

Hoops and Other Essays

By

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*To my parents, my partner Gabriella and son Vernon, my brother, and Professor Bucak.*

## Abstract

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*Hoops and Other Essays* is a collection driven by form and lyricism threading themes of grief, fatherhood, joy and anxiety. I place myself within an American landscape spanning South Florida, Northern Alaska, and Montgomery County, Maryland. Anchored by non-linear structures, an exploration of trauma, and a delight for language, these essays depict the coming of age of a thirty-year-old man who seems to be still coming of age. Poop is a theme; Nature is a theme. Speaking aloud to no one is a character trait, and iguanas are a motif. *Hoops and Other Essays* pulls free the particulars of the universal struggle of trying to be okay when things hardly ever seem okay. The collection comments on the inevitability of dying shared among the living and the pleasure and pain that emerges from loving what has to end. The essays were written over the course of two years after the sudden loss of my brother which was quickly followed by the birth of my son. In the end, *Hoops and Other Essays* tries to unravel how one fits between the polar opposites of human existence, with the hope to uncover more likeness than difference in the way we enter and the way we leave it.

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## Overtime

Ode to Stone Cold Steve Austin, Hulk Hogan, Mick Foley, Ray Mysterio Jr,  
and my brother, the heartbreak kid.

Ode to his DDT, his suplex, his pile-driver  
the hop-off-the-top-couch elbow-smash.

Ode to soft spots for a body to land,  
my body to land.

Carpeting, couch cushions,  
stacked up baby blankets.

Ode to the bus stop down the road where my brother waited,  
the lanyard attached to the key in his pocket

Ode to baby folds. Elephant onesies with magnetic buttons.

Ode to the Flannigan's bartender tossing tips in a metal bucket.

Ode to a couple or friends or siblings,  
talking with napkins on their lap. Ode to talking  
by the pond with frogs beside my brother.

Ode to Budweiser that begins:

*fuck Budweiser, but I love it.*

Ode to the crumbs flung off the bleach rag,  
the smell of breaded onions deep fried

Ode to Flannigan,

whoever he was, wherever he is.

Ode to the crack on the phone screen that makes Ode look like O-de.

Ode to the *o* and the *d*,

to *Julia's Bazooka*

and Fuckhead's Georgie.

Ode that begins with *Alone, baby folds*

Ode to my big brother's Chad Muska skateboard.

Ode to my mother's nightgown.

It was green.

She was awoken by a knock at the door.

Ode to hamburger helper,

to broccoli hidden in a napkin,

my brother's zip lock-ed pez dispensers.

Ode to dusting on the weekend.

Ode to wrapped presents.

*this is the PlayStation*, he informed me.

Ode to presence,

to flower petals on a wet sidewalk.

Ode to my father's pajamas.

He answered the door.

Ode to our baby folds,

we all had them.

Ode to the shot hit as time runs out,

to the missed finger roll,

the kid on the floor shielding his eyes from rafter lights.



Ode to me.

I heard the knock too.

Ode to the comeback.

Ode to coming back.

Ode to I'm back.

Ode to overtime and the 3rd Budweiser,

to the cop's son

my brother chased barefoot down Melrose

Ode that begins, *Let me see your badge.*

Ode to falling backwards,

into rivers,

my brother

falling forward,

a stranger's tinted window.

Ode to *what you got*,

to what you have,

or don't.

Ode as a veneer:

battered onions

*I know you're in there*, he once said in his sleep.

Ode to *in there*, that moment, I think of often.

Ode to *in here*, Flannigan's, South Florida.

Ode to my brother pinning me to the floor,

demanding the whereabouts of the channel changer.

Ode to the empty seat beside me.

Ode to apologizing.

Ode to digression,

repression,

to sudden bursts of fury.

In a gym, screaming at strangers for shooting too much.

Ode to shooting too much.

and the sound of my mother when she learned.

Ode to never forgetting the sound of my mother when she learned.

Ode to the words my dad said at the kitchen table.

*In my head, I'm still trying to save him*

Ode to trying to save him,

a half-court heave after time expires.

Ode to trying to save ourselves.

Ode to saving before the lights turn off.

Ode to never seeing over-time.

Ode to it's never over.

Ode to outside of Flannigan's

my forearm hooked around a steering wheel.

Ode to the heaving

And the silence

in the aftermath

where feelings always end in the same place

like a road or a river

toward a town, or source.

Ode to the source

my brother *is*

to my brother *was*.

A body and a voice

and then a jar

Ode to what became of me

riding my bike along a dirt road

and dusting

or more so pouring

or really: emptying

what I had left of him

Upon the rapids of a blue creek

Ode to what I have left of him:

## Hoops

Outdoor courts have bugs. Bees that colonize the backboard. Spilled cola at the free throw nourishing ants and hornets. I stumble on a divot where a puddle forms, but still hold my dribble.

When I'm not running fives at Florida Atlantic, I play alone at George Snow Park, where the court is surrounded by sharp-edged bushes. I move with no trajectory in mind, working up a sweat that soaks gym shorts and socks. My shirt becomes a rag for my face when I need it dry. I keep it bunched up under the pole that lifts up the hoop.

Maryland deer prance through soccer fields past the Damascus Regional hoops. A snowshoe hare near Coldfoots' ATCO arena sits on a lopsided spruce catching wind of a lynx. Iguana poop at Florida's George Snow Park comes down like soft serve ice cream on the roof of my car. Sweat is a problem only when it gets behind the eyelids. I switch from behind-the-back step-backs into turn-around fade-aways that, if mastered, could preserve my knees until my late thirties, that, if mastered, could compensate for when I was cut in middle school by the history teacher.

Outdoor courts sometimes aren't courts at all, but a rim nailed to a tree. They are held upright in suburban cul-de-sacs with bases filled with water, where blinky-sneakered kids play around the world, 7 on the line, or king of the court.

At a forests' edge, at the bottom of my parents' hill, is a slab of pavement with a hoop two feet shorter than the regulation ten. *Smoke a blunt* is carved into the pole beside *Open your Mind*. Faint lines outline hopscotch, where, carved in box number two is a tiny

heart with the initials *JM*. A hidden path slinks into a shallow creek, where a spider in a tire catches gnats in a web, where the water is low enough for a rock to poke through. The night after my brother dies, I drive on familiar back roads and return to the double-rimmed hoop where the nylon, years ago, was replaced by leather straps. It's an unlikely pair, but one that strives to survive the elements of Maryland humidity and winter ice storms. The lights take time to illuminate the court, so I stand in the dark with the ball at my hip, unable to see the hill that rises into soccer fields, that stretches into baseball diamonds, and becomes a forest after that.

For awhile, I heave from long range under a night lit by bulbs with timers. Nothing goes down easy. Sweat mixes with tears landing together on a surface that is slightly lopsided. I leave before the lights switch off, watching out for deer on the drive home, watching out on the winding road of Log House.

*Craig is wack* is spray painted on a green slab. In Lubbock, Texas, where the worn-with-time surface is emblematic of a barnyard fade. The rim is a circle of empty space, as if a history of bad weather and good makes lead to the nets' disintegration. I play with a poet who writes about prairie dogs in parking lots and left me his purple chair when he left Coldfoot. I spend time with my back turned, his forearm pressed into my spine, drifting into fade-away jumpers that, if mastered, will free me of the jump-stops that have shredded my ankles. That, if mastered, will reconcile the inner bench warmer I hold in my heart.

Down the hill from my childhood home is a court next to a hockey rink that's pressed against wooden fences of homeowners. Pavement splits making space for grassy weeds and budding butter cups, showing growth from the bottom up. As a child, it's here

I developed the first step to my right handed drive, repeating the motion of putting my head down and barreling to the cup. It's here I became good enough to make a travel team, but not good enough for the coach to put me on the floor. It's here I sat on a bench, waiting around for a lopsided score so I can touch the ball again.

“When people die, they leave a hole inside of us,” I say at my brother's celebration of life, to a crowded kitchen where everyone who ever loved him eats cubed cheese on small plates and sips out of clear plastic cups. “Try to fill the hole with good things,” I say, and walk back to my seat between my parents. Cousin Puddy stares with a perplexed smile, who spoke not of any hole, but about the opportunity to commune with God. John Shrewberry speaks too, and says my brother taught him how to use the DMV transit system.

“I never knew it was a skill to get from one place to the next.”

My aunt speaks and then cries, and then my mom cries, and then other people cry, and it occurs to me that crying grows and takes over and fills the empty space which at one point had nothing but words.

A forest does not need permission to overcome what a city sanctions. I bring my son to George Snow and we chase the ball from one side to the other. When he drifts over boundary lines, heading for the bushes, I scoop him back into play. When he poops, I lie him upon my sweaty shirt directly under the hoop. As I switch the old diaper for a new one, he finds the sky in the hole the rim makes and points, and says, “Circle.”

Hoops come in boxes. Hoops come in the mail. Poles attach to bases that fill with water, or sand, and become sturdier. They are thrown in trunks or truck beds, and are assembled by fathers in blue jeans, or ball shorts, or mothers with straight-elbow jumpers,

or grandmas who knew the Lakers by radio. A hoop is a cup without a bottom. A pole was planted in my parents first driveway. A driveway meant middle class, as did a personal hoop. Attached to this pole was a backboard with plenty of give, with plenty of forgiveness, which helped my shot go in, which was more of a shove than the form rooted in fundamentals.

At FAU one student says, “I got downs.”

“No I got downs,” another responds.

Sometimes you need to before seeing the court.

“Kill him,” is an order toward someone guarded by a weaker defender.

A hessie is a hesitation. A blow-by is what happens when you lose a step.

In Coldfoot, we drill a hoop to an ATCO unit and play threes on gravel. Games end with bloody knees and bruises, with foreheads smeared with mosquito guts. We play hard, as young men do, on the verge of feeling our age.

A court is where people go to lean on one another, to hold on to one another, to push off the ground and reach with a hand, saying, “are you good?”

“No man for real are you good?”

A court is where people go to kill one another without actually killing one another.

For a defender, a blow-by means you’re beat.

“Blow by,” someone yells at FAU, after it’s too late to stop a bucket.

Outdoor hoops are abundant, and sometimes hard to see, like birds blended into the landscape. They are tipped over, rusted, netless, no ground to plant its pole. They are behind restaurants, beside dumpsters, in alleyways, loaded in dump trucks, taken

elsewhere. Some are poleless, baseless, backboard-less, bolted to aspens, or oaks, or strapped to light posts with fishing line. They are rims–heads without bodies–lost, never found, on a roadside with dead things and the passing deer.

I have developed an eye for them.

“There,” I tell G, pointing to a hoop with a glass backboard bolted to a blue shed.

“There,” I say to a netless rim floating in a Colorado creek.

“There,” I say, pushing V in the stroller, to the rim atop the garbage pile in the Kwik Stop dumpster.

Are basketball hoops alive? It depends. There is a hoop in Fort Lauderdale that grows from the same hole as a mango tree. The tree, the hoop, together, kick back any made shot in a symbiotic relationship that rewards good shooting. Bad misses end in the road, or bounce high enough to land on the other side of a fence, where lead pipes have become windchimes, and stained glass dangles from the archway of a podager. There is a man in an America first t-shirt as much a part of the landscape as the court. He counts buckets from a red truck, and one day suggests I take a break. I tell him, “That’s okay. Need to keep up with these young go-hards come pick up season.”

He laughs. “Mother fucker I played here in the sixties. I can’t even begin.”

An old-head in San Antonio says he lives by the good word of God. He wears braces on both knees, runs up and down the court with a hunch. And each three pointer he takes either bangs the front rim, or airballs. Over and over he asks himself why, “why is everything short today.” That he plays is a miracle. The question then reveals a thriving imagination.



Some courts are less forgiving than others. In Santa Fe the wind holds the ball in the air like an illusion. Any shot needs to consider the elements. Chain netting catches my uncle's pinky leaving it mangled and useless. But some hoops *are* forgiving, like the one my brother knew in our parents' driveway, where he dribbled left handed with gritted teeth, unafraid of putting his elbow into my rib, unafraid of sending my shot-shoves into the garage door. I see him now, big brother, how he looked when he shot, his gritted teeth opening with his release of the ball, a space then revealed wide enough to fit inside a walnut.

Warming up means moving slower. Stretching prolongs what is coming. A blow by means you're beat. There's no other way to put it. At George Snow Park, I start in the paint and gradually move further back. I hit floaters, then move to elbow jumpers, then begin again the turn around fade-aways that, if mastered, will ensure I play basketball into my forties. That, if mastered, will protect me from my own death.

Shooting from further out turns a bad miss into a long rebound, and a deep dive into bushes that leaves rashes on my chest. When my brother dies, everything for a while becomes overly symbolic. I sit around with memories and questions, trying to find metaphors to keep my pain poetic. Meanwhile my body hides the hole that opens, and so I drive in the nighttime to circulate the grief with the blood.

Outdoor courts are sometimes not courts at all, but patches of grass stomped down by time. When my brother dies, it's clear that I'll die too. I slip on a back cut during fives and hear, and then feel, the pop of my big toe. When I remove my shoe, it's pointing at my face inciting collective agony in other players. A doctor flattens it into the socket by

pulling up and in. Each time I play, whether pick-up or alone, the ache in the dislocation pulses—a reminder.

On a tour of the Inuit village Anituvack, I ask a stranger to take a picture of me beside a hoop that stands at the edge of the town. On this tour, there are thousands of things I will never see again. This hoop is not one of them. In this picture, I am grimacing from the mosquitoes in my eyeballs. Power lines split the skyline into strips of murky white. “Don’t blink,” the stranger says. Beyond me a tussock field leads into the Brooks Range, and unknown wilderness after that. In the picture my arms are folded. There is no ball in sight and I wear a pair of black cooking shoes. I have no idea what is coming. But I don’t blink.

Every shot carries the intention to fill up empty space. And every shot camouflages all the shots that preceded it. Hair grows in strange places. My muscles collect memories that override cognition. When one shot goes in, followed by another, and another after that, the brain becomes a passenger to the body. A hessie is the false expectation of holding back. A blow-by is a history of morning suns. Outdoor courts remind me that my brother is gone. When I cross-over into turn-around fadeaways, I know it’s something I’ll never master. What would be the point in trying? Anything mastered is already gone.

Shooting hoops is working out. Or. Shooting hoops is working it out, pulling it from the inside, out into the outside. When the doctor pulled on my toe the ball went into the socket, she gave me a couple percocet, and I told my dad on the way home that if I needed to, I could whoop his ass. I was high. He forgave me by saying, “There’s nothing to forgive.”

But some courts are forgiving, like the empty parks in Wichita, Kansas with their single rims and intact nylon, where the trains pass and jiggle the nets. Courts have me when I know nowhere else to go.

Instead of backspin, call it forgiveness. “Put some forgiveness on your shot.”

“Don’t just shove it. Forgive it.”

Instead of follow-through, call it forgiveness. My shot is no longer a shove, but a beauty I feel when I do it right. I don’t come to the court for forgiveness, but it’s nice to know it’s there.

## Rideshare

The sun rises with V's button mashing and the singing of a jovial bulldozer: "*Scoop, scoop, scoop all the balls away.*" Not long after, the opening of a toy computer and listing of primary colors that concludes "*Keeping the workday colorful. Yeah!*" I move offline to online, pull on my pants and appear at a coffee pot.

A ding on my phone flashes a six dollar ride to the Boca Raton Town Center.

"Gotta jet, huh," G says, appearing in my t-shirt with V in her arms.

"Seems like it," I say, nestling in the crevasse between V's head and G's bosom.

NPR covers a Washington forest fire, covers smoke from Canada, the unprecedented heat index in Miami. My dad texts: "Norway might be our best option." "Then there is pickleball," a reporter says with an audio background of dinks and squeaks. "The fastest growing sport in America."

Through the windshield, the shedding of a palm tree looks like a struck leopard. From a distance, a deflated tire tube looks ancient and reptilian. Ducks stop traffic to cross roads. When I pee into the wind, it often comes back and hits my shin. When I go behind a Life Storage building, it's beside a dumpster where the loading ramps and garage doors are. Lodged in some hedges, my stream splatters a shredded tire. "I'm going to wait for my party at the bar," I tell the host of Trattoria Ramona, heading instead to the bathroom with marble sinks and soap that foams out into your palm.

Naturally, I develop a bad relationship with red lights. Stillness won't keep the Wifi on, nor get me to the next Porta John. When green goes yellow, I call out, "motherfuck," forgetting the Haitian man squished between two hefty bags of laundry. Forgetting the white couple three hours early for their flight back to Delaware. Forgetting the elderly lady in a Gap hoodie who says without the right context, but with the utmost conviction: "You are only human. You are not a bastard." Forgetting, forgetting, forgetting even the Bangladeshi math teacher who, on entry, proposes an under-the-table ride service between him and I.

To each one I apologize and say, "One needs to land on the right side of red."

The sun rises with the popping of V's vacuum, I appear at a coffee pot that squeals like a train when poured. I get lost in one parking lot or another. Entrances and exits disappear. Veering left instead of right sends me the wrong way and the GPS needs a breath to buffer. Braking too hard, too quickly, evokes a honk from a rear approaching tour van. Newly painted highway markers mix with the faded ones of old, and I enter the wrong lane, slip through the wrong exit, find again where a Michael's meets a Nordstrom, meets a Home Depot, meets a Miami Grill. If it's Wellington, or Palm Beach, or Parkland, or Okeechokee, it's hard to know.

Before the sun reaches its peak position, V and I follow shaded sidewalk slabs up 13th to George Snow Park and pass the carport dumpster where a doorless microwave sits atop garbage bags. We pass the Kwik Mart where bird nests fit in the crevasses of the

signs W. At the intersection of 9th and Palmetto, a block from the pediatrician who no longer accepts our insurance, we pass an iguana carcass.

“Loss of life,” I say, staring as maggots sprout into flies.

V points at the lamp post hovering above us, “ball.”

“That’s right,” I say as flesh disappears and skin gets dark and crunchy. “Ball.”

At home, my phone dings with a twelve dollar ride to Pompano.

“In this weather?” G says pushing V in an empty laundry basket.

“In any weather,” I say, slugging a shot of old cold coffee from the fridge.

I keep a Nalgene of water in a backpack on the passenger side floor mat. I keep coffee in a red mug in a cup holder. I slug one or the other, balancing hydration with momentum. Bladder fills and empties, and fills again. Construction workers turn hydration into a lifestyle. Migrant farm conditions ignite debate on NPR where ninth district Commissioner Mcgahee says, “All buses need air conditioning.” Further up the road, a gas station without gas. A Porta John under lock and key. A lady in a MaryKay t-shirt refills a styrofoam cup of Mountain Dew code red, and further the other way, a man with his finger orders me to “stay” in the Publix fire lane while he searches for his wife.

The sun rises with the sound of spilled crayons. V yells inaudible words to landscapers shooting their wind at fallen leaves and grass trimmings. I slip through parking garages seeking health care professionals in scrubs and lanyards. I use the restroom in a laundromat with slot machines and pinballs. Wood blocks, rubber balls, bent clothes hangers, flip flops are attached to keys to gas station bathroom doors. Mangos shrivel on sidewalks in Pompano. Kurtis Blow’s, “We Got The Brakes” is the

interlude between Fresh Air and Sundial. Cops get together in a park where pickleball sends offputting dinks into the atmosphere. A lady tells her drunk boyfriend not to vape in my backseat. “It’s rude.”

Instead of listening, he takes a long pull from the rig, and with a mouth full of smoke, says, “You’re ruining my birthday.”

Pavement has a way of absorbing heat and cutting off our oxygen. *Men at Work* signs lead to *End Road Work* signs that lead to a gated community named Woodfield Hunter’s Club and Boca Del Vista where speed humps sit vertically and the security lady rubs a smudge on my license.

I scoop a Serbian lady who slides a vacuum inside the trunk and says “This heat.”

I nod. “Nutso.”

She points left. “Go that way,”

I point to the GPS. “It’s better this way.”

“Just do as I say,” she says.

A school teacher leaves behind her self-published collection of break up poems, and says, “Best of luck with your endeavors.” A lady in Bart Simpsons pajama pants sips a Flanigan's cup in front of a giant guitar and says, “I shouldn't be here right now.”

When it’s goodbye, it’s goodbye forever. Nobody plays basketball in Wellington but everybody eats Chick Fil A. Pavement traps heat the deeper I get in Miami, where I drop off a businessman who recaps a visit to a doctor on behalf of his daughter’s spine.

“It was as if he were selling to us instead of treating.”

The sun rises with the hunger of my son. A decomposing iguana carcass separates this morning from the last, but often, when rolling by with V in the stroller, I forget to notice the reptile that was.

“God’s Microwave,” a man whose mom passed away twenty months ago says. “That’s the new normal.” I drink enough black coffee, my muscles tighten. Each day ends on a couch that I’m too tall for. Sudden storms pelt the windshield with rain and folks with cardboard signs catch the chill on hot skin. At a Whole Foods crosswalk, a man in a wheelchair wears a pair 1920s aviator goggles. He shakes his peeling fist at the darkening sky and yells, “Bring it on mother fucking God.” Wind slants when lightning cracks oceanside. He turns his head to face me.

“How old are you?” he asks.

“32.”

“Why you holdin’ your peter?”

“I need to piss.”

Thunder overhead sounds like the upstairs people moving furniture. The man’s voice roars over the wind, “You don’t say!”

The sun rises with a song from a fire truck certain it will save the day. V’s love of tupperware permeates the walls. We drive to the park when it’s too hot to stroll, and spend most of the time swinging in a bucket seat. Men who do opiates warn us of a python on the nature trail. V extends his legs and kicks me in the stomach. “Nice one,” I say, keeping my eyes peeled for something slithering in the mulch.



At home, I change Vernon's diaper when my phone dings with a 4 dollar ride to a nearby Publix.

"4 bucks aint shit," G says, sitting pretzel style with a red bin on her head.

"It's better than nothing," I say, puncturing a hole in the bottom of a Celsius and puckering my lips.

I pick up a man with Parkinson's who hands me a ziplock of orange, translucent pill bottles, and says, "Three grand right there." Commissioner Mcghee says, "I'll be back in town as early as Tuesday. Let's talk then." I run over palm tree shedding, but brake for indecisive iguanas to cross roads. A nurse in my backseat scratches a Brightline train card on the side of her skull, while we wait for a mama and her ducklings to waddle by.

The scratching grows louder.

Someone on NPR says, "This new normal isn't so normal."

It's not a scratching, but a digging.

Someone on NPR says, "The memeability of Barbe-hemier."

"There's the train," the nurse says, her fingers now on the door handle. "You can stop here."

Someone on NPR says, "Ghost guns."

I point to the GPS. "It's just a little further," and inch closer.

"Just stop here," she says again.

Someone on NPR says, "And then there's Pickleball."

"Please," the lady pleads.

G says, "The center cannot not hold."

“Stop!”

I stop. The door opens. I yell before it shuts: “run” And she does, but not because I say it. Her hair flaps cinematically. Her studs slap pavement right before she leaps over a grass partition. A family enters the frame, running also but slower. I wait to see what happens. My passenger, who is no longer my passenger, grips the railings of the stairs, and takes two steps at a time, swipes her train card, and boards. The doors slide shut. The family, one after the other, reaches the platform and watches the train slide out of view.

All my profits are split with invisible boardrooms. An outdoor John has a cardboard sign taped to the door handle that says, “unusable.” The nearby Burger King requires a key, but the key is in the bathroom. The light posts on 95 jut from the ground like giant Ys. They pass, one by one, overhead as the need to pee compounds with the sudden smack of raindrops on the windshield. My phone dings with flood warnings. G sends a video of V saying “hi” to rubber sheep. I imagine water build-up where the carports are, but remember V has a new pair of floaties and G was once a lifeguard, and if we had to, we could blow up the air mattress and use it as a raft.

I hold on to what I can’t see. Deep breathing only works for so long. When it’s goodbye it’s goodbye forever. The heat in my pants is a quiet surrender.

“That’s all folks,” I say to the empty backseat, crawling with traffic toward the next sunrise.

The sun sets with a tantrum from V, who won’t let his mama go. My last passenger is an ER doctor who enters the vehicle and says, “Let’s get out of here, people are dying.”

I shower with my shorts on and watch the road spiral down the drain. Faces become numbers and numbers become frozen pizza from Trader Joe's. I lie down with G and we try to make love, and then we try to fuck, but when V cries, those parts of us don't work.

In the dark nursery, I hold his head against my chest, singing quietly,

*"It's not what you think. I could be gone in a blink I don't wanna leave."*

I hear my phone ding in the other room.

"At this hour," G says, squirting toothpaste on the bristles of a toothbrush.

"I think so."

My passenger smells like clean laundry. Her suitcase fits beside the carseat in the trunk. When she enters the backseat I say, "hello," and she says, "hello." I say, "lets get out of here," and she says, "let's." Each ride is as predictable as the last. We want only to get to the next destination. Heading south on I-95, overhanging light beams wash over the windshield as the tires and the pavement know they were made for one another. Ted Grossman's night train plays the old jams by Bennie Goodman. I move among lanes unencumbered by speed limits or cars. Time dwindles with the distance.

"Are you from Florida," I say into the rearview.

When there is no response, I turn to the backseat and find the lady, with her head against the window, asleep.

"Oh," I say and release some pressure off the accelerator.

Her even breathing mixes with the power of the engine. I carve the subtle bends with care. I listen to the softness of vehicles passing by. I drive as if transporting

something that can easily break. Should the ride go beyond the time we were given, I don't think I'd mind.

## The Chase

Trap the bigger brother in a picture frame. Here we can map the disappearing hairline. We can assess the polo shirt with the cargos. We can say, “He didn’t always show his teeth when he smiled.” A grimace was more of a flinch when something bugged him. Add the fact ups, find a solution.

He was kind to his friends and family. He was loved by many. Deep condolences were shared in various forms. Fact: he once robbed someone for their percocets. He stole money out of my wallet. He had a crude sense of humor. And a temper. And a soft side. You could say anything to him. He’d listen to you.

The facts don’t always add up.

Candy in a CVS bag. Gum inside a glove box. A Starburst stash in a shoebox beneath the bed. Recall the neighborhood mapped on computer paper to ensure maximum candy acquisition come Halloween. And an impressive Pez dispenser collection kept in a zip lock in the closet. He knew of mom’s top shelf licorice, just like he knew dad kept pot in the cement room filing cabinet. The blue Sour Patch Kids was his favorite. All of this. More.

He knew what I couldn’t. Secrets gathered from the non-time, when I was merely a hypothetical.

See us racing to the dinner table at the sound of our mom’s voice. Climbing stairs that led to a door which determined a winner. As soon as I believed in winning, legs

would be knocked out from under me. He worked in spectacles. A staircase chin-slide was a victory. Each race ends with a reversal.

Bundle facts together. Carry them around awhile. Spread them on the carpet and see what's there: a post-Reagan commercial of a boy sprinting it would seem for his life. All the while a voiceover of a dire grown up man who said "Nobody wants to be a junkie when they grow up."

"I want to be a junkie," my brother declared in response, at the age of five or six, to our mom who... He handed me this memory on a screened in porch, years later, when it was him and I getting drunk while it rained outside. He handed it to me with bewilderment, learning something about destiny, or chance, or what...with living.

By then the term *junkie* had been deemed socially unacceptable for its blatant, dehumanizing force, replaced instead with *disease, with sickness*. By then, he received treatment for a sickness that made pharmaceutical and rehabilitation corporations obscene riches and, in his own way, moved on to other pursuits.

Facts, when arranged in certain positions, convey something more than facts.

He was 34 when he died. It happened from a bad batch. One of the last times we saw one another, he expressed gratitude for having kept his body and mind free of the harder stuff. Though, he mentioned he partook occasionally in what would be considered softer stuff, say, like, India Pale Ales and decriminalized marijuana.

"I think I knew that," I had said, as we sat outside a sushi place in Boynton Beach, drinking sake.

Depart from the facts, and speculate awhile. Speculate so much you smell sour patch kids. What is the little brother's responsibility? The enabler? The confronter? "He knew the score," our father said, eyes swollen and bewildered. "He knew the score."

Blame the system circulating bad batches. The futility of pain eradication that ends in a multi-billion dollar industry. Blame the arrangement of events leading to a poor decision. How chicken wings, a balmy evening, and cold beer compromised brain chemistry. Blame the man appearing at the precise moment of post-meal slumber with the ingredient to prolong the waning night. And my brother, having confidence with spontaneous parking lot transactions, inquired: "What you got?" This man had, in fact, what my brother did not want. This man had what my brother grew to despise for the unyielding pain it had caused him and our family—but the question we always wonder: did this man know death was in his pocket?

A fact can seem like hyperbole, as in: people carry death in their pockets. As in: billions are made manufacturing death.

Fact: we did our best work in our childhood basement. "I'm free," he had said meekly, like a whine. "I'm free years-old." This was how he liked to play. In reversals. I was meant to bully him. He offered the power I was hungry for. But each time, by design of such play, I let the power get to me, and pushed his face into the carpet much harder than the rules allowed. How quickly he got bigger. The fact is, my nose cracked on a box speaker. But my power was the evidence I could present to our parents. Blood could be a good thing. A broken bone meant I was not alone in the crying.

Cling to facts and you'll find plenty are missing. I recall a blanket woven with yellow, orange, and brown yarn draped over him. "The darker the better," he said in

impromptu forts. As time passes, he's harder to see, but the blanket remains. The blanket is right there, at the forefront of memory. Pull back the blanket and nothing is there: empty space inside of empty space.

So pin the brother to a wall. Gravitare toward the brows, as they convey what the eyeballs see. Recall a walk home from school, and the pleasure he took when informing me of the unusually small size of my head. Trace his outline, his length, his 6'5 aliveness, and feel the weight of a palm on a skull. Follow him on an inner tube attached to a speed boat. Watch him get smaller. Watch him lose his grip. Watch the lanky body skim across a flat lake before sinking below the surface.

People use numbers to measure time passed. In two years, seven months, and nineteen days, I'll be the same age my brother was when he died. A number is a fact and a fact can be a comfort. *I am here, you are not.* There is no victory in living. Only an immeasurable distance between one point and another.

A brother offers what parents can't. A body that holds you against the carpet. A hand to muffle screams. Loogies over eyeballs. See brotherhood this way, from the ground looking up, and know a little about helplessness. But go into the guts, into the ribosomes, into a memory: *sunlight upon the neighbors forehead, the weight of my brother pressed upon me, pressing upon the neighbor, for a long, long while, this weight—* and uncover the closest thing to yourself.

Play the blame game until a circle forms. Blame the little brother. Blame the man with death in his pocket. Blame the bigger brother for never letting the night go. Blame narcarn's inability to wrangle the spirit back. Blame the light reaching through a pulled back eyelid that my brother escaped from.



Facts arrange themselves given our proximity to them. My brother could only exist if I existed. The facts of him, chosen by me, say more about me than they say about him. He always needed me to be “my brother,” and vice versa.

We can call this the little brother complex.

Which implies an inability to imagine the before time, the non-time. Where I was an idea my parents shared during pillow talk.

“One more?”

“You think?”

“One more.”

Later a question posed to him, “How does a little brother sound?”

Expectations come whether intended or not. I was meant to join him, yes, but also I was meant to make him feel less alone. Given the order of events, the little brother adheres to the bigger brother. Little did anyone know of the hunger I brought into the world. Little did anyone know about the territory he ruled and protected.

Fact: The little brother complex hinges on an urgency to make up for the non-time. We eat more hamburgers because of all the hamburgers we never ate that our older brother did. The little brother cannot avoid his insatiable appetite for experience and attention. A question we never ask, but shapes our worldview, is: how could you all ever get along without me?

It’s a question that lights the stove in our belly and oils our gears.

Reverse positions: to the bigger brother the little brother is a trespasser, unruly, as bad as a colonizer peering over the expanse of new, fertile land. The older brother was promised a companion, yes, but in servitude, and instead received a pest. Always longing

for the empire that was, but is no longer. The bigger brother complex hinges on destroying the little brother who has swiftly occupied half, if not more, of the territory.

When complexes collide the result is a shriek in the nighttime, the slamming of a door, dusklight charley horses, blood in the snow, close calls with sharp corners, with box speakers, and then distance, silence in the nighttime, when questions emerge between rooms separated by the corner of a hallway: How are they them, and you you, and will they, will you, ever be ok?

Fact: nobody escapes childhood unscathed.

Fact: He was our parents' first true love. And I was his first disruption. They were a family without me. When he was born, he became the archive of the non-time, and when he died, so went the facts.

As we grow older, brothers lose energy for battle. It's a likely progression. Relaxing to the futility of hatred, needing to preserve energy for the onslaught of adulthood, and a closer proximity with dying. Or, it comes from love that has been battle tested. Like boxers with swollen eyes embracing in the middle of a ring. Or, the time between seeing one another growing, where encounters that happen become more sacred than they once were. Or it's to fulfill the parents' wishes, who only ever wanted peace, and at times, demanded it, or reacted harshly when there was none.

And so maybe the battle ends after a staircase reversal, where the little brother shrieks loud enough to inspire the mother to charge the bigger brother, and lift him off his feet by his shirt. While, from the staircase finish line, the little brother watches surprise turn to fear, turn to tears, on his bigger brother's face, feeling the weight of responsibility for the wrong outcome.

Months before he died, we were drunk on a screened porch and it was raining. We spoke in memories, readily sharing the very territory where we once fought. I held him. My hands rested on his chest, his head rested against my chest. What is brotherhood but learning to die alone together?

Fact: what is in fact gone, keeps the collecting alive.

My bigger brother leaves the world himself, as a deep, metaphysical being that is both mysterious and very familiar. That he was taken out by a force which attaches a reductive narrative, and evokes the sentiment “loved by many” by the loved by many and the word “prayers,” written and spoken, again and again, and fish-bakes in disposable hotel pans with cards with angels on them that says “taken too soon,” and a blanket of buzzwords like Perseverance, Joy, and Warm hugs, and a note, and some blueberry cobbler, that I ate standing up with my fingers, can be viewed as a collision of the sentimental with the factual, with the bigger brother and the little brother, and creates something of a fusion of he and I. His absence. My experience. This ordering of facts.

Fact: Four years, ten months and five days from his day of death, and I’ll have lived without him for as long as he had lived without me. It’s strange to be alone. The dark period ends when I do. So much non-time ahead for a little brother.

## Thresholds

When I ran into a wall, I did not know there was a wall there.

At first, I believed I was crossing a threshold. Given its transparency, I could see into the room with a vending machine, a bulletin board, and a staircase that led to another room to the reading I planned to attend. Whether this reading was in an auditorium, or a classroom, or some other functional room, I never found out.

First, I ran into a wall.

As blood from my nose arrived, I said to a stranger, “Did you see that?” who, at about the same time, entered from the outside through the door that led him inside.

As it was obvious what had happened, the stranger hurried up the staircase and disappeared without answering.

*Thud* is a good word to describe the sound. *Boink* maybe less so. *Crack* works, but it comes after thud, and explains the break of the nose-bone. What the stranger heard was my foot against the wall that impeded my walk. This thud—the thud of my foot—was louder than the head-thud, and much louder than the crack of the bone.

When standing in a soldier's pose, the nose is furthest from the body, except for our feet.

*Thud-crack.*

The blood that came, came quickly. Blood signals your insides are on the outside. When the inside is outside, something is not going according to plan. To survive in this

world, the inside has to stay inside, or else everything spills out and you die. Blood is blue on the inside but red on the outside. We never know blood is blue. The sight of blood can be jarring, especially after an unexpected collision with a wall.

After the wall, I did not want to make a mess, or really, I did not want people seeing me making a mess. So I removed my overshirt, covered my face to stop the blood, and hid any evidence the inside had ever made it outside.

After anybody runs into a wall they either choose to continue forward to their intended destination, or else figure out a new plan. In two separate biking accidents, G was struck by a car. Neither time required hospitalization, but both times she collected herself off the pavement and made it to work.

The decision to skip the reading was an instinct of self-preservation, more primal than anything. Pain from my busted nose met with my teeth, and moved vertically, creating an isosceles triangle of pain on my face. At home, I filled a zip lock bag with ice and lay on the bed. I thought back to what happened before the wall. The walk toward the reading with some of my classmates. I thought of the stone table where we had sat drinking coffee and Coca Colas, eating campus salads, enjoying one another's company. I thought about the professor who approached our group, who, at the same time as us, was starting to walk over. This professor was not part of the creative writing program, though he was still in the English department, and someone we all knew and respected. And this professor, half joking, half sincere, asked, "Can I walk over with you creative writers?"

As I passed students heading toward my car, I scanned expressions for evidence that they knew what had happened. I wanted the wall inside me, someplace where no one

could reach it. When we run into walls, we don't think there is a wall there. This goes without saying, but it's the aspect of running into a wall that's most confusing. In one moment we are confident in our ability to differentiate between a wall and an empty space. For me, I could see the staircase that led to the reading, and the doorway that led outside, and the soda machine that took credit cards, and the bulletin board with flyers advertising clubs and events. I never failed to make it through the door before. There is something unsettling about bashing into what you know is not there. It's a collision with what is certain. It can feel like the world is trying to tell you something.

I've watched my son slip on ripped out book pages. I've seen his collision when not recognizing his growth, rising suddenly under the kitchen table. His collisions are collisions with certainty. When I ran into a wall, it was as if a secret was revealed and I had no control over how it would spread. I imagined my cohort—or were they my friends—heading down the staircase moments after the collision. Not laughing, nor making jokes, but concerned. *Are you okay? Can I get you some ice?* Which was worse somehow, this worry, as if I were someone who could not take care of themselves.

At home, lying in bed with a ziploc bag of ice on my nose, I thought about the moments before colliding with the wall when I spoke to G, who had just left the pediatricians and my son's fifteen month check up, where they held him against the table to administer the shots. My mom was there, who I spoke with after speaking with G, who said similar things G said, “he was not happy about those shots” and I, similarly, explained again, that I was attending a reading with friends/folks from the cohort, and afterwards I had class, and would be back soon after that.

Before the wall, I ate green bell pepper and ground turkey soup. My mom, from my living room, asked, “Is the soup not salty enough?”

“Not quite, it’s not for me,” I said. And before the soup, I ate breakfast: oatmeal with goji berries and I remembered I asked G why she never eats the oatmeal I make and before she could say anything I asked, “Is it because you hate me?”

Before the wall, I spoke to my son in a nonsensical way. I called him Mr. Poops and waddled around like I soiled my pants. Yet I adhered to daily obligations. I taught my students things about writing and reading. I got mad at ball-hog undergraduates on basketball courts. I changed my son’s diaper and washed the dishes. I told my mom I loved her. I held G at night. I didn’t always put deodorant on. I wasn’t kind to strangers in traffic, nor the people who slammed doors in our apartment complex. I called them names from the confines of my head. Sometimes, I muttered, “loud ass mother fuckers,” to myself.

As I lay there with a broken nose, I thought about these things, with strange investigative purpose.

Before the wall, I thought it important to attend the reading because I had little time left in the Masters program, and did not know how many more readings would be available to attend. Those from my cohort were going, and my professors too, and so I walked alongside them toward the building, where I called G, and my mom, while also using the bathroom.

Before the wall, I rushed to complete daily obligations. I followed a routine dependent on our son’s sleep and eating schedule. Surprises were not welcome. Possibly because our son was a surprise. To get our son to sleep through the night, we avoided his

nursery as he cried himself asleep. We lay in bed listening with pillows over our head, our hearts dropping and rising with the fall and rise of his cries.

Our absence that night, for him, was a surprise.

Lying in bed, the ice melting against my broken nose, G, my mother, my son, walked through the front door of the apartment. They walked through the door, because they opened the door, creating an empty space to move their bodies through it. When I heard their voices, I was both relieved and sad. Sadness is a surprise, and it comes from a strange place. How come I was not entering the apartment too, at the same time as them? If I were with them, would I be here, lying in bed, after a collision with a wall I didn't know was there? Was this the world telling me something?

G came into our bedroom and sat on the bed beside me. Before the wall, she said things like, "I'm going to be a pizza box in my last life." She wore my underpants when she ran out of clean clothes. And sung to our son in the rocking chair until he fell asleep. She had been struck by two cars cycling to work, and each time lifted herself up, and cycled on.

I told her the story of the wall, as she stroked locks of my hair, listening.

Before the wall, I wore many hats. I was a student. I was a teacher. I was a partner. I was a father and a son and a person who played basketball and drank beer at night, and freestyle to himself alone in the car. After the wall, I was still all of those things, but as I lay there, I felt like I had been performing this person the whole time.

When we run into a wall, we often stop the blood by shoving toilet paper through the passageway. We pop Advil to lessen the pain. We fill bags of ice to stop the swelling.



We press our clothes against our face to stop people from seeing the blood. Days pass, we recalibrate. Eventually we forget the whole thing ever happened. But, when you run into a wall, you've run into a wall. There's no going back.

But I keep coming back to the wall. I turn one corner, then another, and another, and I find myself where I am. I want it to mean something, because, at the time, it meant something. I didn't think there was a wall there.

I've said this already, I know.

Before the wall, it sometimes felt like I rushed through the world with a cartoonish smile on my face. When the professor asked, "Can I walk with you creative writers?" I said, "Sure, so long as you stand over there," pointing, it would seem, to a grassy patch ten feet away.

The professor smiled and nodded and knew it was a joke. After the wall, I remembered he had once stepped in my apartment, carrying a box of toys his children no longer had use for. I remember the three car seats side by side in the back of his car. I knew him as a professor, but also as a father, and the previous owner of the blue floppy cat my son now slept beside.

I never mentioned this to him. After the wall, I wondered about moments in his life when he'd been excluded, and if my joke brought him to a moment in the past when he was on the outside looking in. I then wondered why I hadn't simply said my moms soup was delicious and that I was grateful she flew from Maryland. I wondered why I ever asked G if she hated me. Where did that come from? Did she ever think about the question? Did she think about that question more than I ever intended her to?. And I

wondered if it walked through this world with a cartoonish smile on my face, and how my son respond say when he knew Mr. Poops was him.

Heading across campus, I tried to keep the secret inside, but you cannot hide colliding with a wall. The secret is out. The secret is out whether anybody witnesses the collision or not. There is no hiding from what you are. After the wall, I was still a student. I was still a teacher. I was a partner. I was a father and a person who played basketball, who drank beer at night, and freestyle to himself alone in the car. Yet, I was also somebody who ran into walls. The truth is, I had always been someone who ran into walls, though I was only feeling the impact now.

There was the sound my foot made. And the thud-crack which led to a broken nose bone. The blood gush I caught in my overshirt. The words “Did you see that?” spoken to a stranger who then quickly disappeared. And the battered ego, a missed reading, the rush across campus to hide my face in G’s lap, where I thought about events that led up to the wall.

And perhaps it occurred a long time ago. That I had been one collision course with the specific wall. That this wall was my destiny.

The ice bag slid off my face and hit the floor. Water leaked free as I had not sealed the bag completely. This in itself was painful. A puddle formed and I did nothing to stop it. Instead, I snorted blood back into my brain, and watched it slowly expand.

“I could just cry right now.” I said to G.

When you run into a wall, you run into what is certain. It can feel like the world is trying to tell you something. Some walls are internal, some walls are just walls. Either way you're always going to be bashing into something.

In the 7th grade, I sat at a lunch table with the kid—or were they my friends—I ate lunch with. Trevor Golden would attempt to sit and eat lunch with us too. Often he was there before us. I remember, for whatever reason we never liked this, and pointed away from our table, to someplace else. Perhaps a table that was empty. Perhaps a table with other kids who were not us. We said, “Geez Trevor.”

“Go over there.”

“You’re taking up a good seat.”

Our son—in that moment—pushed the bedroom door open and showed us his front teeth. Bright band aids covered skin where doctors sunk tiny needles into his skin. He couldn’t talk yet, or know how to form the right words. He could only gesticulate and babble, but the smile on his face said, “There you are.”

## Metaphor

Flowing river. Frozen mammoth tusk.

Lynx tracks, wolf print, rooftop raven flocks.

Coldfoot is middle-of-nowhere's middle of nowhere.

It's limestone mountains, summertime lush, a burst of fall, and seven months of darkness.

It's armies of spruce, spurts of aspen, and tall birch.

It's Pink snowmelt. It's wild mushrooms, wild ducks, Wild Bill's rifle in a cemetery.

Mosquito-y, buggy, fire-y, dirty, pristine, a right-above-your-head aurora borealis.

It's parked semis, rumbling motorcycles, loaded up vans, and John Peter's grader three times a week.

It's a trucker café, a blue post office, a patio canopy, a slithering pipeline, these trailers called ATCO units where people sleep where blackout curtains or trashbags shroud the windows.

It's the one road to the Arctic Ocean.

It's a hot lunch with an afternoon shit. Coffee to-go cups, CXF bumper stickers. Hooded sweatshirts with an imprint frozen foot. A helicopter landing pad in a dirt lot. A Frozen Foot Saloon with twist off wines. Drunk-talk between work crews, laughter among friends, war stories between cyclists, a quarrel between lovers. It's the silence of beer coolers, when everybody has gone to sleep.

It's a metaphor for gold miners from the 70's that couldn't hack it during winter. A name for a pilsner. A name on a shot glass. An epithet for a loved one. The feeling of Slate Creek in September.

It's a 6 foot 7 wizard's dream that begins in a little white van. It's wood paneled and wine stained with mattress crammed compartments and an ever growing lost and found.

It's burnt coffee in a thermos, bacon fumes toward an oven fan, a murder of fryer-oil-fed ravens, pink light cast over Colbert's Nub.

It's antiquated generator shacks, broken down pick-ups, junk piles, gutted motors, sudden power outages, staring into soup with a headlamp.

It's a mechanic named Kevin running toward the generator shack. Yukon Jeremy's drunken drool, saying "Dis shit's better than HBO."

It's an out-of-state staff in the same colored shirt. It's close quarters and tight knit.

It's a 100 names and dates, but no hometowns in Alaska.

It's home to riff raff, wanderlusts, and potheads. To the financially irresponsible and lonely and a guy named Bart, and this other guy named Watts, and Laura Wart, who sings along to JB's banjo.

It's not staff, but coworkers. Not employees, but coworkers. Not family—coworkers.

It's home to sensitive undergraduates with FOMO. Suburbanites who crave attention. For cult-born gun lovers. For Cast Iron Tims and Deadhorse Daves and Stanford social justice activists and born again Christians. For Mormon graffiti artists, Marlboro smoking opera singers---an old lady named Gwen who pees in empty Folgers containers that she pours outside in her window when it's cold.

It's ego casserole, mashed personality, the human scramble to be known.

It's Mike Miskovitche's twenty years of free ice. 8 Ball's request for burnt onion rings. Clutches' advocacy for a hockey team.

It's painful conversations with truckers Chet, Roger, and Buzz. It's oil centric, male dominated, lucrative and Libertarian. Home of the belt loop revolver, women who carry spittoons. It's Mike McCann's cowboy hat, his band of horses, cheesy hash browns, indoor trucker smoke, the alarming sound of an N bomb at the trucker table.

It's listening to people you want to sock in the face. Caring about people with the belief they don't care about you.

It's three in the morning, the wizard crunching the numbers, eating Cheerios and no one around.

It's a café sinking into the earth, little by little, year after year. It's leaky roofs, overflowing toilet bowls, exploding cans of canola spray. It's an emergency ride with the trooper to Fairbanks. Ian Colbert's hot blistering face. Poet fingers cramming into plywood cracks for a dropped pain killer.

It's a metal rod shoved up a fryer's rectum. The plop of Coagulated crumbs hitting the bottom of a stock pot. The waddle when lifting hot fryer oil through the kitchen, out the door, to be dumped into oil drums where a murder of ravens wait.

It's putty knives scraping hood sludge into hefty bags. It's smushing dumpsters with loader tongs. Wyndsong force feeding Pawpaw and PawPaw 2. It's last night's beer cans, empty bottles of Rock Gut, three-day-old clam chowder dumped in pig troughs. It's vans crashing into snow banks, into moose, into the sides of things. My own head against limestone, skirting Sukapaks ridge in tennis shoes.

It's Sukapak. It's Dillion. It's Wheel. It's Cathedral. It's Wolf Jaw. It's Blue Cloud. It's Michelle. It's mountains named after drowned daughters.

It's homemade empanadas and beer braised pork butt. It's sourdough bread and Scott Landis' left over lasagna. It's soggy hashbrowns and perfectly cooked sirloin. It's soufflé, Big Ben's Tacos, peas that never split.

It's an Australian vacation when marriage is on the rocks. A Midwestern ladies quest for

purpose. Spring break for Chinese college students. A Japanese man's rickshaw strung with a banner that calls for world peace. It's the step that breaks climbing to the office. A place between one home and another. A conversation about Duffy's truck. One about the missing dough hook, and the fan next to the dish pit. One about Em Jay eating broccoli. Another about the spread on the Lions games.

It's a refuge for the geographically confused. Home for the undiagnosed. Land of odd balls. It's the womb, really. A nest. Your final attempt at a soulful existence.

It's saving money, buying a van with a stove, going to Canada to pick mushrooms. It's that van catching on fire and the red eye flight back. It's the forever soft spot in the wizard's heart as he sweeps up the mess you made in your life.

It's veganism too, and liberalism, and idealism and socialism, inclusion, political correctness and incorrectness. A broken vacuum cleaner named Tom Waits. It's big, mean ugly Jeff's second monster, his third clove, his infinite racism.

It's many stars at once. An aurora eruption. Your jaw dropping. Your face melting. Your thoughts drying. It's a selfie-stick turned walking staff when sled dogs lick each other's asses. It's breeding ground for like-mindedness, for passive aggressive notes on white boards, for alt right lunch cooks and dishwashers who never wash dishes. It's mood swings and mental illness and domestic abuse. It's teardrops on shit splattered toilet seats. A ranch ramekin exploding against the microwave. A vole stomped to death on wood slabs. Camp lore by campfire in old chairs on broken buses and old tents, in old rooms, smoking cigarettes, spilling your guts, falling in and out of love, with yourself.



It's cyclical. It's dishes in a broken sanitizer. Like chugging Red Bull before serving dinner. It's hiking upward toward a pink light. A promise you make that you'll always break. It's people fucking while you're trying to sleep. A hiker falling off Sukakpak. A gang of coworkers looking for the body.

It's the grizzly's bluff charge. The moose's adrenaline. A wolf on the prowl. Glitter in the candy closet. Frozen blue water. One eyed Marshall. The whisper of snow.

Learning the same lessons.

It's all of this, I promise, and waterfalls, and slippery stones, and tussocks, and tundra, and rock slides, and goat trails...your heart breaking

saying goodbye.

It's believing in miracles

and saying goodbye.

It's a hole in the wood, where a spider survives.

The answer to the question how, right now, are you here.

## Pep Talk for a New Father

Out of nowhere, realize that Tom Cruise was once a baby. “Tom Cruise was once a baby,” you tell G. “So was Putin,” she says, having already experienced the same unsettling revelation.

“And Anne Coulter.”

“And Bobby Flay.”

Understand that babies will one day hoard assault rifles in bunkers fearful of government officials, who were also once babies. Babies will eat monkey poop when their friends dare them too. Babies will strap fireworks to rodents in the woods as an experiment. Babies exploit other babies to gain a larger piece of the pie.

Your students were babies. G was a baby.

Babies get old and die.

Babies get young and die.

Listen to the old-head in Nikes and knee braces when he says, “Enjoy it.” Listen to the woman in joggers pants on the path by the drainage ditch, when she says. “It happens fast.” And listen to family members with midwestern accents and craft beer bellies, who say, “Don’t blink. You won’t have time.”

And listen to G when she says, “We need diapers.”

Listen. Blink.

Smell the green, over-watered grass of your apartment complex. Feel the rugged bark of a tree. Take your baby's hand and place it on the rugged bark, and watch your baby's brain through your baby's eyes.

“Tree,” you say, matter of factly. “Rugged-tree.”

Show your baby where the ants are, what the cricket does, how birds fly. “Like this,” you exclaim, arms sprung out to flap, in a field, near a busy road, where each day the sprinklers turn on even when it’s raining.

See a mob outside the Planned Parenthood center by the 7/11. Notice their signs have pointy ends. Notice sweat ovals beneath shirts. Say aloud, “Dehydrated Pro-lifers,” as your baby points to a tropical Skittles bag on the curbside.

Drink black coffee. Drink it warm, drink it cold, but drink it black, Spend less money on creamers and junk. Read student discussion posts about their favorite places to spend time. Spend time feeling your jaw line. There it goes cracking again. Listen intently as G discusses solid food.

“Wet but solid,” she confirms.

“Like doo doo,” you say loudly, writing, “What a great place to spend time,” to a student who enjoys the beach and collecting sea shells. Discuss swaddle theory with G. Wonder if it’s good parenting, or a violation of basic human rights to velcro a person shut. Write to the same student who also spends time at the beach: “be specific as to what plastic washed ashore.”

Wash ashore. Lay on the sand. Look up. Say “look I’m plastic.”

Take a long shower, watching sand grains collect at the drain. In the heat of the water, or the chill of the spray, remember a mountain without a name. Remember the

quiet of walking a ridgeline. There is quiet in the shower too, and soft breathing. Just not the neverending expanse each way. Just not the endless possibilities of mountain peaks. Just not what it once was, what it won't be, again.

Bring your forehead against the wall. Ignore the fake baby squeal found inside the rushing water. Remove your head from the shower wall and second guess yourself: is it a fake baby squeal or a real squeal?

"The real squeal," you say aloud for the next few days when nobody is around.

Go out into the world with your baby. Find men drinking beer and smoking cigarettes behind the Kwik Mart by the Boca Raton Regional Hospital. Find the discharged in wheelchairs on the corner of 13th and Palmetto. Wave. Say hello. Pass them by. Find iguanas atop green electrical boxes, and storm drains without bolts. Go out into the world, but watch out for the overly-made-up lady that shames you for exposing your baby to sunlight. Watch out for her, but mostly watch out for cars, even when the walk sign says walk, even when your nearly to the otherside of the road, on the sidewalk or in some grass somewhere, even if you've reached the park, even if you've reached the doorway, and have stuck the key in the lock. Watch out for cars and the guy who jimmys locks with pocket knives and hair clips and will kill you, your baby, and G, all while you sleep. Consider bearing arms. Never bear, but consider it.

Have sex with G during naptime. When the mattress frame collapses, freeze and wait for the real squeal. It's coming. When it does, no more sex during nap time.

While G comforts your baby, use a phillips-head screwdriver to ensure the frame won't collapse again. Strut naked after fixing it saying, "Has anybody seen my phillips-head?"

Enter a bar called Flannigan's before buying diapers. "I'm buying Pampers, sweetpea!" you yell from the doorway of your apartment.

"Poop," she yells from the changing table.

Speak to Craig who holds the bar edge like he might tumble to one side. Discuss the men who were once babies at the line scrimmage. Notice the music switch from bro country to soundcloud rap to classic rock back to bro country. Exchange stories of estranged family members. Hear Craig rank his sister from least evil to most. Shake his hand when he starts speaking about hoaxes.

"It's been good talking," he tells you.

"You too," you tell him.

Find G asleep on the floor wrapped in a train quilt, where, for the past few weeks you have reinforced your baby's dependence on pacifiers attached to furry animals.

Curl up beside her.

When it gets hot, roll to the other side of the floor. When it's cold, curl up beside her.

Learn about time passing in dark nurseries.

Remember reading that infants die suddenly. Remember inconclusive evidence points to sleeping positions. Wish that you never read that infants die suddenly. Emerge from the floor of the dark nursery. Place your palm close to your baby's mouth. That's

breathing. Place your hand where his heart is. That's thumping. Stand awhile watching your baby sleep. Sudden death, sudden death, sudden death, how does one combat sudden death, you wonder.

Commiserate with parents in empty formula aisles. Hear moms on NPR's explain the search in faraway counties. Curse knock off brands during spats of constipation. Imagine fathers in out-of-state Targets wrestling over the last container of Enfamil. Call the number on your Similac container inquiring if the Cronobacter ever crossed your baby's lips.

"You're in the clear."

"When are things going to get rolling again?"

"You're in the clear."

"Are you a real person?"

Wonder aloud, "will the organic brand make my baby's poo come out funny?"

"It most certainly will," somebody says from beyond the wall of packaged Wubbanubs.

Put it on credit, along with Similac knock offs, and store brand containers, knowing the future holds balled fists and high pitched screeches, a lower FICO score, and that familiar confusion when swaying your baby at three in the morning.

Ask Alexa: "How do you get a baby to poop?"

*You can help stimulate a bowel movement by gently inserting a rectal thermometer or your pinky finger about one quarter inch up his bottom.*

Drive to Flannigan's when buying formula, freestyling words that rhyme with Cronobacter.

“FOMO tractor.”

“Open Cracker.”

“Hopeless Matter.”

Hear someone that looks like Craig announce to you and those nearby, his allegiance to the protection of the unborn. “To the sanctity of life,” he says, raising a half-eaten mozzarella stick. “Let God plan parenthood,” a lady in a Titleist visor says, pointing a rib bone in the direction of a photo of marlin. Put the bill on credit.

“What about keeping the alive alive?”

“What about it, man” a man who you briefly mistake for *the* Flanigan says.

Talk to yourself when no one is around. Point and say, “slippery,” when passing puddles. To the sound of traffic, say, “Busy busy.” Discard plastic shards from playgrounds saying, “Choking hazards.” Watch out for the man who jimmys locks with paperclips and hasn’t slept in awhile, who will kill your family when you are gone. Realize the coffee pot has debilitating sturdiness. Pretend you’re a bear crawling across the living room floor. Juggle squishy blocks that squeak. Juggle and make them squeak, thus making your baby smile. Watch out for cars even when there are no cars to be found. “Why is there a broken bottle on the staircase,” you say to the broken bottle on the staircase. Go around waddling ducks in your car, in your stroller, when you’re walking. Feel the wrought iron gate by the green pool of the apartment complex. Say aloud, “Gate.”

Teach your baby, “Papa.”

“Pa pa,” you whisper in his ear

“Papa,” you say to yourself when nobody’s around.

When he slaps you in the face, take it in stride, understand, you had it coming.

Stare at the mirror holding your baby wondering why you're holding your baby staring at the mirror. Recall moments of bliss when summiting the mountain Sukakpak, or submerging into cold creek water to perform breathing exercises that relieve. Take extensive inhales of uncertain air, and keep it inside for as long as you can. Inhale a little more, still keeping the air inside, and then a little more – more than you thought was possible. Eventually exhale. Repeat this over and over again as past You’s gets replaced by this You happening now, like one landscape for another. Soon there will no longer be a world without your baby in it. Soon there will no longer be a You who knew the world without your baby in it. In this sense, you have a reason to grieve.

So go out into the world with your baby. Spin the colored blocks at George Snow Park, but pack a towel for the bucket seat water from yesterday’s rainfall, and maybe a rag or an old t-shirt for the iguana poop on the slide. Feed the ducks broken up rice cakes unsure if it’s a good idea or not. Wake up to the soft cries of sudden hunger. Sway in the nursery to your own soft humming. Feed your baby G’s last bag of colostrum, also known as golden milk, also known as first milk, and watch your baby guzzle the bottle with what is the epitome of human desperation. Sway slowly in the embrace of your baby's mother to a song neither of you have heard before. Drive out to the ocean. Let the waves trounce you and the sand fill your pockets. Stand between the shoreline and the sea. Blink outward into another expanse. Stand between your baby and G. Apologize to one another in your minds. Neither of you expected any of this. And maybe, neither of



you wanted any of this. But it's happening. He's happening. In this sense, there's reason to be optimistic.

But first, watch the ice cubes melt in black morning coffees. Tell your students about the misogyny in "Go Dog Go," the theme of self acceptance in "Green Eggs and Ham." Squirt Motrin in your baby's mouth and wait for a fever to subside. Get angry at G's aunt when she wears her Border Patrol hat. Remember she was once a baby too. Watch your baby's decision not to cry when he bumps his head against the kitchen table. Watch the futility in his determination when he can't poop. Learn poop isn't a nuisance or something gross, but a sign of good health. Learn the poop dance is just the body's response to unclogged blockage. Learn no poop is the same as the one that came before it. See how it clings to your baby's butt when the diaper is removed.

"It's a Poop picasso," you say hog-holding your baby's legs.

Listen to the man at the park when he says he saw a python in this vicinity the other day. Listen to the dad struggle to control his four children. Offer him your baby wipes when he's forgotten his. Learn how to strap down a car seat. Learn to change your baby while he's standing on a Publix changing table, or on grass by see saw. Learn variations of the word *shit*. Like *Shizz*. *Sugar*. *Shh*. Always come back to *shit*. Kill the man who jimmys locks one hundred different ways. Remember that you were once a baby. You were once your baby. And if the man who jimmys locks were real, he'd have to have been a baby too.

## Messes

What a mess it is to include my son without emphasizing the beauty of fatherhood, or the beauty he brings, or how much I've changed, for the better, because of his beauty. What a mess to speak of him in order to speak of myself, and baby-hood, of projectile vomits. I slipped into this world like nothing could stop me, my mom said. I slept my entire first night and many nights after. I gulped down the milk I was given and ate what I was supposed to. For a while, my mom said, I made it easy on everyone.

And fast forward to the smell of spoiled milk inside my car trunk from a punctured jug in a Trader's Joe trip gone wrong. And to the divots in the hardwood of the living room floor, from the Little Tykes popper my son lifts, drops, in his countless experiments with noise. And after a thunderstorm, to the styrofoam in the pool of our apartment complex, where in a unified effort, G scrambles before the next storm to get V into the pool for a swim. Him in one arm, a bag of towels, sunscreen, floaties, pool shoes, pacifier, snacks, water, and pool key in the other—and stepping onto the damp poolside, she wiggles floaties on his arms, and make sure the yellow bucket hat is secure on his head, and walks into the water.

“This ain't no paper towel commercial,” a cook once said from his knees, at a taco shop in Phoenix, Arizona, when the deep-fryer valve was left open, as new oil was poured in, and the floor, a narrow space, flooded. And I, a dishwasher, dumped the dirty

rag bin on the spreading oil and slid the towels around with my feet and soaked up what I could.

What a mess writing by hand was, and still would be, if long-form surpassed keyboards. “Chicken scratch,” my second grade teacher called it, reading the hurried, anxious, angry, yet big-spirited font I turned in. Font that cramped the in-between flesh of thumb and index, and conjured enough force to rip open the notebook paper I used to discuss my summer break, where I never included the rug burn needed to escape my big brother’s headlock, or the split open skin after a box-speaker collision, or the week my mom wouldn’t look at me because I told her one thing and then did another.

And how neat, and pleasant, and so oddly tiny, my big brother’s handwriting was. Writing that almost seemed to hide, or at the very least, make room for other writing, contrasting the ferocity he held within, often evoked by me, his little brother, who hid the remote with the cleaning supplies, or opened all the dresser drawers in his room—but also ferocity inspired by annoyances at school, perhaps a bully that poked him the wrong way, one too many times, about the tiny punching bag protrusion from his ear, inspiring apple red cheek bones, a cramped up fist, that never failed to penetrate any expression.

What a mess it is when a child encounters a mother’s anger for the first time, as I had at seven years old, when I told her I would be nearby at the school track, but instead followed some kids to play basketball. And so mom, my mom, who grew up a talented sprinter, thought her talent and passion might be somewhere in me, and headed to the

elementary school after I did, hopeful for what we may possibly share—this determination for speed and coming in first—only to encounter empty lanes circling an empty field.

What is hysteria but a spill one person cannot clean fast enough?

What a mess: the imagination of my mother, and the horrific news stories which created the image of a man in her mind, who she pictures alongside of me, barreling over state lines in a jalopy or white construction van, toward a bunker, a dank unfinished basement, of an unidentifiable house. Always someplace below ground, horribly lit, where in the imagination the ungodly happens, and how she was too late to reach me, as I was too far from her grasp, the same grasp that kept me out of oncoming traffic, from spilling the boiling pot of water, from petting the bumble bee in the yard.

What to make of being spanked with the wooden spoon used to stir tomato sauce? Tears not so much from the pain, though it stung and left my bottom red, but from the rare occurrence of physical abuse, though, what a coincidence, to be spanked and grounded the same week as my brother, where we bonded in a punishment we thought did not fit the crime, plotting early release from the confines of our comforters as our bedtimes became earlier, and in the morning—when told we could not communicate, that we were meant to “learn a lesson”—created a pulley system between our rooms out of Valentine’s Day cards and string. A system that could slip notes beneath the cracks of our doors, thus connecting our rooms, thus connecting us with paper imprinted with *I love yous*, and notes written by pencil that began sweet, but led to hurt feelings when he

commented on my “chicken scratch” where I then tied the string from his doorknob to the hallway humidifier in an effort to lock him inside his room, never anticipating the crashing of an appliance my parents installed, that circulated the bad air with the good, making it so we could all breathe a bit cleaner.

What a mess it is to watch the spreading of bath towels over soaked carpet. Your mother on all fours dabbing, and pressing, and squeezing what was absorbed in a bucket, laughing in between crying, and you watching, not knowing how such a pose could be so motherly and symbolic of one person's life—this sudden dropping to one's knees, this release of tears mixed with the laughter at the cruelty of raising young boys.

What a mess I've already made of this essay, implicating the people I love into my own writing, writing which requires long, gratuitous sentences, that which alters tenses, alters what person I should be, the *I* or the *you*, as they both, in my mind, have no clear reason for existing on the page simultaneously. Writing the mess leads to the grammatical mess, the content mess, and in end the mess that is a narrow portrayal of my mom as if she solely cleaned up after me, after my brother, as she also dedicated her professional life to human resources and the cleaning up after adults, who often were imperfect and tough and failed to treat each other well, or more often, failed in some way to follow the rules of company policy, which offered my mom something of a guideline, or even, a moral compass, so when it came down to the termination of employee contracts it was easier to know who to let go, or hold on to.

And fastforward to the first knock on the door in the middle of the night, and the police alerting my mother of her husband's wild night, in a parking lot brawl with three other guys, before tossed through a glass window, where shards in his back stuck and glimmered under early morning sun like little diamonds. Little diamonds my brother, her son, his son, picked out, one by one and placed inside a glass cup.

And fastforward back to the taco shop: "Corner! Hot! Hot!" I yelled, waddling through the kitchen, waddling with smokey black oil, two hands in oven mitts, gripping the hot, hot handles, yelling to alert the presence of deadly material in route, which never ended badly because of the persistence of an imagination that constructed worst case scenarios out of hot handles, where the waddle ends in a tumble, and the tumble tumbled into a body, where the oil undulates before spilling over, before burning skin, the entry into the flesh, and agony.

What a mess it is to save another's skin by traumatizing yourself over something that never happened but could, especially if you never spent any time imagining it.

And backtrack a few years, to the house my senior year of college, the rising stack of dishes, the trashbag pile in the backyard, which, more or less, was a slap of cement, when flies would enter the house, and then bed bugs somehow too, when my brother was in his second round of detox, before his second go at rehabilitation, a second chance toward another form of living, and I, in similar ways, needed to clean up after myself, but mostly decided to put it off until later, using my parent's money for ziplocks of pot, and to cultivate a drinking habit, thinking such a life was meant to squeeze the nectar out of

the college experience, where I began to forget how I got from one place to another, eventually running a stop sign to an intersection, where I then was placed in a backseat of a police cruiser, eventually reaching my mom from the Horry County Jailhouse, where her first question wanted clarity on the extent of the mess, this question asked calmly, as if bracing for the worst, as if having braced herself for the worst for many years, and gripping a table's edge, thinking, "This is it. Here is the uncleanable mess," and notices, briefly, out of the window, catastrophic storm clouds, to which my answer, briefly, became her exhale, in that I simply blacked out at the steering wheel, ran a stop sign, smashed into another car, killing and hurting nobody.

What is a mess but the scene of unrecognizable wreckage?

And fast forward to fatherhood, asleep, yet trapped in a 'where-is-my-son' nightmare, navigating a labyrinth of SIDS anxiety, full of detached diapers on endless staircases, falling backward into the unpreparedness of loving someone more than myself. Discovering this love as it emerges in a hopefulness, that, yes, *it is in me, I can do it*, but then in the worry at the prospect of losing who I am responsible for, and the imagination creating scenarios that have yet to happen before they happen as the only defense against them happening, thus uncovering a new objective, a fools mission, in that I just need to outlive my parents, but go before my son, living in order to discover the perfect pocket of time to die.

Because what a mess it was, and is, to have lost my brother the way we lost him. In the middle of the night, as we slept, the knock at the door from the police, who were given orders to step inside my parents house and explain first to my dad, in his pajamas, who then, explained to my mom, in her pajamas, while, I–me–home for a visit, stood up out of bed, first hearing my dad tell my mother, and then the sound of my mother.

What a mess it is to write the words, “the sound of my mother,” which has no language, and adheres to no structure, but reveals the depth of love no son ever wants to reach. “The sound of my mother” on a page beside the indulgence of my own turmoil while thinking, or even sometimes believing, there is a way through the mess. Or, nothing is clear. And, maybe, it is not only her sound anymore. It can also be mine, and my father’s, in the way that a spill spreads on the floor, following the canals of tiled cracks, collecting as it goes, debris, momentum, before running into another spill. And so my spill becomes your spill, and the biggest messes are not ours alone.

What is a mess but loving someone forever?

When my son was born, I watched the contractions on the monitor rise off the screen, plateau like flat mountain peaks, in rhythm with G’s closed-eye moans. A music of pain I had no part of, no fathomability of, wanting, for a moment, to be inside there too, to know and be closer to the experience of birth, but left the room instead to get snacks at a nearby gas station, where in the middle of a crosswalk, a man in his car misses my body with his bumper, and the older brother in my fist cramped, clenched, as I



shouted in the direct aftermath of an almost-death, “You piece of fucking shit,” and as the man quickly stopped, reversed, rolled down his window and asked “Are you trying to get shot?” I walked forward, to where the sidewalk picked up where it left off.

My mother was asleep when her baby died. And though I can remember her in what might be called *moments of peace*, say, in a beach chair on Sheboygan Lakeside, or, asleep on a couch to an episode of Law and Order, or, farther back, before any babies or husband, the moment she crossed a finish line, where crowds stomped in the bleachers, centering their attention on her victory—it was sleep that made an escape from the mess possible.

Babies are messes. It is of course the toys they don’t put away. It is of course the throwing of spoons and the sweet potato smear, and the look on your face when they fall, or fail, and the middle of the night wake ups that defy age. But as babies get older, become children, become young adults, it is how they determine what life will be for them, which carries inside a disregard for it, which conflicts with how you perceive life for them, which is sacred, and precious, and how do we live without children?

I could say again and again, “this is not on you, none of this has.” That is not how mothers work, or, more so, that is not how my mother works, so what happens when that child disappears in the middle of the night? What is living but an unidentifiable mess we desperately need to clean, but never can? My mess is your mess and...

Nothing is more epitomizing than the morning after he died, where I learned for the first time I would become a father, where on the phone, it occurred to me to look at a sky I did not see, and sit where I stood, for I felt for the first time, the sheer magnitude and confusion of living and of dying in what seemed like a single exhale—how to not shatter by simple breathing—and then hauling my body through the house, wading through the grief, up the staircases, down the hallways, becoming, it would seem, magnetic, pulled to the room where she was sitting, who, before I entered, might have been looking up at the ceiling in a rare moment of escape from her pain, or off into nowhere, my mother, perhaps able to close her eyes for a moment, but just as quickly needed to open them, and found me at the doorway, already in complete understanding, knew there was nowhere else for my body to go.

“What a mess I’ve made,” I sometimes say, when my son screams out a three in the morning, “again,” And it’s my turn to wake up, so I do, and improvise a good mood, watching him make do with a pasta strainer and a wooden spoon, yelling out “chaos,” which was taught by G who knows what I don’t, and I think, “if I could be like his mother, this would be a whole lot easier.” And nothing is further from the truth, but the idea occurs to go to the beach, where upon arrival it’s simply a mess of sand, seaweed, and diabolical sunlight, where on the shoreline a tiny wave splashes my ankle, but trounces my son, knocking him over, scaring him into a tantrum, and we leave. And on the drive home, I call my mom, complaining of sleeplessness and uncertainty, in which she offers options, something of advice based off lived experience, but nothing full proof because nothing anymore is full proof, except weeks later, at the airport, except weeks

later, on an air mattress, except weeks later working from a tablet with a half-full diet Coke, V wakes up at three in the morning, and it is not on me or G that wakes up, but her.

## Eulogies

Jacob grew up in a small town in Maryland, where the motto went: farms, football, and a whole lotta fun. He often hurried to catch the morning bus, forgetting the ham and cheese inside the fridge that his mom prepared.

More times than not he forgot to apply deodorant.

Nobody knows what happened. He was here and then he wasn't.

He believed his father when he said, "there comes a time when we have to hang up the phone."

He believed G as she straddled him and said, "I'm your laptop now, bitch."

He believed the frog bubbler was a portal to layers of consciousness, thus departed on a rug of white smoke.

Jacob smoked pot even when he wasn't smoking pot.

His nights ended with over-the-sink pickles.

He thawed his son's breast milk in a cereal bowl of faucet water.

He called CVS, *CV-ass*.

He broke into his car by straightening out clothes hangers and inflating blood pressure bags.

Jacob's brother called him *Cup-Cup* and left candy outside his bedroom door in a CV-ass bag.

Jacob's brother worked at CV-ass and always smelled like peppermint.

Watching his son suck the nipple of his G's boobie granted him a surprising amount of pleasure, particularly when G winced as his son suckled more vigorously. It was during those moments that Jacob was a proud father and proud partner.

Though Jacob never sampled G's breast milk, he knows he'd prefer the golden milk fresh from the nip, rather than squeezed from its holding bag.

Jacob grew up in a small town in Maryland where he and his brother slipped firecrackers into storm drains, where they swindled youngsters out of holographic Pokémon, where they dug holes in stranger's yards for handfuls of ants, where they were boys who stayed out past supper time.

Jacob's brother never hurt anybody who didn't deserve to be hurt—except for Jacob.

Jacob's addiction to television was best expressed by the cries of his infant son muffled by the opening song to "The Office."

Jacob could have been nicer to his mother.

She could have let Jacob stay up later to watch TV.

It was his competitive nature that ultimately killed him

It became unclear if Jacob remained in academia to further his education and career, or to play pick-up basketball with undergraduates.

Given enough practice, he could have played overseas.

If he wrote everyday, the words people wanted to hear would emerge.

He was a victim of countless delusions.

High on LSD, he followed ridgelines to other ridgelines and valleys into other valleys. He waded across cold rivers. He made a nightly fire with birch bark and twigs. He decided things about his life he wouldn't have otherwise decided.

He never found the balance that was thought to exist.

He never aligned the person he was in his head with the one that existed in the world.

He died a little each day.

When struck by lightning, Jacob recalled himself as a child with red popsicle-stained lips, flinging wild haymakers up toward his brother's face.

He looked at his shoes while he talked. He thought long and hard about descriptions of poops exiting buttoles. If a reader or nonreader were to inquire about his writing, Jacob would often point to his anus.

Depending on the clothes he was wearing, it was possible pocket change landed at his feet.

If he were president, he would have used the word *butthole* in speeches when referring to congress's inability to pass meaningful legislation, as in, "Those buttoles have no bipartisan willpower."

When boarding an airplane, he segregated strangers by those he would prefer to sit beside and those he wouldn't. Evidence proved those carrying food bags were most rambunctious.

The last thing Jacob saw before nose diving was a lady in white gloves biting into a McDonald's McRib.

As his life flashed before his eyes it did so in a sepia shade.

Giving a craft lecture on Literature and Poop, Jacob suddenly clutched his throat and fell back into the chalkboard. Before Rigor Mortis, those in attendance—students, teachers—crowded his body, horrified at Jacob dying in front of them, yet ecstatic to write about the experience later.

Many books were published after Jacob's death. The book titled *Jacob's Death* won the Dawson Creamer award and propelled the author to receive tenure at Queens University of Charlotte.

While dying in front of his students, Jacob sputtered these last words: "Take notes motherfuckers."

He felt the need to discuss bowel movements with his father when they talked on the phone. His father felt the need to discuss *hot peppery gonads* when they talked on the phone. Both Jacob and his father partook in conversations in which they talked about two different topics simultaneously.

At his funeral, everybody shook hands as if a lucrative business deal had been reached.



*The best days of our lives, more like the best shits of our lives*, Jacob wrote in big letters on the chalkboard.

He didn't particularly like the word *boobies* but deemed it necessary to encapsulate his level of sophistication.

He shielded his G's body from the bullets of a mass shooter. He was deemed a hero. He was dead, but deemed a hero.

Jacob was from a small town in Maryland where the word *Deemed* went unsaid. He often rode his bike to the country store for malts and pork rinds. This required trespassing the backyards of gun owners. Under American law he was legally shot and killed. He died beside an idle John Deere lawn mower, the smell of fresh cut grass in the air.

He never believed in theorizing about the writing process, nor explaining himself, nor reconsidering certain decisions, nor listening to the advice of others, even if they were more knowledgeable and/or experienced and/or offended. He was the Bill O'Reilly of literature.

At odd hours, one could find Jacob alone at a glass table drinking kratom from a jar.

It was said by close friends that he could make plants wilt by his presence alone.

He consumed an appropriate amount of Budweiser before driving home.

*Nor, door, boar, floor, par-core*, Jacob famously wrote.

He was poisoned by his G's father.

He hung himself with an, "I'm Vegan t-shirt." The note he left behind read: *Somebody had to do it.*

All those who ever wronged Jacob were gathered and pelted with non-gmo fruits and vegetables.

As he lay dying, Jacob came to no final conclusions about the meaning of his existence, and so, before his heart gave out, he quietly pooped his pants for one last time.

Jacob was from a conservative town in Maryland, where the high school football team went undefeated, and Jacob, with a green and gold hornet painted across his chest, shouted obscenities about opposing players' mothers.

He believed his mom when she said, "there's no dessert for those who waste their broccoli."

He believed his grandma when she said, "There's a cold place in hell for those who snitch on God."

Jacob's crowning achievement was the stuffed animal elephant he strategically placed to hold the pacifier in his son's mouth as he slept.

Jacob liked many things about many people, but especially when those people liked Jacob.

He would have been published and offered numerous awards if he remembered a pen and notepad.

The author of *Jacob's Death* never mentioned Jacob in the acknowledgements.

When asked to describe himself, Jacob might begin with the reddish brownish, rather large mole on his sternum, or that he had a close friend who never chewed a piece of gum, or that he used to pee in empty Folgers cans to save trips to the bathroom.

To Jacob, it was impossible to articulate who he really was.

He never believed in god.

He never not believed in god.

In truth, Jacob didn't have the time to contemplate god. He was busy with making ends meet, with processing the latest mass shooting of children, with trying to balance his

individuality while raising a son and maintaining a healthy relationship with G, while trying to play an important role in his local community, but needing also to drink four or five beers a night, with a bit of marijuana, and sometimes, on occasion, a little kratom too—that god, for months at a time, slipped from his mind.

He was often tired and full of thoughts.

He flew through the windshield of an Intrepid.

He changed the way the world felt about poop.

The night his brother died never actually ended.

He slipped off the face of a jagged peak, where his face peeled back like carrot skins.

As he lay there dying, a bright red horizon in front of him, Jacob came to no conclusions about the meaning of his existence, but just, for once, he was out of ways to stay alive.

He simply wanted to hold his son again.

Stand in the yard beside his father again.

Run with his mother on the trail again.

Plan the week ahead with G again.

Believe in the miracle of his brother again.

Now gone, Jacob has left behind choice words for those who prioritize word choice.

He never thought people would like him. He never thought people would dislike him. It turned out, nobody really knew him.

He smoked enough marijuana he collapsed at the sink.

He couldn't play enough basketball to reconcile the inner-bench warmer.

He couldn't live up to society's expectations of hygiene.

He hurried to get to the end.

His brother demanded the whereabouts of the channel changer in Jacob's dreams.

He consumed enough metaphors on writing he finally became one.

He was a once-in-a-generation talent destroyed by capitalistic pursuits.

He floated away on a hot air balloon.

He was a black spec in a blue sky.

He was from a small town in Maryland. He wrote a story in his son's nursery amid the elephant onesies and electrical train set that ended, *In almost no time at all.*

He took a hero's dose of LSD and vanished into the woods, and was never heard from again.

As he lay there dying, a sepia shadow creeping close, Jacob shared one last breath with the world.

He thought, "And I was just beginning to know myself."

If it sucks it's for the best: An essay about writing and living

Cleaning the trucker bathroom in Coldfoot, AK was not a pleasant job. Toilets often clogged, overflowed, and required old mop heads to soak up the spillage. Plus, for a while, there was no ventilation system causing bathroom traffic to waft into the dining area and kitchen. Me, and others, were required to clean this bathroom twice a day—once in the morning, once in the evening— due to truckers and tourists who spent their days on the Dalton highway, in remote northern Alaska, where porta potties were sparse, and good plumbing even more so. Often, while cleaning one stall, another stall would be occupied. One might imagine the sounds and smells in those stalls that reverberated and wafted.

Cleaning the trucker bathroom was an agreement I made in order to live in Coldfoot, AK: a truckstop/tourist destination in the Brooks Mountain range, along the trans-Alaska pipeline that stretches 800 miles from Valdez to Prudhoe Bay. Coldfoot's primary function is to accommodate Dalton highway truckers driving north and south with amenities like gas, food, a place to sleep, and of course, toilets.

Although the physical structures of Coldfoot are rustic, the surrounding landscape is unique in its expanse and harsh beauty. Through scrubbing toilets, making beds, cleaning deep fryers, I gained access to a remote wilderness unencumbered by people that filled my head with landscapes, midnight suns, moose, wolves, grizzly bears, and a supreme diversity of birds. I got to see a long summer change to a quick fall and the rare, elusive aurora borealis in the endless winter. As one trucker relieved himself after the

other, there was a rhyme and reason to my presence there, which was to exist in a community I had never been a part of, in place I never knew, but that was beautiful, and at times uncomfortable, but always mysterious.

I've never really sat down to write about the trucker bathroom, but I have written about poop. It's a theme that shows up in my writing from time to time. The main reason is that it's something we all do but don't talk about, and at times, go to extensive lengths to keep a secret. One of those social conventions we all sort of follow in order to be less weird and disgusting.

But I have an affinity for feces I wouldn't otherwise have if not for places that required a close proximity with it. Along with Coldfoot, I worked on a Portuguese tree farm and part of my contribution was cleaning the outhouse by dumping the shit-can into the compost, and then, with a long wooden pole mix in saw dust so over time it broke down into rich soil for planting trees. I lived on a friend's property in Hawaii where turds became fertilizer for mango trees and avocados—fresh fruits we relish eating. Like in Portugal, my own insides became the very fruit we enjoyed. On a pot farm in Cazadero, California, I helped the maintenance man suck the outhouse bin with an industrial vacuum. The sound was no different than how you or I would slurp from a Slurpee. And more recently, I have a son, whose poop I clean and check for signs of good health, or on occasion, not so good. This I do each day, every day for the past two years.

The term Type Two Fun is a psychological occurrence in which we perceive an experience to be miserable in the moment, but later, when remembered, is remembered fondly, or with appreciation for having gone through that experience. I think about mountain climbing or long distance running or physically taxing kitchen shifts. A lot of



these were challenging experiences that were painful mentally and physically, but in the end were worth it for the views and being in nature, or in terms of kitchen work, the experience of cooking and money acquired.

One instance of Type Two Fun occurred after a day-hike up Zirkle mountain on the border of Colorado and Wyoming. This particular hike began early in the morning. I knew I would need a lot of time to reach the summit, but for some reason I hiked that day without my phone, and after a long strenuous hike and climb, I was sitting on the summit, taking in the views, and found the sun low in the sky. and that the glow was bright, but not as bright as before. The sun would soon be setting. Upon realizing that I was many miles from the trailhead, a surge of panic took over. A shock to the system. So, I started to hustle down the mountain.

When I found the trail that led to the parking lot it was already getting dark so I started to run. In the woods in Colorado one should not run because then you are behaving like something that should be chased and eaten, so I started calling out to the animals, alerting bears and mountain lions of my presence. The calling out into the night helped relieve some of the panic, and stymied the fear of being stuck in the woods all night. It was also a way to feel less alone. By hearing my own voice I was somewhat comforted.

As I got further and further down the trail it got darker and darker, to the point that I would lose the trail and end up in some bushes, or stub my foot on roots I couldn't see. There were points where I crawled on hands and knees to feel my way back onto the trail. Eventually, after it was completely dark, and I could barely make out my hand in front of my face, I arrived at the trailhead. When exiting the forest out into the open, a bit

bloody, a bit bruised, a bit freaked out, I expressed, in a truly uninhibited fashion, bliss. Whooping that echoed in the quiet night, along with arm flinging and jumping that I recall as silhouettes on the dimly lit gravel. It was a wonderful moment. One I wouldn't have had if not for the pain and fear endured.

Through immersive traveling and Type Two experiences, there is an equality in my brain between what might be considered a good experience and a bad one. Caught in the forest at dark was both frightening and dangerous, but ended in an experience I would never forget. In another sense: when we overcome sickness, we are able to appreciate our health those few days right after. The world feels new. We learn we take simple things for granted. Investing in experience through immersive traveling is investing in your future, your life and the craft of writing, as there are cognitive, emotional, and spiritual benefits that are as valuable as what university education offers.

I am reminded of the power of finding beauty in our daily lives, or beauty in the mundane is common and great too. Because really: the mundane happens to be not that mundane after all. But I will say the mundane stays mundane when we do not act to revitalize our minds. So as I use the term "immersive travel" I don't mean vacations to a place for relaxation, but longer stints, at least a month, in which you are not in the comfort of your community and home. On a road trip, backpacking, living in the woods, in another country, on a farm, living and working in a community perhaps. There may be an element of nature too, or really scaling back the amenities you are used to. This could be an absence of proper plumbing, or living in close proximity with other people. It can be a work exchange where you cook in a tiny kitchen, or need a language barrier to teach English.

Adam Galinsky, a professor at Columbia Business School states “for a more creative brain, travel: our neural pathways are influenced by environment and habit, meaning they’re sensitive to change: New sounds, smells, language, tastes, sensations, and sights spark different synapses in the brain and may have the potential to revitalize the mind” (Galinsky)

Here, I think about active experimentation with our writing environment, where I might find certain times of days to be productive over others. A complete change of my environment through immersive travel will alter your environment and influence neural pathways on a larger, perhaps more long term scale than if it were a trip to the local park. But there is something to be said about the small alterations we can make in a day—these smaller scale explorations that require lesser investments, say, going to a park and reintroducing your feet to grass, or surrounding your writing station/office with inspiring and topical trinkets. I am also thinking about my time as a chess instructor for schools in Washington D.C., where I followed elaborate transit routes that brought me to new towns and parts of the city each week. How riding the escalator out of the metro tunnels into a part of D.C. I had never before been, was a way in which I could experience something novel on a weekly basis. Immersive traveling though, demands a certain level of sacrifice, as sacrifice, in a way, is another word for investment.

One major sacrifice described through my close proximity with toilets and being trapped in a dark, Colorado forest, is comfort. Here’s another story: growing up my parents wanted so badly for me to go to college, because, in their words, “They didn’t want me to have to struggle like they did,” which, I think is to work hard for a living, or sacrifice for a living, or really be uncomfortable for a living. It should be noted, I also

wanted to go to college. All my friends were going and if I didn't go, I felt I'd surely miss out on some fundamental experience that was necessary to be a person in this country. So there was no other option in our brains; no trade schools, no gap years, no travel. We all believed in the certainty that a Bachelor's degree was a ticket to the middle class or higher, where, now, we know it is also a road to eternal debt in a job market saturated with other BA's. But I did go to college, and made it through, and accrued large amounts of debt, and afterwards found Coldfoot, and I could hear those words, "We don't want you to have to struggle like we did," playing in my head as Trucker Karl relieved himself in the stall I just cleaned.

Like many parents, mine sacrificed for my education performing manual labor and later, corporate and government labor, yet here I was cleaning a toilet while another one got dirty. But sacrificing a middle class existence for cleaning toilets at a truck stop bathroom 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle in hopes of a new experience was a product of my education, and also became an education. An education on sound, smell, sensation, and work ethic.

I was "struggling" to earn a living, but really, "struggling" to earn an experience. This sacrifice, this investment, requires contribution to a community, like the Coldfoot community, in the form of manual labor because as I stated before, when talking about immersive traveling I usually mean existing in a community that requires contributions to remain inside of that community. In this way, traveling does not have to be for those with the means to travel. There are ways that make immersive travel inexpensive if one is willing to be uncomfortable. There is the misconception that travel means vacation, and vacations are supposed to be low stress and relaxing. But in my experience, travel has

never been relaxing, even if it means going somewhere with the intention to relax. Adam Galinsky states, “The key, critical process is multicultural engagement, immersion, and adaptation. Someone who lives abroad and doesn’t engage with the local culture will likely get less of a creative boost than someone who travels abroad and really engages in the local environment.” In other words, there is work involved, both in labor and in your own agency in trying to adapt and understand that contribute to our artistic pursuits.

Work ethic by labor translates into work ethic in craft. Patience on the page as a direct result from patience needed to perform difficult jobs that a university education implicitly says you should avoid. I was a dishwasher in Coldfoot and at a restaurant in Phoenix, Arizona, and if anything, those positions exposed me to the difficulty that comes with monotony and how I could easily succumb to a rage with repeating the same motions, like grinding steel wool against burnt soup pots or closing and opening an industrial sanitizer, but with enough discipline, I could sometimes use this time to think about craft or story, or, if I was lucky, not think at all.

The sensations that are attached to manual labor, like cleaning toilets or washing dishes, are the very carnal experiences that give writing depth, edge, nuance—because if you have not felt a sensation, you cannot accurately write about it. The more new experiences that you have, the more you are able to combine them and augment them. New experiences tend to make people better communicators, more empathetic, and more aware of their surroundings. Now, functionally, you can create a nearly infinite amount of novel ideas and novel ways to communicate old ideas with the experiences that you have gained in

your time on this planet thus far, but it will be much easier for you if you go out and experience new things, especially exciting or unfamiliar, or uncomfortable.

One of the coolest aspects of writing is that it harnesses the very essence of you, in order to make something evocative, beautiful, new. So you play the long game by acquiring experience and perspective. You are the turtle not the hare. But I do not see it as winning a race or in terms of success as in publication, or notoriety, or some small place in a metaphorical fish pond, but I think about this as a means to create, again and again, a new experience for yourself on the page, where growing then means the ability to approach the page as if it is its own novel experience.

And so investing in experience, investing in immersive travel is another blank page—as the cliché goes. Leaving behind current comforts of your current location, your friend group, your time with family, your couch, your languages, your proper plumbing and clean water, in exchange for a fresh perspective of your surroundings, of yourself, and your writing. This investment in experience can affect your writing holistically, in that it could lead to a whole new way of writing you never would have known existed. Could lead to new voices, or a sound, or a new structure.

One year I drove around the country in my grandpa's Chrysler 300. I traveled aimlessly, irresponsibly even, from one side of the country to the other, north and south, even revisiting where I had already been. I saw old friends and slept on their couches. I hiked in wilderness areas, slept in my tent, and in the back seat of the Chrysler. I used money from cooking at Coldfoot and on the California pot farm to fund this trip. I have fond Type Two memories in parking lots, heating up oatmeal in a jetboil, sleeping

uncomfortably at rest stops, camping on beaches, and taking up kitchen jobs for some pocket change. But I spent lots of time driving. I spent lots of time on boring highways where everything looks the same. If you ever drive through Nebraska, or, God forbid, Texas, you know what I am speaking of. But still, I look back on driving with, yes, fondness. I did not belong anywhere, or have anywhere to be, or anyone to be, whereas now, each day is jammed with responsibility as a father, with my pursuit of writing goals, etc. Though driving was a freeing headspace, it was also lonely and uncertain because of that lingering feeling of needing to progress and achieve, and have things like goals, or doing something productive because that's the kind of headspace we develop to "get ahead." That's the kind of headspace the college education sells us on and profits from.

But through the constant movement inside the car I adopted a style of creating—a way to order words in a random way that made them flow from my brain out into the world. Freestyling. Freestyling opened me up to an artform that followed a rhythm, a breath, a sound. It was a conversation with a deeper place and a coping mechanism for my loneliness, not too different from calling out to wild animals in a dark forest.

It was also a chance to be vulnerable. We associate vulnerability with opening up to other people, but freestyling alone in my car exposed me to the hidden parts of myself. It was me, opening up to me. It was weird, and sort of embarrassing, because I wasn't good, and because the experience of freestyling brought to the surface strange sounds, images, thoughts, words. But I did it all through the course of my journey, and kept doing it in the years after, and once in a while I would download my old snapchat account and post

these freestyles to my story, just to share and be vulnerable with other people. (There is a link at the end of the essay.)

During the time of driving around the country I had been writing stories that were conventional narratives, or like different variations of what I had read in undergrad and after. You know, sad, white man lost in a sea of uncertainty and anxiety, but the writing slowly morphed into something more lyrical, and the words on the page were driven by an intuition for sound. It was not a conscious switch, but something that happened on its own. There were pockets of time in those freestyles, a creative zone, that compares to the creative zone of writing. These two means of creating fused and my writing prioritized a new focus on rhythm and repetition which led to interesting forms that facilitated this new momentum. It was a blend of many things I suppose: travel and movement, hip hop and sound, story and words, the conscious me and the unconscious me. And this is the thing with immersive traveling. It takes time for the experience to work itself out into your writing.

I cleaned my first trucker bathroom the summer of 2014, and in a literal and visceral way, I was brought closer to the inside of people. Poop slowly became a theme in my writing. It is now 2023, and over time poop evolved into something else, a theme really, what is all kept inside us that we let out Blood and guts and crying and snot, but also fears and joy and dying, and so in a way, nearly a decade later, a closeness with poop has allowed me to see the world through another lens. The lens to how we keep the inside in order to maintain sanity, or abide by social norms. In this way, my writing transformed from something bodily, to something more spiritual and metaphysical, more universal, in that it can be applied elsewhere, opening doors to different topics and content and forms.



Toward the end of my undergrad I talked with Jason Ockert, a writer/teacher at Coastal Carolina, and to this day, an influential friend. We discussed MFA's and he recommended before applying to rid myself of "the stink of the university." A stink, yes, isn't nice, but it's really just a clever word for a veil, or like a shroud, something you are covered in that may be hiding parts of you that you don't realize exist, or that you forgot about and need to be reintroduced to. To rid oneself of stink, of the stink of the university, or of any place spent for long periods of time, simply means to separate yourself from it to remove it. The stink of the university is a stink that is earned and warrants pride, but it's also a necessary stink to exorcise and to assist the growth of ourselves as people and as writers.

And if you plan to pursue more time in university, whether graduate school or teaching, or both, I recommend using summer breaks to invest in experiences through immersive travel in order to revitalize the mind. Culture exchanges. Workaway. Sleeping outdoors. Coolworks. Teaching English. These are all ways in which you can invest in experience.

The stink of where you once were evaporates through immersive travel, and you are left exposed to yourself as an outsider. This is a valuable lens for a writer to see the world because you are the observer, a listener, the person who does not fit in, the weirdo in the corner mumbling rhymes or scribbling on a page. So to embrace the outsider role for awhile, see the world through that lens. It is uncomfortable, but something to look back upon fondly, and perhaps you can grow to enjoy living in uncomfortability.

When I think about driving around the country and freestyling in New Mexico, or Texas, or on the interstate outside of New Orleans, I think what I was doing was

establishing a relationship with the outsider inside me. Becoming friends with that outsider, so that, in a way I wasn't really alone, because I had my words, and sound, and in those moments when writing, or freestyling, I had a familiar place to go. Somewhere, perhaps, close to home.

## Aftermath

We wake up to our brother rummaging the room for something he lost.

“What is it this time?”

To a malfunctioning alarm clock that says we have to wake up.

“It’s nothing.”

We have to wake up.

“Wake up,” we say, with our eyes still shut. “Wake up.”

So we do—with a wet spot on the sheets where our mouth had been, and an overdue book on the floor, and a hummingbird at the window.

We wake up with a hole in our sock, the pinky toe exposed.

We wake up to the person who we wake up beside and watch their face while they sleep.

We wake up to the person who we wake up beside and always say the wrong thing.

“Will you be here when I get back?”

We wake up to what we see in the mirror.

“I won’t be here when you get back.”

We wake up beside a glass of water that’s needed to swallow the morning pill.

We wake up where we wake up—in the back row of history class, in the front seat of a stranger’s jalopy, on a rooftop air mattress, on a hill in Cazadero, in rooms that smell like deep fryers, in a studio above a laundromat, on a Murphy bed, in Wichita, Kansas.

We wake up in the backseat of Chrysler in Southern Texas and discover a dead golden retriever beside the passenger door.

We wake up speeding away from the flesh eaten by horse flies.

We wake up with a foot on the accelerator and a new habit of speaking aloud to ourselves.

“Why am I like this?”

We wake up and remember that last night's hip thrust spilled the punch bowl, to the aftertaste of bad tacos, laughing at what we speak even though what we speak is never funny to others.

"I need to change."

We wake up to slit Xs in brussel sprouts before they are deep fried.

We wake up to the imprint of a knife handle on our palm.

We used to wake up to our mother saying, "up and adam." To our brother in the kitchen putting string cheese into a brown bag. To our fathers on the basement futon with a crooked back. To the hunger of a screaming baby, or a toddler, in a race car onesie, gripping the bars of their crib, yelling, "Mama! I'm awake!"

And before that, we woke up in latex gloves in the aftermath of incredible pain that wasn't ours..

Now we wake up and our brother has escaped through the window.

We wake up at the point of collision with another, and always say the wrong thing.

We wake up to the person we wake up beside who is an imprint on the bed sheets.

We wake up to the person we wake up beside searching their face for something we missed.

We wake up uncertain about the person we are, or have become, but assume it's not the person we were meant to be.

We wake up and check the labels of medicinal syrups that induce drowsiness. We peer into a brightly lit fridge for the rotisserie chicken. We watch shows from the 80s, the 90s, the 2000s, smoking cigarettes on a porch that isn't ours and calling every number in our phone until somebody picks up.

We wake up and put our pants on backwards, and the shirt from last night over our heads, and walk onto a street only to be crushed by a minivan.

We wake up crushed, in the cold, with all the blankets on the floor, somebody's dog rapping at the door.

We wake up as a child, heartsick for our mothers.

We wake up from a dream where we're flying and wish it didn't end so soon.

In this dream we knew that we were dreaming and so bent our legs, flung back our arms, launched our bodies into the air, and woke up.

Nobody said waking up is the worst part of the day.

The older we get the more we wake up.

We wake up to the person we always wake up beside, and say, “you again.”

We wake up to the knock at the door and the volcanic eruption that makes a city disappear.

We wake up in the aftermath of unrecognizable wreckage.

To our brains uploaded on a computer where we exist in a sea of 1s and 0s.

We wake up and wrap our arms around our bodies and hold on to dear life.

Some of us are naked when we wake up. Some of us are sound asleep. Some of us are called upon.

“Wake up,” they say. “It’s an emergency.”

Some of us wake up in a cage, in a cell, on a floor, in an unfinished basement. We are tied to the support beam and nobody hears us call out for help.

So we wake up and ask God to help us.

We wake up and wonder if anybody still loves us.

We wake up in the aftermath of love.

“Where did everybody go?”

We wake up and ask the waiter for more coffee saying, “I’m barely awake right now.”

We wake up on a bar counter to someone shouting, “Oh yummy!”

We wake up in a fish bowl, darting in and out of a make-believe ship wreck.

We wake up with memories of everywhere that wasn’t home.

We wake up in a tent on the ridgeline, and light the propane of a jetboil.

We wake up to a glimpse of an idea we are always on the verge of understanding.

We wake up chasing after chicken buses in Guatemala.

Inside a trim shack beside a dog named Hobo-Joe.



On a Portuguese tree farm

We wake up never able to forgive what we see in the mirror.

We wake up to the slobbery licks of a doberman who needs to poop, who needs to eat, who needs to walk. To the rumble of a toy truck, pattering on the floor beneath the bed.

We wake up to the duties of providing for a family matched with our undeniable quest to find ourselves,

We wake up and there is not a second to waste.

Often the light wakes us up.

Often it's an urgency to be somewhere we are not.

We wake up in a puddle of drool. Our first thought arrives as slow as a stopping train, followed by another, and another, each one more surprising than the last.

We wake up to the smell of fallen leaves piled high that catch us once we've left our feet.

"Wake up," we say, nudging the person we wake up beside. "Just wake up."

We wake up and burst from the confines of horse shit.

We wake up to the endless possibilities of Saturday.

We wake up once we leave our bodies behind.

As a chipmunk in a torpor.

As a tuber on a russet.

As a mushroom in a forest.

We wake up with second degree burns, from a fire we fought, but never put out.

We wake up to the familiar smell of autumn, in a puddle of past time.

## Thesis Essay

I was young when I decided to be a writer. Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" had revealed what people mean when they ask, "Did the story resonate with you?" And I might have cried in American Lit when Professor Hammelman recited Emerson's poem, "Terminus," which was written before his death from pneumonia. I remember Hammelman reacting with a quiet force, *I trim myself to the storm of time/I man the rudder, I reef the sail*. But my pursuit of writing originates from a need to be known, heard, and thought about. There is a part of me that wants attention, and through writing I once thought I could get that. So I'm not always stoked about how much time I spend on the page, instead of doing things like contributing to my community, or spending time with my family. I sometimes view writing to be a selfish pursuit –like why is my voice important over others? Why do people have to hear what I have to say, or know what I'm feeling, over others? Yet, I also know that the world needs writers. The world needs art. Sometimes it can all feel rather artless, say if I venture into a Walmart or I watch cable television, or walk on FAU's campus. The world needs artists like we need bus drivers or plumbers. We view them differently, but we all offer services that help our society. I imagine plumbers have similar moments in their life where they ask themselves, "Why did I become a plumber?"

Each of these essays houses thousands of tiny decisions based on sensibilities I am aware and unaware of. So it's true then that other people's knowledge and opinions from my past contribute to the conscious and unconscious decisions I make on the page.

Meaning these essays are not only mine, but a collection of people and places which have influenced me in one way or another. Writing and knowledge is fluid like that. How I connect the influences, or shape them into the form of an essay, is, in a way, my own.

Fundamental to my writing is Grace Paley. Her prose has zip in which no fragment feels shorted of attention. There is musicality in her specificity of observations that works to develop the setting of New York communities. Take this line from, “Faith In a Tree:”

“This is a great ballswinger of a city on the constant cement-mixing remake, battering and shattering, and a high note out of a wild clarinet could be the decibel to break a citizen’s eardrum” (Paley 84).

Her language choice comments on the relationship between maleness of societal progress but also a free-wheeling-ness within the syntax that gives the sentence a flowing, meandering aspect—sort of like the Beats—but yet is still tethered to a purpose and an order. My reaction to reading Paley was a bit of an *aha* moment. Not that I figured a secret out, just that I needed to work harder to get each sentence to pull its own weight in any given piece. By emphasizing sentence level construction, I learned that stories or essays reveal themselves on the micro not on the macro. That language when created and tinkered with leads to bigger ideas of the story. “Ballswinger of a city” works on a couple different levels as it implies maleness through demolition balls. Depth in a piece emerges when words or sentences are doing more than their design. A lot of Paley’s story comes from the perspective of Faith and her community.

I always found writers who develop characters across stories interesting. One example is Fuckhead from Denis Johnson’s *Jesus Son*, who floats through the collection

as a medium between the reader and the communities that house characters like Georgie, or Dun Dun, or Wayne. Through developing a character over the course of a story collection, Denis Johnson can place Fuckhead in different forms and moods that perhaps would be too separate if it were a novel. The opening story in *Jesus Son* “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” characterizes Fuckhead as a kind of mystic, someone who knows more than his appearance or status lets on. Contrast this with “Work.” It is not Fuckhead’s journey but Wayne’s, yet documented through the lens of Fuckhead. Like Denis Johnson’s main character, I am positioned as the main character in this thesis, found inside varied places, forms, and moods. With separate pieces inside a greater whole, I can grapple with themes like death, fatherhood, existence from contrasting angles, while also introducing other themes other essays do not touch. In this way, the diverse characteristics I contain can be illuminated.

For me, writing begins in the morning. Either with coffee in a mug, or brewing in the pot. I sit in a glider chair with my laptop on my lap in my son’s nursery. If I’m at my parents place, I’m in their cement room, at a wooden table beneath a ceiling made of fiberglass. I keep books nearby for when things get slow, hoping other people’s words might spur on my own. Writing this summer, the “Greatest Essays of the 20th Century” was close by. I relished in the rhetoric of Martin Luther King essay, “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” as well as the nostalgic, fatherhood recollection of E.B. White’s “Once More to the Lake,” and Cynthia Ozick’s fast moving essay, “A Drugstore in the Winter,” that maps her childhood during the great depression through her relationship with books, but William H. Gass’s, “The Doomed in their Sinking,” stands out for his ability to tackle taboo subject matter without flinching. He gives suicide a wider scope than common

Western culture allows, which inspires more honesty than sentimentality, opening me up to undermining common language, and creating my own definition of the phenomena of losing someone close, or bringing life into the world, or doing both in the same breath. On a sentence level Gass says dark things in funny ways. Take the opening line, “Crane went sudden as a springboard.” Which challenges notions around suicide through humor, while also, at times, pointing out our irrational thinking or absurdity in the way approach suicide. He redefines suicide, “suicide itself, intrinsically considered, is that it is a wholly empty act” (Gass 373). Though redefining may come across harsh, especially by infusing an abundance of famous writer deaths, Gass opens the door for a more nuanced conversation to take place—not just about suicide, but about living also.

Because I’m writing about my life, through my perspective, through my memories, my entire living experience becomes the fodder that feeds the essay. A vortex forms and everything feels like a it could connect to the essay, List-form essays coincide with a vortex as they ironically become the least orderly and more adaptable to differing images or thoughts, but “Rideshare,” became a vortex of the moving world as I was out in the field writing from my parked car in between passengers. Focusing on one essay for a long time, a unique relationship forms between my surroundings and the essay. There is more potential in the atmosphere to contribute to the writing. The dead lizard is a metaphor. My son’s growing vocabulary is dialogue. The landscapers that disrupt naptime are a force to write against. It’s a cool relationship that pulls me closer to the essays and my own life, but it can also be tiresome as the search for meaning doesn’t stop when I want it to stop. When persistently trying to dissect or seek symbols in the world, I

can get overly critical, overly metaphorical, overly writerly in that I stop experiencing the world for what it is, but try to extract from it the material that would benefit my own pursuits.

And it's not just out of writing where this occurs but from literature courses that prompt, in me, unlearning of societal conditioning. As a white, straight, middle class, tall, abled, American man, who has a financial safety net of his parents, my privilege is massive and a new area for criticism and exploration. With it comes feelings of guilt and the need to account for privilege in my everyday living and in my writing. Unlearning has become a part of my process and a voice that exposes gaps that I have. Finding gaps within myself is difficult, and frustrating, but also super interesting and cathartic as I'm constantly recounting the past to understand the present. One example are the forces in undergraduate literature and creative course writing that excluded authors like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison from a reading list made up of white men. Reading *Beloved* was one book of many that evoked the historical and psychological impact of racism in America, in larger terms, which also began to expose gaps in my whiteness that had lay dormant in the unconscious. But on a craft level, Morrison's construction of an omniscient narrator works to distance itself from Sethe's trauma, and conveys trauma through avoidance, creating tension the closer the reader gets to the actual moment when that trauma was first felt. As a whole, the trauma of my brother's death inspired some of these essays. And through the tool of avoidance write of the occurrence with more distance.

Humor is a tool that balances darker, heavier material. My mom, dad, brother are all irreverent, ironic, and funny people. They all have an intuition for comedic timing and

use humor to endure difficult times. Even if it's not *ha ha* funny, there is a weirdness in the thesis that I interpret as humor in observations that add subtle brightness to darker content. Knowing my brother as a deeply funny person whose sense of humor was dark, yet really smart, I immediately hated the language that surrounded him after he died, which was played out, unoriginal, and lame. I shouldn't be harsh with how people express grief, but in some respects it felt like people expressed grief in a commercialized and staged way. In some sense, some essays are reactions to that language, and an attempt to bring something more accurate, more my brother, to the table. One of the last paragraphs of "The Chase," accounts for this reaction with a long sentences expressing the aftermath gestures and language, which ends with... "a collision of the sentimental with the factual, with the bigger brother and the little brother, and creates something of a fusion of he and I. His absence. My experience. This ordering of facts."

"The Chase" may also be inspired by Joan Didion, whose prose I find cool, or, cooler than other prose. It's her calmness, confidence, and distance that emphasizes precision in which the reader can trust and follow. Even when rendering strange, violent, traumatic, or wild occurrences the voice never wavers. From "The White Album," and writing about "The Doors," Didion says of Jim Morrison, "Morrison sat down again on the leather coach and leaned back. He lit a match. He studied the flame awhile and then very slowly, very deliberately lowered it to the fly of his black vinyl pants" (Didion 25). To add more would ruin the scene. To overtly state what she thinks of Jim Morrison putting a flame to his crotch would contaminate the reader's experience of seeing it in their head. In "The White Album," Didion collects her observations and puts them in a order, rendering scenes with cold precision to form a bigger more impactful mood of the



piece and of the turn of the decade. I'm drawn to Didion's voice because a lot of my writing when I first started out was emotionally weighty, seemingly drowning in sentimentality and sadness. It's not to say that I've shed all of my emotion. That would be bad. But I think she has helped me work within the mood of a piece so it can be rendered for the reader to, at some point, feel it, and to let images and observations do the work of building tension or emotion, and know that interjecting with my take can impact the reading experience.

But in another vein, this thesis is influenced by lyrical prose and poetry. Poetry by Joshua Bennett has given me moments as a reader where I'm more moved by the music than by what the words mean. Even before writing was a pursuit, I came across Bennett from HBO's *Brave New Voices* which documents spoken-word poets both on stage and off. In one scene Bennett was filmed reciting a poem about his father, in front of his father, called "Carbon Copy." Here, he positions lines of his father's work ethic and inspiration to Bennett with lines like "with a Vietnam Vet with Jim crow education, with six children and enough regrets to fill a casket with". Towards the end, the force in which Bennet recites the poem peaks and he runs out of breath while at the same time needs to cry. It's this moment where language and love fuse, and with it comes a strong feeling that has no language. Lyricality is a feeling. Yes content matters, but momentum matters too. "Messses" is a good example because the longer sentences create that momentum, and inside that momentum are the emotions of pain and love. And this is not to say that "Carbon Copy" is without craft moves that elevate the sound. Inside the poem is a metaphor of fireflies that grows and changes as the poem progresses, leading to the end where Bennett says to his father, "Let the lightning bugs loose, so I can illuminate the

path for my children.” But sometimes you follow a feeling, and the feeling leads you to moves you make on a craft level.

Part of this poetry, part of it is also Hip-Hop. Bennett in “Carbon Copy,” and other poems infuses rhyme scheme more hip-hop than poetry, “I’m a carbon copy of my poppy” (Bennet) Or in “Say it, Sing it, If the feeling leads you,” Bennet breaks the established voice and leads into, “I’m an elided lyricist/metaphors everest/anybody hatin’ on my halo is irrelevant/I flow like Baldwin, Clifton, Gwendolyn, Zora, Langston, Cullen, Ellison/the authors that offer a glimpse of what heaven is.” And so listening to hip hop, I focus on how artists complicate or deepen a song with a wide range of melodies and hard rap that make a beat seem like its own blank page. Both writing and hip-hop rely on timing, and both demand attention to the ends and beginnings of sentences. It’s never a science to me, but an attention to sound and feeling. If it sounds good, or if it feels good, or both, then it is good.

Form influences voice too, and vice versa. The essay “The Chase,” has a commanding, analytical voice at times that feels kin to voiceover of National Geographic television programs, or a scientist saying aloud the observations found beneath their microscope. This analytical voice paired with the emotionality of my brother’s death has its own kind of tension, mood, and subtle humor. It allows me to say things without going too far into sentimentality. Certain facts like, “he robbed someone for their percocets,” are said without good or bad judgment but left in the air as fact. At the same time, the voice is not completely analytical, and it does show the humanness of my loss, which may land better because it’s not heavy handed, or forced, but something rooted in fact. This is my aim at least. But I don’t go into an essay with form in mind. Usually it’s a

sequence of words that pop into my head and I follow that sequence to other sequences. “We wake up and burst through the confines of horseshit,” was an initial sentence that inspired a list-essay where most sentences start with, “We wake up.” To me, “We wake up and burst through the confines of horse shit,” has a rhythm and is tactile on the brain. Perhaps one can imagine a maggot, poking its head through a turd.

I wrote “The Chase” after reading *The Beauty of the Husband* by Anne Carson, who turns husband-hood into a physical examination. The husband character is up for analysis when she writes things like, “Rotate the husband and expose a hidden side” (Carson19). It’s a move that offers objectivity and perhaps more accuracy to what she says next. Or really, it allows her to form a guise of accuracy. The little brother and bigger brother complexes in my essay are probably real things in the realm of psychology, but my use for them emerge from personal experience of what those two complexes entail. Which means I am lying when I say the essay is rooted in facts, but because the voice has the analytical, authoritative tone, things that are more ambiguous are stated as facts.

“Pep Talk to a New Father,” is second person commanding and presents a somewhat authoritative voice like in “The Chase.” “You” is both me and the universal father, even though the essay is rooted in the specifics of my life. Fatherhood anxiety inspired much of the writing, but it’s also a reaction to the many instances of family, friends, and strangers who said to me in regard to fatherhood, “Enjoy it,” or “It goes by fast.” So I really just wanted to write something deeper than that, and at the same time contradict the persistent “enjoy it,” with anxiety and misery, because of course you can’t always enjoy it, and that’s okay. You can be a father, love your baby, and at the same

time be miserable, scared, exhausted, and know that when you're older you're going to miss all of it.

As a new father I've become drawn to father writers whose experience ends up on the page. Evan Lavender-Smith, renders his perspective as a dad in his book of fragmented journal entries, *From Old Notebooks*. One entry Lavender-Smith writes, "Three things I would try my hardest to save were my house on fire: flash drive, baseball glove, first edition *Gravity's Rainbow*. Three more: Carmen, Jackson, Sophia." It is comforting and helpful to see someone convey their inherent selfishness in the face of being a father. It does seem like a lot of blog and informational documents present parenting as this life changing event that changes your very being, and it's partly true, but rarely does anybody use parenthood to put up a mirror to the flaws intrinsic with being human. Parenting is not a remedy to these intrinsic flaws. Parents are still selfish people despite having a child yet are forced to wrestle with compromise and selflessness on a daily basis. I feel this thesis is the beginning of other pieces in which I undermine mainstream, blog-like, guide-book parenting theory.

The voice in *From Old Notebooks* reads like a continuous scribbling of ideas, as if each entry were written between tasks, or at a red light, or waiting at the doctor's office. Yet, within this collage style there is a structure that is most evident in Lavender-Smith's son Jackson, who he calls 'beaniebutt' throughout the book. In return Jackson also calls his Lavender-Smith "beaniebutt."

We can see progression by the end of the book.

"Hey beaniebutt, whatup?" Lavender-Smith says to Jackson, to which Jackson, instead of returning with 'beaniebutt,' says, "Whatup, Dad" (Lavender-Smith 178). This

marks the passage of time and for Lavender-Smith a moment of actualization into a new stage of fatherhood. It marks change in Smith's son too, a growth out of babyish ways. On a narrative level it shows how three lines can convey the timeline of an entire book which seemed to have very little timeline when reading it.

Many essays in the thesis rely on repetition to house the words in a structure. "Rideshare," uses "The sun rises with..." to show time passing, to convey routine, and to give agency to my pursuit of money. And just as important, it separates home life from the road, giving a breather to the reader from the stimuli in scenes of driving for rideshare companies. But it's more than functional. It's also symbolic. "The sun rises with the sound of a jovial bulldozer," implies my son at play, which implies that the sun rises with Vernon at play, which means the days revolve around Vernon's needs. But then there is also the sun in the sky that is heating the planet and a marker for the work day, as well as the end of times. The sun and the son have some interplay that I find cool.

"Messses," relies on a question to move the reader through the piece. "What is a mess but..." It's a functional move that creates pace and allows one section to begin after the one before it. As the essay progresses, the mess deepens, gets messier, growing out of the physical and into more emotional messes closer to the present. Because the sentences are long and travel to different points in time, and then circle back, the repetition of "What is a mess," acts as a glue to the places the essay goes. By relying on a single refrain, the refrain takes on deeper meaning the more the essay progresses. As well, it offers opportunities to surprise the reader when the language gets altered. "What is a mess" eventually becomes "Maybe my mess is your mess," which creates a sense of progression in the essay as we might finally know what a mess is. The essay builds like a

mess might build, gathering force as it goes. From the beginning the piece refers to the writing process behind the piece. This allows distance at a point when I need it most, “What a mess it is to write the words, “the sound of my mother,” But it’s not complete disconnection or distraction, but a turn of the head—like Didion or Morrison—to view the point of trauma at a slight angle.

“Metaphor” depends on “Coldfoot is” or “it is”, to introduce a list of metaphors that provide a collage of Coldfoot. Using a list form allows me to travel through Coldfoot in the various seasons that I worked and lived there, giving the reader glimpses in many years of time spent. Similar to “Messes,” the refrain changes as the essay progresses. On occasion I depict a scene in place of the metaphor, “It’s three in the morning, the wizard crunching the numbers, eating cheerios and no one around,” which subverts the role the refrain has played prior with the intent to surprise the reader.

Death, or dying, is a clear theme in the thesis as most essays, in one way or another, make attempts to comment on my own dying, my brother dying or, dying in general. I imagine my experience is not rare, in that after a close loss, reflection on mortality sets in.

“Now I can’t die,” I would often say to myself after he passed. Being the only son, my parents have left adds a bit of pressure to staying alive. But the inverse exists too, in that I am much closer to the reality that other people die, namely people I love. It is one of those rather obvious, but avoided, repressed aspects of being. It’s the obvious realization of was there all along: “Oh, this actually happens,” and then how the body and mind try to make sense or come to terms with it.

In “Hoops,” basketball courts become a metaphor for my own deterioration, but also represent a space of presence and aliveness. “The Chase,” hints at Nabokov’s “Perfect Past,” and the empty dark place we come from and return to. “Messes,” sees death mostly through grief and the mess it causes the ones who lose. “Rideshare,” circles death from a more human-consumption, capitalist lens, that conveys the grind amid certain climate crises and that we work, move, consume, all to one day die.

The impact of my brother’s death also granted a new presence in the world. Quiet mornings with a breeze were more appreciated, and a little sad too. “How many more mornings like this do I get?,” I would think. It is also a gift that allows a deeper connection to the people already in my life. Within the essays there is an agreement with dying. To not to see myself as someone who is only living, but somebody who is also dying, and to see people this way too, which avoids the binary of life and death, and tries to make living and dying into something more fluid, which, at times, sees them both as one in the same.

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