ago in my youth.

Sinatra's love ballads for the city played on repeat as the Wolverine Line pulled into Union Station. The platform was paved with bricks of glory as I stepped off the train and into a new home. I climbed the concrete steps and found myself surrounded by gorgeous chaos, again in my element. People circulated throughout the land like coursing energy in-between back-alleys as expressways of veins— all was awake.

"Welcome to Chicago." It didn't take long to fall back into old habits; chopping up white powder with friends inside girlfriends' bathrooms, making moves toward more bad choices, and so on until the night would pause just long enough to sleep off its effects before restarting again.

I saw the yellow patent purse she graciously dangled from her left arm all around our streets for weeks before realizing we lived in the same building. The elevator ride was under twenty seconds but we only needed a few to see the signs. I remember thinking it cute to still feel the

butterflies before our first date. Rat Pack playlists blared from the two-hundred square-foot studio as I laid my clothes out for the night. I'd returned my new Fender acoustic to afford the five-star fondue restaurant. Dinner turned into next-day brunch which eventually turned into nine months of dueling-artistic magic.

We'd each write a short story on the spot and read them out loud to each other at small one-off coffeeshops nestled deep within our tree-lined neighborhood. Little kisses under lamp posts let me know she was a living princess. A picturesque connection of battling wits turned my arrogant male ego into humbled clay through the lure of a woman's intellect who always rose with the morning's first alarm.

Anne Sexton, *Happy-Go-Lucky*, books and shows and dinner dates at the Red Head Piano Bar that'd make most anyone keep a centered spirit about things; except me and my misery. It ran its way right back toward the originator at twice the speed. She eventually kicked me out once the video for *Hood Pope* lost all appeal—slapping me before slamming the door shut in my face. I walked away conflicted of which feeling dominated my heart most; the endless cycle of self-sabotage or my newly-found attraction towards someone I'd deservedly never see again.

Back to living in a box. Back to wishing it was different. I hear the call through the airwaves out beyond the clouds in the distance—

'Find me...'

I see thunderstorms outside my studio window as lightning cracks across the sky. I crash on my bed letting chemicals rewire all parts of my mind as my frontal-lobe explores further. Outside there is so much life— inside there is only grey ash. I walk her streets at night in ever-search of self-gifted curses, like always.

The city becomes my church— an industrialized nature with permanent smoke gliding across its surface. Her curls cascade down in flowing rivers of taxi cabs and speeding hearses. Her lips part the ocean and its coastline before swallowing my body's inner-pulp. My bride's alive in the electric wires powering our cement sanctuary with trillion-watt bulbs. Through the commotion and constant multi-dimensional regression of self— I rehear the promise;

'Find me...'

It flies through the fog like an emotional homing missile. Deep within a dark stare, an inner-spirit slowly points towards me as her eyes whisper, *'that's mine.'*

Above an autumn-rainfall's freshly soaked asphalt shine the peaks of high-rise rooftops projecting an outline of shapes I've never seen before—

eclipsing the laws of mathematics; Divine Geometry.

She'll appear like a siren in the seas of forgotten memories; Mnemosyne, reawakened. Throughout the moment, a portrait of future potential by way of rising phoenixes wrapped in Oak Street leather jackets.

Sparks will fly off the rails as L-trains thunder down their tracks toward the Loop. Three-inch heels will keep perfect time of our tapered lives through rhythmic-clicks off

alleyway-bricks below her stilettoed metronomes. Louder with each step; power sounds of an elegant season will surround us in stereo, ever-guided by the speakers' bass-driven beats.

We'll enter our dimly-lit kingdoms and take the two tallest thrones with pulled-patent cushions, like always. Lights of fire-glowing lava will branch off in strange sporadic angles through their glass-shaped cages; all restoring life to the smallest parts of the darkly-painted walls with such class-made patience.

She'll sit while looking the room over and silently read its vibe.

VI.

The promise is always alive. Whether it's fulfilled in the moment or the span of a lifetime, it's forever imbedded into the deepest places of our psyche. To see a bigger, cleaner picture, sometimes I need to take a few steps back and reexamine the artwork, especially in trying times that require a reshaping of reality.

"They found something," Gabriela said of her mammogram results while holding back emotion. Hodgkin's lymphoma and an eventual battle with five cancers ensued as her son was nowhere to be found. Sombre mornings came; quiet showers, semi-clean shirts for work, something to eat for lunch but chemo?— no. Not her doctor appointments, my new shoes. Not the pills she's taking to live, the one's I'm doing to die. Not the thoughts that matter, those that don't were the ones I'd consciously obsess over. Parties— every night. Escape— always. Drugs, strangers, alcohol, anger— all wrapped up tightly as my own little self-gifted box complete with a velvet bow tied neatly on top.

Amidst the continuous static are still flashes of hope. Rest stops placed along my life's highway to a destination that Angels keep trying to steer me away from, as Virgil's words ever-haunt the back of my mind; *'the way to hell is easy.'*

Each one of His Disciples came holding a lesson to impart. The spark was lit as her lipstick left scarlet marks on our mutual-interest, passing it back and forth as we plotted

out plans for future business. Sunsets splashed across the sky in waves of watercolors. Pastel pinks mixed in with Easter oranges as all washed out in the city's light-blue ceiling. I perched on my rooftop's fire-escape, sitting on the cold metal steps while staring out at the skyline I'd come to call home. I blew out streams of thick smoke as thoughts of pure dread replaced any bits of comfort left. Time was running out to do anything worthwhile. The clock started ticking louder than ever before. Each step I'd take, another spot the second-hand moved— over and over until minutes were made into months in the blink of an eye too bloodshot with poison to realize it.

The haze brings about bits and pieces of memories that don't make sense. Chopped up frames of film I don't remember shooting.

Anger works in ways that's hard to take into account. It threads itself into my daily existence with such a delicate touch that by the time its coursing through my body, I'm already breathing fire. I used to try meditation until I realized that it required active focusing upon nothingness. I used to be able to pray with so much more ease a long time ago too, but lately I feel like I've been picking apart my end of the line. The emotions used to drip out through my fingertips and onto the canvas below, smearing technicolor truths through optic brushes— a filmed masterpiece from beginning to end to new beginning.

I still see her flipping through the pages of *Inferno* she'd self-wrapped in plastic; trying to find the next piece of the scavenger hunt I'd created.

VII.

C. S. Lewis wrote about pride being the nexus for all other sins. Hubris self-love, self-pity, and self-hatred all wound together into a brilliant ball of over-confident arrogance.

I used to walk by the same bridal shop on my way to weekly therapist visits. With skateboard in hand, I'd stare through the window at the custom threaded pieces. A sight of renewed purity flowed down in off-white silks and satins. Beads of ivory instead of sweat. Lines of embroidered passion instead of permanent slits.

I'd imagine the clientele; ecstatic at the feelings they'd get on their final fitting day— an image of redemptive beauty reflecting back from all angles. She'd close her eyes and see the imperfect prince charming riding towards his bride, steel armor replaced by scarred arms, sword and shield by pen and paper.

Then; trust-falls back into a recoiled reality as she draws back the eyelid curtains and reaccepts objective truth. He is nowhere, she is non-existent; the shorelines dissolve back into the ash that rises up through the atmosphere like burned pieces of grey confetti.

The best men all gather around the groom— anxious to see the ball and chain locked up from their front row seats. I've pretended to get down on one knee too many times throughout my life— nobody's ever taken me seriously, not even myself. Wise words I recently heard;

“Don’t ever get married if you don’t want to have kids,” –knowing neither would even be half-realistic.

I remember one of my creative writing professors talking to me about fatalism and predestined souls. I remember *Paradise Lost* as Milton was the first poet to dare and humanize the other half. I remember buying two copies together and she laminating hers later that same night.

She is both saint and sinner at once.

She lounges on the Venetian piece with book on world architecture in hand as steaming Earl Grey sifts out of her vintage Malcolm McLaren-inspired porcelain cup. Diamond-shelf indica wades through the air as its clouds slowly rise from the self-wrapped amber tip balancing in-between her poised fingers.

She is draped in a see-through sundress paired with peep-toe lavender pumps and oversized straw hat or dancing underneath neon green lights pulsing out in strobes of sweat before soaking off the night amidst bubbles and jets with only the darkest of scarlet petals scattered across her wet surface-level.

She is what gives the scene its color, like always.

Time refreshes its frames.

Time refreshes everything.

That’s when I’ll first hear it; the language. She’ll speak in her native tongue and I’ll reflexively look up to answer in my own, but won’t be able to. Like I’ll already know their shapes and flow with their rhythms but a last-second crossed-wire will scramble the words, coming out

completely different. Far preceding genealogies and all original lines, before the branches of long-descended-ties—there sits The Unmoved Mover; breathing purpose into everything with such glorious life— putting pieces in play throughout corridor-ed time.

Beyond symbols and accent marks, passed tense participles and cognates— there is a familiarity present, rooted in future emotion reaching backward, realigning the phrases as it sees fit; an unmoved mover.

VIII.

During the last two years of living in the same place my father had passed away in, I attended a private Christian school up the street where my mom would patiently wait with the biggest smile on her face as she'd sit alone in its dirt parking lot counting down the minutes until I'd finally appear within the crowd.

On chillier Friday-evenings after getting home, we'd celebrate the weekend's beginning by baking hot banana bread together in our lively cornered-off kitchen; small but happy. Once Mondays rolled back around, all who'd skipped their Sunday services would have to openly admit their sin of subconsciously self-wedging unneeded separation between the sheep and their bride.

We'd have daily sermons every morning in the gymnasium where all the students would gather on the bleachers above the Principle/Pastor, watching him preach through the little vignettes he'd relay. Ninety percent of the time I'd be in my own world, thinking up new plot lines for the comic strips my friend and I started sketching out from scratch. Every so often, I'd hear a word or phrase that'd make my ears perk back up as I'd reenter Earth.

"The enemy wanted to turn as many people as possible towards the darkness, so one day he gathered all of his most loyal disciples and sat them down for a meeting," the sermon began. It goes that he went around the room, asking everyone their best idea on reaching the

masses, unimpressed by all until the last opened its mouth to speak—

“We tell them to turn their lives over towards The Light instead,” he started saying, infuriating the enemy at the thought of spreading the opposite message to his true aim, as the servant continued, “but to wait until tomorrow to do it.”

“Genius,” the evil one confessed, sitting back in awe of its simplicity.

Deep down; I know that The Light always was, is, and always will be stronger than everything else around it.

My mom came into my room one morning before my scheduled shift at a nearby yogurt shop in walking distance. I was still shivering with nervous sweat—

“What’s wrong?,” she asked, full of concern. I began telling her about the dream I’d just woken up from, the dream that’s haunted me for the past decade plus—

A beautiful wedding in a broken-down chapel; rays of sunlight still shining through its cracks in the rooftop, impaling the dense air with translucent touches of promised hope that pierce the fog in permanent halves. Beacons from high above all beaming prisms of rich color through the stained glass windows and onto walls half-sprawled with the bright vines of deep green emeralds.

She stands center-stage; framed perfection. A magnum opus wrapped in white threads of pure redemption. Untouched skin; restored to life and ever-pampered by real Seraphim who flew down from His Side and saved the star-crossed lovers from their eventual

suburban fate of celestial disappointment. I'd found true happiness at last through her eternal smile.

"Does anyone have any reason...," the Preacher repeats the words I'd been dreading to hear as she peers through her peripheral in my general direction. The entire body freezes shut— disabled by well-deserved humility and a forced life of self-imposed silence. Through the veil's intricate lace; a microscopic image of our entire universe and its timeline starts taking shape as it simultaneously begins unravelling at both ends, gaining exponential purpose within the glistening liquid of reflective teardrops being formed real time inside the bride's outlined-eyes.

Then I wake up.

"I couldn't move," I whispered out to my mom through thick gasps of air. She started choking up, seeing the scene for herself—

"But it was just a dream, right?," asking with as much emotional investment as I had in the off-chance that it wasn't. Just a dream; like all the times I've been rushed to Emergency Rooms for OD'ing as Angels would find my slumped body and refuse to let me die such a pathetic demise. Just a dream; like meeting my best friend, or that she ever existed outside my immediate self-centeredness at all. Just a dream; like the possibility that anything I ever did from the heart was truly real.

IX.

I owe my art this much if nothing else; the absolute truth – in its rawest form, forever erasing the gap between Artist and Audience.

Through the advice of angels are words engraved onto my designer's moral compass reminding me of my life's sole purpose; redemption.

Some dreams I actively seek out in hopes that their hauntings are ever-abstractive and self-implanted deep within the maze of crossed-wire encryptions that maybe– they might just be real. My chemically-altered lifelong-coma comes with an imagination that remains in a constant state of flux throughout the mixed-media thought-tunnels running on only the highest, if not sharpest– of stoner frequencies.

I gently slide the tip of my finger across the soft edges of her ankles where sole and topside separate for an entire night and not think twice about going any further. I pin her up against the wall by softly biting pierced-earlobes as jeans ease over paralleled-hips in slowed motions before falling to the floor beneath our bare feet below.

I am both sinner and saint at once.

I feel the cold metal zippers of her open leather jacket repeatedly smack against my chest; the only piece of clothing on either of our bodies as we out-best the breaking of each others' backs from the Kama Sutraesque-grinding upon the same chair for the past hour plus.

Amidst the room; a sensual intuition that turns our
two genetic buildups into counter-reactive towers of sexual
energy impatiently waits to rip-through by megaphone-
amplified moans we'd make certain that the world itself can
feel with a diamond's worth of clarity— and shine.

Dream-wave expanding;

Two souls

of the same sign—

watching all sides

as we hear billions

of beautiful

gunshots

blaze

through the

night sky marking

the start of our

week-long

royal-wedding

event—

it's official.

Her

finely stitched

bulletproof vest of

silken-threaded wires

reflects back a past

through mastered

alchemy of the very

Sun's

satin-
flowing fire;
–an ever-beauty
bleaching out darkness.
Her wreath whispers
beginnings of the
long-awaited
fulfillment
under
regal soils of
a promise
stemmed from
paralleled-
-lineages;
–a potential
ever-
reaching its
markets.
Ancestral aims
refined through
Cupid's love-arrows,
guided by Heavenly Eagles
soaring high
above in
multi-sphered
flashes
of future ascendance
as she nears

Her
Most
Holy
Alter
&
I
Mine.

“The bride has arrived!”
voices out the gathered
loved ones through
bouts of loud cheering
and commenced
celebration
as the first
gleaming pieces
of a mile-long
motorcade rolls
down in leisured
convertible movements
accented
by thumping sounds
of pounding subs
coming from out
the dozens
of duffle bag-
sized trunks.
Cherry paint-drops

sprinkle the
ground
in Pollock-
-channeled
brushstrokes
like the melting lollipops
of a humid-conquered
Houston Summer
from the swerving
procession of
Princes and Princesses
Kings and Queens—
all sitting atop
freshly-coated
four-
wheeled
floats leaving
behind mid-air
energy-streams
telling the cryptic
tales of rival meetings
between ivory and
burgundy castles
through in-rhythm
waves set to the
chopped and screwed
remixes of A\$AP
and Thugger.

Each
backseat—
a temporary council
of familial aristocracy.
Everything; primped
and proper. Nothing
left to falter.
Festivities thrown
in the name of
revolutionary
suicide-pacts
by permanent-
spotlight
stealing
martyrdom.
The
centerpiece
is pulled by
pure-bred
quarter horses.
The chariot slowly
slides into view.
She is
not an image
of mere
perfection nor
solely radiates
the inner-strength
of beatific love; no—

The Bride is Beyond Beatrice.
–A backdrop of
bright blue and
red bursts
merged
through golden
lava-filled fireworks
light up
the dark sky
behind the
dual-airing
dynasties
accepting
their celestial
roles, taking up
eternal thrones;
–setting the stage
to a sacred
joining
of ancient
bloodlines
with unresolved
mysteries that
remain in play
as the plot continues to thicken;
–forever searching for
the exact point
in our shared

dreaming
that put
into motion
the
metaphoric
split-off
and the
exact point
that it'd
re-found
i t s e l f
further
down
below
watching
their shapes
realign in
real time
into
the symbols
of an ever-
monarch's
permanent shine;
-like always-

r i v e r ; remerged.

Then I wake up.

I've been spoiled my entire life, given everything I've ever wanted. All eventually gathered dust or endured unmerited misery through my destructive nature. I've taken

freedom for granted before so I too, eventually felt the desperation of losing it as I laid in my lonely bunk—gathering dust, enduring self-merited misery.

Of all the gorgeous pictures taken of my socialite parents throughout their photogenic marriage, there isn't a single one of my mother smiling. None showing even an ounce of happiness. I remember my dad sitting by the living room window, blowing streams of continuous smoke through a small fan sat upon the sill. Though I never once saw him raise a finger to my mom and still; nobody should endure so much unmerited misery just to stay in line with social norms as she did throughout the self-imposed union. I never once saw them fight, but nor did I ever see them kiss, hug, or even hold each other's hands.

Back in the present, Gabriela laid on her uncomfortable bed, waiting for the moment I'd finally walk into the hospital room and surprise her with flowers and chocolate. Instead; I was wheeled into the E.R. on the bottom-floor as security handcuffed my wrists to the stretcher's metal handles, prepping to pump my stomach clean. I knew she was asleep seven levels above me as beeps from both IV machines kept perfect time of our lives half-spent sifting through the bleak corridors of institutionalized misery. I finally got my wish of walking down spotlight-lit streets with the reigning Queen by way of the sprawled hospital; a monitor of displayed heart-rate served as scepter held by her side as she wheeled it down waxy floors through short baby steps of inspiring strength.

After the storm, a period of personal restoration is required. In order to beautify a place that's been held under such a previous oppression, one must first create their own space of individualized-peace. Symbols of hope came through the countered images of potential happiness to my puke stains and pill bottles all surrounded by a brilliant swirl of sleeplessness cast upon the outside world with zero concern and even less caution.

An immediate shift within the Earth's core; flipping the switch on polar opposite poles when she appears in my dreams as someone I have yet to meet, taking center-stage; both brims ink-filled while adorned in Vivianne Westwood accessories with added revolver clip as liquified rose petals drip down halls of scarlet throughout a timelessly-armored heart. Her attitude; Rihanna– the posture; prayer, as her poet approaches his muse from beyond the background's shadows.

"Why does he want me so bad?," I once asked my mom.

"Because you've always given yourself up to him so easily," Gabriela said before slowly rising from the patio chair and walking off with newly-sparked strength. "Pray about it," the Queen said, slowly disappearing from my visual line of sight only to begin reappearing through all other spatial estimates of my life in search of the best possible spiritual route.

It's poetry.