UA68/6/1 Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University
Zephyrus
2004

A publication of the English Department of Western Kentucky University
Editors
Rebecca Butorac
Kristen Fisher
Calvina Liebig
Kate Matheny
Savannah Sipple
Zachary Vaughn
Aubrey Videtto
Chuck Williamson

Art coordination and cover art:
Charlene Grieshop

Title page art: Darlene Branham

Online version: Sam Stinson
<http://www.wku.edu/zephyrus>

Faculty advisor: David LeNoir

Printing: Print Media

Editor’s note: Our selection process is based on complete anonymity. If an editor recognizes an author’s work, he or she abstains from the decision-making process for that work.

Award Winners

Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award
James Prather Phillips

Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award
Marci Kacsir

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Rebecca Payne

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
Alex Taylor

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Zacchaeus Compson

Zephyrus Art Award
Brad Williams

Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing staff of WKU; the art award is chosen by Zephyrus staff.
Table of Contents

Corey Alderdice
Hannah Carrman
Brad Williams
Hannah Carman
Zacchaeus Compson
Zacchaeus Compson
Megan Hopper
Ruth Enos
Derek Holt
Brad Williams
Marci Kacsir
Marci Kacsir
Bonny McDonald
Jay Moffett
Rebecca Payne
James Prather Phillips
Samantha Ragland
Mike Sickels
Heather Boehler
Savannah Sipple
Jordan Carey
Alex Taylor
Tim Eschrich
Chuck Williamson
James Lee
Chuck Williamson

"Through These Gates" ...................... 7
"How To Be a Pantyhose Poet" ............ 14
untitled ........................................ 16
"Black Hole Peters" ......................... 17
"Stigmatism" .................................. 19
"The Touch" ................................... 21
untitled ........................................ 24
"Images" ........................................ 25
"threnodraw" .................................. 27
"Anguish" ....................................... 30
"Sunspots" ...................................... 31
"I Hope We Become a California Sunset" .. 32
"Tracks to the Fire" ......................... 34
untitled ........................................ 35
"Memoirs of a Three-Year-Old" ............ 36
"V" ............................................... 37
"Something I Remember" ................... 38
"Fermata" ....................................... 39
"King Tut" ....................................... 40
"Granny Gettin' Old" ....................... 41
"Thoughts From an Ex-Jock" .............. 42
untitled ........................................ 44
"Legends of the Lesser Timber" .......... 45
"Landscape #2" ................................ 55
"Clemensky Strikes Back" ................. 56
"The Duel/Draw/Culture Clash" .......... 60
"Whenever Mister Crayon's Pen Says 'In Poetry, We Fear' You Listen" ............. 61
I have this theory about clubs.

You’ve probably seen it all in action, especially if you’re a guy of average looks in your early to mid-twenties. If you’re of the female persuasion, well, you’re probably oblivious. This theory is rather simple in mechanics, but—like gravity—I find that I am damned into submission.

You’re still not getting it, okay. To simplify: there are six kinds of guys at dance clubs and they’re each very, very different. Like the Israelites of millennia ago, they are searching for the Promised Land—a place of milk and honeys. And just like that first generation in exile, few will ever see its borders.

Trust me, it sucks, but at least I’ve gotten used to it.

The fourth week of each college semester is the byproduct of some great conspiracy. C’mon, you expect professors to gang up on you during midterms and finals, but this one comes out of the blue. My first taste of hell. By the end of this fourth week, I’m ready for something else—anything else. The pages of Hawthorne and Sartre and Stuart are beginning to blend into a literary smoothie. I guess that’s why it doesn’t seem like such a bad idea when Lucy calls and says we should go clubbing.

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fun,” she says.

“Root canal fun or Chinese water torture fun?” I think this is clever.

I always think my little quips are clever.

“I was actually thinking more of the electric cattle prod kind, but if you’re looking for something a little more exotic.”

Damn, she topped me. “I really would like to sleep, I’ve had three Lit exams this week.”

“Then you need some fun.”

“Like I need a hole in my head.”

Lucy and I play this little game; I always lose. She knows that whenever I pick up the phone I’m going to do whatever she says. That’s just my nature. Call it a desire to please or to just feel wanted—whatever—but I’m already beaten.

“I take it I’m driving.” At least I am humble in defeat.

“Oh, you’re the best. Pick me up in an hour.”

Lucy and I are not dating. Was that obvious? Because people who are actually dating don’t like clubs. Again, you’re confused. How do I say this? Guys go to clubs for one reason: to get ass. Blunt, but
painfully true. My visits only seem to add to the bigger picture of my frustration.

We arrive at Lucy’s club of choice this evening. The Inferno is housed in an old meat-processing plant, the genius of urban planning and reconstruction, a mix between S&M and Trading Spaces. I think it’s only fitting that the place was once a bloody mess. It’s exactly how I feel.

For Lucy’s sake I try to put on a happy face. I even dress up. My outfit is the result of Lucy’s impulse shopping: brown cords, a purposefully-wrinkled imported long-sleeve shirt, shiny black buckled shoes, and a coral necklace. I honestly don’t know if I should laugh or cry. As we pass the windows of bistros and coffee houses, I catch glimpses of myself. It’s always pleasant to know you dropped a week’s paycheck to look this foolish, but Lucy is happy so I must be happy by proxy.

The building is basked in a red glow. Groups of girls in halter-tops and stretches of string enter the building. By the way that one of them is stumbling around, my guess is that she’s already begun the festivities for the evening. Standing in line are people of every sort: skin tones, socio-economic status by choice of clothing, even age—despite their best attempt at using Just For Men. I’m beginning to forget why I’m even here in the first place, because I have to look just as stupid as the rest of the crowd—a pathetic facsimile of Where’s Waldo.

“All they need is the sign that says ‘Abandon hope all who enter through these gates,’” I comment. There actually are gates: metallic grids topped with sharp points and gothic demons pulled from some artist’s worst nightmare. His catharsis is at least profitable. I, on the other hand, will be losing twenty dollars for our entrance.

“That would be overdoing the metaphor,” she replies punching me in the side and taking my wallet.

“No one’s big on subtlety these days.”

“Promise me you will try and have a good time tonight.”

“No promises.”

This is where Lucy and I part ways. I mentioned we’re not together, right? I mean, I fulfill the daily roles of a boyfriend: shopping, talking, complaining, and the occasional witty retort. I just fail to receive the perks of the actual relationship. I’m in this whole thing pro bono. I like to think of myself as the “Hetero Gay Best Friend.”

Inside The Inferno, the music is overpowering. I’m not sure who the artist is, but he has an affinity for doggy style and the f-word. Now, I know I’m in hell. So I do what any other person of legal age would, I head to the bar.

“Red Bull and vodka, lots of vodka.”

“Enjoy,” he says. He. The servers behind the bar are all women except for this joker. My face flushed red as I feel my temperature rising. As always this is my luck. And by the expression on his face, he can see the ridiculous nature of my costume.

“Thanks.”

I move across the crowded room and settle into a corner table. It’s the only open seat and it’s next to a speaker. I scan the room and become informed of a different singer’s love of Bacardi and pimpin’. At this point you’re wondering why I’m here in the first place? If I’m this miserable, there’s really no point in being here.

No one is in hell by choice.

I’m a pro at this. I can spend four hours of my life reading or making someone else happy. Too bad she’s dancing with someone else. Now is the precise moment when my eyes catch sight of Lucy among the throng of clubbers. Fire and brimstone do not burn this badly. She’s made a new friend with above average looks, impeccable taste in clothing, and this guy must have the soul of a Latin samba dancer. He’s one of the lucky.

You see, I have this theory about hell. And that’s really what this club is. The place is overheated and a confined space where the noise is so loud that you can’t hear your own thoughts. When the lights are swimming around the walls, you lose sight of even yourself. Depending on what drugs are being passed around that night, there’s a decent chance for weeping and gnashing of teeth. However, this is not a unilateral hell; there are, in fact, many levels. Each one filled with lost souls seeking salvation and constantly being turned away.

“You got a light?” a guy asks. Back to reality. He reminds me of myself. I look more ridiculous, but at least he looks more rejected.

“Yeah.” I reach into my pocket. I don’t smoke, but I carry a lighter. It’s just in case I’m ever covered in gasoline. I’d hate to waste the opportunity, or if some smoker needs a light. Always looking to help a person in need.

“Thanks man,” he says.

“No problem. You alone?” Of course he is.

“Just killing time.”

At this point, I realize it sounds like I’m hitting on him. So I stop talking. There’s an awkward pause of around twenty seconds and he simply walks away. He resides in one circle higher than I and
“No problem. You alone?” Of course he is.
“Just killing time.”

At this point, I realize it sounds like I’m hitting on him. So I stop talking. There’s an awkward pause of around twenty seconds and he simply walks away. He resides in one circle higher than I and yet he doesn’t even know it.

My residence is in the lowest circle of hell. I’ve done nothing to get here and that’s precisely why I’m being punished. At the bottom are the guys who don’t even stand a chance, so they don’t even try, so they don’t even get a name. They are happy (kinda) with sitting at a table and watching the torture of other souls by demonic sirens. I grab a cocktail napkin and draw a frowny face in the corner. This is me. The young man who’s just left my table, I draw him in the other corner.

He is a Searcher, desperately looking to find someone. To make matters worse (and to decrease his chances of salvation), he’s wearing a sweater vest. My guess is he’s pursuing a PhD in some liberal art. All he needs is a pocket protector and he’d easily pass for a Tri-Lambda or Anthony Edwards or any other poor bastard from the Revenge of the Nerds trilogy. At least he is searching. He walks around the edge of the club looking for some twist of fate, but he won’t find it.

Lucy is thirsty, but rather than having her new boy toy buy her a drink she comes to me. Partially because she lost track of me and partially because I have the keys to the car and this really isn’t the best neighborhood for a solo walk after midnight.

“Where you been?” she inquires as her hand brushes my cheek.

“Just taking a break. You know how easily I sweat.” Not the sexiest thing I could have said. Mental note: I need to learn when to quit.

“With that winning charm, how do you not have a girlfriend?”

“So how does the field look tonight?” An interruption, at least, allows me to dodge the question.

“Oh, there’s potential.”

“Have fun, then,” I add and then we’re back to square one. She grabs my Red Eye and finishes it off. Lucy is back among the group, and on her way to the sardine can of horny dancers, she passes the Wolfpack.

The Wolfpack, the fourth lowest circle. I do commend these guys for showing some initiative. Mathematically speaking, it’s simple. There is a level of saturation on the dance floor that cannot be surpassed so they patiently wait their turn. The occasional one does happen to stop a girl who already drank too much, but for the most part they are simply place fillers. Some do actually make it onto the floor. They become the Sweeper freaking about the crowd. These guys know they are alone, but they’re making the best of damnation. Some are dancing with glowsticks in hand. They look happy, but they’ve gotta realize what they are missing out on.

I head back to the bar. To cover my humiliation, I act like I’m ordering drinks for two, but it’s just my way of passing time. I make sure this time I head in the direction of a barmaid.

“Hey cutie, what’ll it be?” The last time I heard this phrase was at a strip club. Another story.

“Two Red Eye doubles.” I figure I should remain awake during torture.

“Drinking for one?”

“Is it that obvious?” My eyes squint and my jaw falls slightly slack. I realize the absurdity of this situation. I’m paying seven dollars for each drink to slip out of consciousness but to stay awake. Maybe my stupidity is why I deserve to be in hell. She pours the drinks and I go on my way.

Heading back to the table, which ironically remains open, I try to make eye contact with girls, but have no luck. It’s mostly awkward glances that you give and receive in return when you’re a third grader. I must have spent more time memorizing multiplication tables and spelling. Damn my lack of priorities.

I settle back in and scratch a sketch of the Wolfpack and Sweeper on my napkin. I’m starting to realize what Michelangelo was thinking when he painted The Final Judgment. I mean, he was aware of the souls around him going in both directions. Mikey was undecided about his fate, so he simply painted himself as an empty shell. I must have finally reached the point where the alcohol allows me to wax philosophically.

Lucy has now made two friends. One is attempting to have sex with her despite the simple fact they are both wearing clothes. The other is admiring her backside, trying to see how far he can shove his crotch up her ass. I think I saw this one time on a Discovery Channel special. Crotch Boy is a Meddler. He’s moved in on someone else’s territory but doesn’t care. Lucy whispers something to Sex
Boy and he turns her around. Crotch Boy is uncomfortable with the ambiguously homosexual notion of dancing near a guy so he decides to stick his...uh...nose...in someone else’s business.

This is when it hits me.
Sex Boy is a Saint—the least condemned soul in hell. Like a Marine he is both the few and the proud. He has the girl and he has her all to himself. And I can’t stand him because of it.
Why?
Because Lucy doesn’t really know him.
Because when he stops calling two weeks later, I’ll be the one to console her.
Because I’ve put up with all the highs and the lows and have only received moralistic platitudes of “You’re the greatest guy in the world,” in return. Thanks for noticing.
Because Lucy is mine. Well, she should be.
At this point the six shots of alcohol have my head swimming and the twenty-four ounces of Red Bull have my heart thumping. I need fresh air. I force my way through the crowd to Lucy. She looks euphoric.
“I’m leaving,” I pronounce.
“Wait, where are you going?”
“Somewhere else.”
“Why?”
“I’m tired of being here. Why do you fucking care?”
By now we’re both shouting at the top of our lungs, but it’s lost among the rapper’s profession of smoking blunts. That’s when Sex Boy steps up.
“Let him drive you home,” I point at the Saint.
I push through the crowd toward the door. At last I’m free.
The late September air is surprisingly cold. I notice this because the sweat has caused my poly-rayon blend shirt to pull toward my body.
I walk.
I wind up in front of a coffee shop, the one where I happened to catch a sideways glance of myself earlier. I still look ridiculous. I see the coral necklace around my neck and jerk it from my body. Little beads of rock and metal spread across the sidewalk. I go inside and order a latte. I should feel better after this. Again, I move to the corner of the room. There’s only one other person here tonight besides the worker.
I’m reading a newspaper that’s already yesterday’s news when a hand pulls down the paper.
“Hi,” she says.

The thick black cat-eye glasses accentuate the curves of her face. I bet her vision is lacking because she read too many books at night when she was a girl. She’s not a great looking woman, but you know she could be, her twisted up brunette hair and smeared mascara the result of her love for ancient epics more so than Cosmo.
I sit up, “Be my guest.”
It feels as though the sticky floor is the only thing keeping me grounded. She sets her purse down next to my chair. Sticking out of her bag is a copy of Virgil. This girl is deep.
We begin talking and I feel as though I might disappear through the cracked linoleum with one wrong look. In my mind I’m rising through the circles of hell. Salvation has come at last, blocks away from the noise and the other lost souls. I’m pressing onward and upward—my guide leading me toward the stars. This is what heaven must feel like. I realize the clock has melted into 2 a.m.
Then it hits me. I don’t even know her name. She knows what I’m thinking.
“I’m Grace,” she smiles.
I smile as well and reach into my pocket to throw away the napkin sketch—a failed masterpiece. Yet I am brilliant in defeat. After all, Michelangelo also painted the rest of the Sistine Chapel.
How to Be a Pantyhose Poet
Hannah Carman

Move to New York with a vintage leather backpack and sit in Poetry Cafés hidden between storefronts. Frame your face in black plastic and scribble lines about fashion week in your leather agenda.

Never have seven-hour scribbles in a three ring about hating the South, or missing it. Even though readers want to know that Kentucky is your old tired bedsprings, making you sore just looking at it.

Live a life in which nothing seems slippery. Miles converted into inches on the true happiness scale must measure everything.

Listen to your TV; do everything it tells you to reassure yourself that your life is the typical American escape.

Don’t cry when you talk to your momma or especially not your best friend who has ended the competition between you with white chiffon.

Never miss the wind or your secret affection for the way it can catch a six-mile skunk.

Strap on your black, high-heeled, Mary Jane’s, in your tiny one bedroom, stare at your reflection, pinch at your sides and try to decide when to stop calling your vibrator, your boyfriend.

Submit only to Chicken Soup books about America and compensate for death in softly written words.

Never write words as you are walking home because it’s the only time you are truly alone. Wait until you find yourself in fields of bloom or under starry night sky.

Perform only in bars full of gentlemen, if such a thing exists. Force a few face streamers at the end of each poem with titles like “While strolling the Galleria De Arte.” Nobody knows you have never really been to Argentina.

Never defend who you used to be but refer to your former self as an armpit and resist the temptation to say a clean one.

Most importantly: ALWAYS WRITE ABOUT LOVE, NEVER SEX. He must always be your sweetest sky. You must always be his gentle as jasmine but most importantly, his.

Please don’t be.
A name is the first label given to all of us; mine is Fable. As a child I was obsessed with the dictionary. I wanted to be Webster’s wife and we would live in a hut with a palm roof that would leak every time it rained on some bleak and blue island. He would be tall, slightly darker than the tan crayon. His hair would curl just around his lobes, then just about his brow and blend with pale tips curling skyward. He would make pearls with sand swallowed inside his bellybutton and folded between his six-pack and pelvic bone. And I would be Picasso’s Olga in an Armchair, my red lips tight until smiling, only I would be brown, blonde, and fan myself between my toes. Our definition of ironic would be two people, responsible for every word of this world, who wouldn’t actually live inside it. Therefore, people would envelop their definitions for life based on something that wasn’t real. As I grew, I realized that the world was already living this parody.

As love foreplay, I would flip through every new Webster edition for what my name really meant. Most of the definitions I hated and by the time I was twelve I concluded that by this, Webster didn’t love me.

Fable, fā’bl, n. A falsehood; an idle story; a fictitious narrative.

To Webster, I was fake and melted along with the other plastic civilians. I was a falsehood in our neighborhood of two. Webster broke my heart.

Shortly after, I stopped playing in the sun, just to allow my skin to clarify. That was of course until spring in Charleston, which was enough to make me burn a picture I drew of Webster in the third grade and run through the sprinkler in my parents’ back yard. I began to notice the boys who farted excitedly in homeroom and turned to me waiting to see if I had heard. I would just paste my eyes to my English homework and bend over, closing my biceps against my “breasts,” creating a B sized crack in my tank top.

My parents always left me unfiltered about the questions of life. I knew what the penis was and I watched them flicker inside the boys’ pants as I crossed one leg over the other. I was the first girl to shave my legs in fifth grade because Mama thought if I was old enough to read Newsweek without just looking at the pictures, I was old enough to shear my knees. I never told her that I read it because I secretly thought Dan Quayle was sexy and in Newsweek, he never
opened his mouth.

Virginity is not as clean as one might think, perhaps mine was filthy. There was a line there but it was made of Hanes cotton. Not many steps were required to cross it for me, just a bottom lip and a smile. Landon Gaston was the first I let pound a tongue against my wisdom teeth. He would pull his lips back and smile to say I was beautiful. And I would let him even though he didn't know who Holden Caulfield was. Even though I imagined Holden's fingers before I pushed Landon's away from my vagina, a word that I have known since I was five.

I had a small hole in my ceiling where a whole family of ants lived. They were my friends, the ants. I called them all Peter. Peter my brother, Peter my sister, Peter my best friend. I would spend the first few moments before crawling out of my bed to watch them walk a straight black line down my piggy pink wall. I imagined that they were girl Peters walking to the school bus. They would hold antennas crossing the street, giggling about boy Peters and wave to me, "The Princess of Peters" wishing they could wake up as beautiful as me. It was my very own fable.

My mother hated Peters. They walked through the coffee sugar, burned inside her piping hot cup, and coffee slid through the gap in her teeth just in time for her to realize it was a Peter, not a grain.

When an ant dies, its family comes to save it. They carry it back to their house and dine on its remains. When I learned this in sixth grade biology I ran from the room, eyes leaking. The next morning I woke in just enough time to catch the Peters walking to school and my mother opened the door to catch me watching. She screamed and took her pump and began smashing the Peters with its toe. I jumped up and pushed her shoe to the floor. Mom ran upstairs and began dialing the exterminator. Peters were running to the wounded, strapping them to their backs and climbing the wall to their home in the sky.

Ants smell like ink when you kill them. I just stared at the ink spot on my pink wall. I pressed my shiny cheek against the battleground and kissed it. Ants taste like ink when you kiss them. My tears ran through their black hole. It always seems to rain when something dies.

Stigmatism
Zacchaeus Compson

Some would say it was the perfect evening, like maybe it was. Campfires danced romantically, curves of flame melting with the warm velvet night. Fireflies blinked for one another, while crickets stroked the dark below. The pungent earth mixed with heavy smoke, each breath full and heady. In a nearby tent, two old lovers held each other again for the first time.

At our site the fire had died three times and so we rested in the blue light of our own full moon, its cobalt glow making the branches of trees seem naked and smooth. We sat at an old picnic table as she gave me a personality quiz, but my mind drifted. Down. Down my arm to where my skin barely touched hers. I worried she would find me there, in that point of warmth so close to her. I pulled away, gazed into the trees.

She was opening now. Telling me things. Feelings. And I had shifted onto my back, floating with the stars, my head a breath from her thigh. One slight movement, one subtle lurch, and I could be resting in her lap. And she wouldn't care.

*****

The first time I saw it, I could not look away, like that first encounter with a deer. It wasn't a sty, exactly, but a growth, a subtle birthmark, a little nodule of flesh peeking out at me. Staring back. At first I thought it would go away, but it only got larger, and when I tried to look into her eyes I couldn't see them at all: just this protrusion, like a streetlight dimming the stars, swelling with each cricket chirp. I began to hate it, how it intruded in on our conversations. I would look only into her right eye, or stand on her good side. But it was still there, hiding discretely on the shore, just beyond the pool of her left eye. My hate for it burned like frost. If I touched it, would all this spiteful cold flow to my fingertip, concentrated at the point where it touched, freezing the nub like nitrogen? Would it break off and shatter into a million tiny crystals reflecting her new perfection? Melt away forever?

*****

The personality quiz was taking too long, and I was trapped in some theoretical point inside her sty. She always became frustrated that she couldn't figure me out, especially when I liked to finish her
thoughts. But her eye was a mystery. Like, for her, the tiny outcapping wasn't there, like she had never known it. But how could she miss it? Didn't it hinder a perfect view? Didn't the mirror reflect a broken symmetry? Had she thought of surgery? Or would she be unchanged forever?

Deep inside the sty, I heard her voice, distant and muffled: Zacchaeus, what's wrong? What's wrong? And the voices of friends, alarmed at my inhumanity: You can't judge her because of a tiny blemish. She cares about you. You two would be great together. But it would never be two.

*****

At last, I could take no more: I walked away in silence as she pursued me, pleading and confused. She stopped, and I turned around to see her soft face in the moonlight. The crickets paused; her pain was like the chirp knotted in my throat. In the shadow of her smooth nose, the defect was hidden. I told her I had to leave, told her something might happen.

As I walked the mile down the abandoned highway to my seasonal apartment, everything was symbolic: the lone moon, the two yellow lines growing infinitely close but never touching, the lost call of a cricket. On the glowing crown of onyx highway I spun around in the light of the moon, a perfect, unblemished eye, watching me dance. Free.

The Touch
Zacchaeus Compson

We are, all of us, molded and remolded by those who have loved us, and though that love may pass, we remain none the less their work—a work that very likely they do not recognize, and which is never exactly what they intended.

--Francois Mauriac, The Desert of Love

*****

"...the Petrified Forest, Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon—places as stark and beautiful and deadly as those revealed in satellite photographs of distant planets. Airless, burning, inhuman. Against such backdrops, my father takes my face in his hands. He tips it up and kisses my closed eyes, my throat. I feel his fingers in the hair at the nape of my neck. I feel his hot breath on my eyelids."

--Kathryn Harrison, The Kiss

*****

When my brother and I were younger, Mom and Dad would "lay with us." This meant that one of them would lay with me, and the other with Justin. We could hear a story or just talk. Dad would read us The Black Stallion; Mom would make up exotic Hunga-Bunga stories about jungle adventures and aboriginal encounters. If we talked, we could get our backs tickled, and Mom was a much better tickler. This became a ritual every night before we went to bed, and we looked forward to it so much that we couldn't sleep without it. So I always thought it was special even when I overheard Aunt Jane arguing with Mom about how it was bad. "It's just not normal, Cathy. They're too old. How will they ever learn to sleep on their own?"

One night, I asked Mom why people kiss. "For love," she told me.

"Why do people always kiss on the lips," I asked.
"They don't just kiss on the lips," she hesitated, saw the confusion clouding my eyes. "Your father and I kiss all over. Some people... Some people even kiss on their special areas." My eyes got wide, my mouth dry.
"You mean..."
Legends recount the potency of a kiss: a kiss awoke a woman from the catacombs of sleep; a kiss sold the world like the whispering clouds over Galgotha; a kiss closed the sky of a young woman, holding her into an Old Testament bondage that only death could release. In Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss*, we gain a perspective into a story riddled with Biblical nuances that rattle across the broken landscapes of love and devotion.

When I was nine I had an operation to eliminate blood from my urine. I remember afterwards how Mom had to check my penis twice a day: she pulled the head open so my urethra would not heal closed. It became a ritual for us, a ritual even my father could not partake in. I was comfortable with only her. One day I came to her with an erection. She gave me a look that betrayed rejection, told me she could not help me right then. “Why Mom?” I told her I would “go pee” and it would go away.

“That’s not urine that makes your penis big, son. It’s blood.”

The disturbing aspects of *The Kiss* focus its innocence into sharp reality. Harrison is a young girl faced with a ghost-image of a father: her other half who has been cut from her life, whispered away by family members, forgotten. This severed beginning forces her to fantasize about him—and, indeed, fantasy comes to life when they finally meet. Literally the ‘man of her dreams,’ Harrison and her father spend long trips on the road, exploring the stark beauty of the cirques, horns, and knife-edged ridges of the rugged, romantic West, exploring the switch-back passes of themselves that open up like roads after the spring thaw, the fault-block mountains no longer an impasse. When they arrive at the glacial-clad peak, it is a thing of stark beauty, not reality, their lives hovering over the continental divide like they are above division, above the zagging, jagged line of morality. And the kiss, the kiss warm like sunset, deceives, bleeding the crevasses a deep pink, deluding the warmth that dips to arctic darkness moments later when the sun sinks below the broken line of Earth.

One night I was laying with Mom and she was tickling my back. I turned over so she could tickle my arms and sides.

“What is ‘thinking,’ Mom?” She thought about it for a few seconds, running her soft fingers over the pale boy flesh of my under-arm, over the smooth buttes of my chest and the hummocks of my ribs.

“Thinking, son, is when you look at something and shut your eyes and it’s still there.” I remember looking at her wedding ring, closing my eyes, and seeing it there, in my mind, for the first time. I loved Mom for teaching me how to think.

“Could you tickle my tummy, Mom?” Her warm fingers moved over my stomach, circled the sinkhole of my belly button. “Lower Mom.” Her hand moved lower. “Lower Mom.”

“No son.”

“Please.” Her hand moved lower, lower, just tickling-inches lower. The cool backs of her fingers just graced my penis. She jerked away, her hand leaving my stomach like I had done wrong.

It is only after the kiss has engulfed a relationship with passion, blazed up into lust and devotion, only after the flames themselves subside, only then can Harrison enter the Yellowstone of her soul and behold the slag landscape, put her hands around a cold, black cinder from kisses past and see the damage. The fire itself its glorious, but it only serves to heighten the pain of the cold. The cold grasp of lust holds Harrison’s father, and his possession is fueled by the false theology of an Old Testament landscape strip-mined of grace and the oil-thick blood of Christ’s very bosom. Only a living sacrifice, it seems, can break the young woman from the salt-cooled lusty bonds of her father’s Gomorrah.

The line between eros and agape love is fine. It bleeds together from the edges like a red sulfur spring, until everything is hinted with pink hues; only when the water dries do the two again separate, the dissipated vapor of lust leaving an alkaline crust of reality.

“Do it again, Mom. It feels good.”

“No.” Her voice still haunts me. “It is not right to touch you there,” she whispers.

“Please, Mom. I don’t care.” Silence. She tickles me again, on my stomach, my sides, but it is not the same. Her stiff fingers rub over my ribs and I am scared.

“Please, Mom. Please.”
Snap. Flash! The bright bulb knocked me back a step as my seven-year-old nose captured the viewfinder instead of the looming pink hydrangea bush. The lime green rectangle reflected a sun ray as its gleaming eye met mine. Oh. I guess that didn’t work. Stepping through the grass in my red jelly shoes, I turned the camera around and tried again. Click! Good—now I got it! Running through the basement doors and up the rickety steps, I landed in the dining room where Mom sat half-buried under tissue paper, newsprint, and cardboard, carefully wrapping her favorite coffee mugs. I hovered over her with my dangling ponytail.

“I got the back yard!”

“All right!” she encouraged. “Think of anything else about the house you might want to remember.” Hmm. I stood there chewing my lip for a minute until it hit me. The porch swing! I bolted to the front door and heaved it open with both hands, stepping out to click the shutter open and preserve the hours Dad and I had spent sitting there counting highway cars.

*******

Thud. Thud. Thump. One. Two. Three. The reverberation gradually stirred me from sleep and West Africa daylight stung through my overhanging mosquito net. Sticky sweat pasted the sheet to my back as I slid my feet to the hard concrete floor. Once I shuffled into the kitchen, a jar of lukewarm powdered milk waited on the table. Grabbing a box of British cornflakes out of the sliding cabinet door, I turned to plop into the nearest wicker chair when Dad peeked inside through the front-door curtain, his Canon clenched in hand.

“Our neighbor let me take her picture! I got several good shots of her swinging the pounding stick into the onions and peppers. Since the other lady told me ‘no’ last week, I wasn’t sure if anybody around here would agree.” Mom glanced over her shoulder from the dish basin,

“I suppose if I’d been told a camera might take away my soul, I’d be leery too.” Dad nodded.

“But now I can show people back home the racket we wake up to every morning.” I looked up from my bowl, rolling my eyes and we all chuckled at the same moment,

“That or the mosque prayer call!”
I stood in the church foyer, hands clasped in front as I watched the younger teenage girls who milled past my booth. Only a thin veneer of interest glazed their faces, and their eyes danced past the colorful images of my summer work in Belgium. A brunette digging in her purse for her cell phone zoomed in to inspect the castle postcard, but images of my students from the Middle East and Central Asia did not vie for her attention. Uzbekistan, Iran, Turkey, the names of my refugees’ countries dotting the poster’s edge earned only a few more seconds of their attention. With coached, polite smiles, they shuffled past my table to form a huddle so they could complain about last Friday’s football loss. Fingers wound around their curls and lip gloss sparkling in their smiles, they let the world glide past them as quickly as the cars rushing by my old front porch.
she scours the crowded lonely &
composite floors
of carpeted apartments,
personal achievement
disinterestedly
for it was he
who told her
everything
about a boy
with a name
she could not speak
but from the story
alone
she fell
straight into the centre of the soft hand
fell into him like the falling of quarter notes
the raising of centesimal staffs
of small stakes
to couple him
with the retention of her praise

in my own song
I've yet to write
a singularity and
I've had no time for grand opera
as I'm reading myself
into the lines
and oh! how I've counted
out my own measure
in the craving of something exclusive,
no more than she and I,
a union,
a profound composition,
a process of eliminating
the border called jack and 'niel and benjamin

christopher justin matthew adam vienna paris athens
hodgenville louisville chicago bowling green—
in a procession of names
and declensions I stammer
over the stretch of an elimination
of exclusivity
as my face tightens
in the cheeks
and a dismantled clef
spreads like an absence
at the round table
to hurry and turn to a solitary listener
and unfold
the boundaries of clout.
Sunspots
Marci Kacsir

There is something
About a sunspot
On a soft bed—
Cat envy perhaps,
Or that sunshine
Closes my eyes for me
And makes my skin
My own blanket.
I warm up to
The smell of baked pillows
On a cold comforter.
It reminds me
Of banana nut bread
At grandma’s house.
But there is that something
About a sunspot
On a soft bed—
Where sleep curls
With its tail tucked
Under its chin.
I Hope We Become a California Sunset

Marci Kacsir

I was ten years old,
Knobby-kneed, flat-chested,
And thought no person
Was more popular than the next.
I still think it should be that way.

I waded into the Pacific
In a 90 degree January dusk
On a Coronado beach outside San Diego.
The beach stretched its belly
A quarter mile under water from land
And I stood like a shadow on water
Singing "joy to the fishes"
To someone in the chameleon clouds.

The deep purple sky behind me
Was a veil that hung on my hair
And the Technicolor waves
Were the train of my gown.
I married that sunset
Dressed in the orange and red glow
Painted on my virgin skin,
Holding a bouquet of shells and sand.

I vowed to always love it
Because even after the last colors
Are stolen from the sky,
The moon shepherds its stars
Into the navy void.
They shine as if the sun
Has broken into infinite pieces
And still winks out of the shards.

Night isn’t dark,
But white as a wedding day
And married to the moon
Who always spills the sun’s blessings
Onto the eager upturned face below her.
Tracks to the Fire
Bonny McDonald

When W.B. Hamilton stepped in a pile of dog crap by the fridge, he went right then and shot his son Cecil’s new flop-eared pup in the head, as it was clear the boy couldn’t take care of it himself, which had been the deal. Another time, he made Cecil’s younger brother A.J. soak a big old rope in the horse trough so he could whip him with it later. And every night when he came into the bedroom, even though she was pretty good at looking asleep, he told his wife, “Git up, woman, it’s time for me to empty my sack.” He beat on all three, plus his bird dogs, but he went a little easier on A.J. since he was the youngest and the skinniest and he only had initials for his name too.

One night, Cecil was lying in bed when a decision came over him. Even though the great big metal fan sucking in hay-smelling air and blowing it on him felt nice as hell, the bruise growing on his shin from that morning didn’t, so he figured he’d had enough and although he was only eleven, he was a tough little shit, so he was getting out of there quicker than Grant took Richmond.

“I love yeh, A.J., but I’ll have to see yeh when I see yeh, okay.”

The rain started on the tin roof while A.J. watched him leave on his bright-ass orange bicycle. Cecil was a pretty good liar and a real good brother, which is why he took the beating for spilling some of that orange paint on his shoes last summer even though truly it was A.J. who spilt it. A.J. figured crying over Cecil riding off in the rain like that was sissified, so he made himself quit.

Cecil got a pretty good ways, but morning was right behind him, so when old W.B. woke up, he didn’t need to ask A.J. where his brother had got to, he just told him to get in the truck and started following the big deep line Cecil’s bike had made in the dirt road that had turned into a mud road overnight.

It wasn’t but a couple hours when they rode up beside him.

“Where yeh headed, boy?”

“I’m going ta see that fire up in Marshall.”

“Well that’s a long way off, ain’t it, son?”

“Yessir, I guess it is.”

“Well hop in, I’ll give yeh a ride.”

On the way back, they stopped to get R.C.’s, and it was pretty quiet except for the grasshoppers and once a deer running off. After that, it went back to being the same.
Memoirs of a Three-Year-Old
Rebecca Payne

when he gets a
big airplane
he will fly me
to the park
and we will play
until it gets dark
because that is when
the park
closes.

his favorite color is blue
and my favorite color cannot
be blue
because he already
owns it.

and i can pick
any car
i want to play with
as long as it's the red one.

V
James Prather Phillips

everything about this bathroom underneath
this motel reminds me of my mother's father,
the dull withstanding scents of Vaseline and
VO5 hair gels, rank stories i should know
nothing about—this VFW coat, his VFW hall,
their house, turned cheap rental space,
now a solid piece of real estate with kicked-in
walls and drag-out fights buried beneath its
floors—high collar, blue fuzz, every strange,
evil, medicated thing he screamed, carefully
induced, by six years of war and ten fold of
cigarettes and unfielded love. he was born
on a farm. my mother, in a silver RV. my
uncle, in the house it overlooked. while i came
out somewhere beside the ocean. and his wife,
well, she let go inside a pristine, but substandard
hospital on the upper east side of a town too
small to mention. and he cried when he under­
stood what the long green line (after weeks of
sharp angles) was screaming. he heard it and
she sat straight up, not a hand to his shoulder,
and flew straight through that window and
between those clouds. and then he said it. and
she heard it: (the sound of things not heard
before. the sound of tears breaking on the ground;
earth's atmosphere circling and sweeping her face;
our love leaving us violently as it entered her,
 exchanged for something new, something void
of ears. to hear. the voice of god say) "i love you,
marcell lee. i love you."

(followed by six more years of silence before his
death.)
Something I Remember
Samantha Ragland

I remember
the sparkle on top of
the dark of your eyes
like that twinkle on top of
the night.
I remember
your charcoaled fingers
melt down
my golden
marsh mellowed body
just like
ocean waves in grains
melt down wood,
bringing the best of
what’s hidden to vision.
And it is the presence of
your hand,
blackened
from just the right
amount of Africa, did for me.

Fermata
Mike Sickels

Piano tempered piccolos
begin this drizzle of
chocolate-eyed quarter-notes;
a flow that halts
all other senses in favor of this
dulcet melody,
mixing music
through these drum-lined ear canals.

For you are the
conductor of
my affections,
and I am the
staccato in
perfect 4/4.

Horns crescendo with
hands’ smooth lifting.
Tempo, tease my heart
into confused allegro.
It beats in time with those slippery tones;
a cadence of desire
to intertwine you between my fingers
and stroke the notes on cello strings.

Before this sonata winds away,
clarinets drift into silken air,
Like your laughter in that loose arpeggio
as it bounces up the scale.
You harmonize
(just so)
to the whistle through my teeth,
a duet with the only musical talent
I possess
and hold.
It rained all night and hasn’t stopped yet. Checks came out this week. She needed to do a few things in town, so I took her. She wanted to go to the branch bank because she hates the stairs at the main bank, but she decided it was too much trouble to go to the branch. I thought she handled the stairs quite well. I sat in the car and read To Kill a Mockingbird while she was in the bank. The David Crowder Band’s “Deliver Me” played low on repeat. Granny tells me again that I need to listen to some old time gospel, the kind that preaches Jesus’ love. She doesn’t like David Crowder Band. She must have been in there for at least twenty minutes. I kept watching for her so I could pull as close as I could. I didn’t want her to get wet. Coming back to the car she didn’t do so well on the stairs. Her walk was much slower, more forced, deliberate, completed like a child does the hated chore. I imagined she couldn’t find the car because she forgot where it was, like she forgot where she laid the Christmas cards I was supposed to address for her. I could see her getting more and more confused because she just knew the car should have been exactly where she stood. Now where did she put it? Her hair would get wet and she would get more and more upset, to the point of tears. I’ve seen her cry silently when she was cooking at the house and just wanted to do things her way, but was in some else’s kitchen and had to ask for help. She doesn’t like to ask for help. I suppose that after raising four kids and taking care of an incontinent handicapped husband, running a farm, surviving breast cancer and the loss of a child, walking countless miles to the nursing home where her husband now spent his days only to spend countless hours “cleaning him up,” and eventually surviving the death of the husband she arranged her whole life around so that he could be taken care of, I think maybe after all that a person has a right to be a little bewildered. She got in the car and I took her to the dollar store, post office, and grocery store. I walked around with her as she shopped, carrying my book, and reading bits and pieces in between talking to her and listening as she talked to every single person we passed among the aisles of IGA brand everything, the same people we had already seen twice today. “Deliver Me” played on repeat in my head. We were in the checkout line and she remembered she needed cereal. She went to the shampoo aisle. I retrieved her and pointed her in the right direction. As she paid for her purchases I put my book inside my jacket and took the bags out to the car. She walked slowly out to the car, out of breath, tired, ready to go home. She turned my radio up, and mentioned that maybe this song wasn’t so bad. I dropped my book in the mud putting the groceries in the back seat.
Thoughts From an Ex-Jock  
Savannah Sipple

Billboards brag that  
The owner of IGA is  
"the cheapest man in town"  
while the delinquent teens,  
those who aren't jocks,  
set fire to the  
makeshift woolly worm haystack  
that guards the brick wall  
Welcome to Beattyville sign.  
The whole county is  
Up at homecoming  
And for those of us  
Who aren't  
There will be  
A hyperbolic  
Recollection of the game in  
The weekly newspaper  
As if all Beattyville  
And its future  
Depends upon  
The Bobcats scoring  
Three points to  
Win in overtime.

I lie in the hammock  
By the pond,  
Adjacent to my own  
Basketball goal,  
The night before  
I leave again.  
I skip the game because  
I don't like to be asked  
When I'll be moving back  
Because I won't and  
I can't explain to them

That my life revolves  
Around books and hopes  
Of traveling to the  
World far beyond  
Small town politics  
Where one man runs  
The only bank  
And his son is  
The mayor

Two ducks slip fast  
Across the pond  
And fly away.  
I go inside and  
Pack my stuffed  
Basketball to take back.

The Bobcats rarely win.
While we were all sitting on my porch waiting for the sun to go down, because it had already set but wasn't really down yet and there was still just enough light for us all to squint and see with, Buzzard drove into the yard on his tractor and came right up to the porchsteps with that big diesel snorting like something bad awake. None of us waved or said anything to him. He killed the engine and smiled, straightened there in the seat.

Anybody want some beer? he asked us. I'm going for the county line.

We didn't say anything. There was still enough light left and we all waited while Buzzard sat there on his Kabota waiting with us.

You should know Buzzard. He's this real bad drunk with a kind of peeled look like somebody came along once and scraped every bit of life right off him. His shack isn't on the edge of town like you'd think, but right behind the post office and when the wind is right he tells us all that he can get high from smelling the envelope glue. About three years ago, the company shut off his electric because he never paid the bill and all the food in the refrigerator went bad: a whole bologna loaf and a half gallon of buttermilk. Now all Buzzard keeps in there are lukewarm Yoohoos and a few back issues of Young Teen Twats in the freezer.

Better say if y'all want anything, he said. I'm fixin' to go.

His smile was thicker now, the face split and the bald head rough and cobbed out. I watched the oil from the tractor leak down into my yard.

We don't want nothing, Buzz, I told him. Thanks a bunch though.

He quit his smile and nodded, looked over the tractor at the town and streets filling up with evening. All of us heard a basketball exploding on the courts in the park, each dribble loud and preaching the noise at us.

Sure y'all couldn't use maybe just a little taste? Buzzard asked.

Swampmoose was sitting next to me on the bottom step of the porch and I felt her string up when she heard that. Even in that light, I could tell how her face was. Sweated and eggwhite, barnacled with razorburn and the slight shadow of her goatee growing in again already.

G/dammit Buzzard, she said. He done tole you we don't want no g/damn beer.

Buzzard's face drew itself down, the cheeks turning a sick
olive color. He pushed his neck out from the shirt-collar like he had a
bad itch, but I think he was really trying to push that face of his away,
like it was a plate of cold leftovers someone had passed him.

All I did was ask, he said.

You ask too much. All the time asking if somebody wants
some beer and no matter what brand we say it's always Old Milwau-
kee you come straggling in here with. G/dammit Buzz, looks like
you'd learn something.

Behind me, I could hear the rest of us turn on a little bit and
start to laugh. That was Merion back there mostly, because he was the
biggest of us and took up a lot of the porch. Especially when he
laughed. But Fish was back there too. He was rubbing pine tar into his
ballbat and sneaking quick, two gulp guffaws every now and then.
You should know Fish. He's only thirteen, but we let him hang around
because he's the best baseball player any of us have ever seen. I mean,
this kid's already starting thirdbase for the varsity squad out at the
county high school. I don't think he's even shaving yet either.

What y'all want then, Buzzard asked. Y'all want Coors? Bud-
weiser? I'll get two cases of each if you want.

Nobody don't want no beer, Swampmooose said. Not from your
stinking ass.

Buzzard shook his head and leaned over the side of the tractor
to spit only his mouth was dry so he just pushed a little breath out,
slow and hot, and I felt a tiny bit sorry for him. Like I said, he's a real
bad drunk. They took his license away a couple of years ago because
he was always getting pulled over with about a gallon of raisin wine
down in the floorboards. Helps my heart. That's what he told the
judge.

We all watched him try and start the tractor again, pulling the
choke until the engine began to gurgle, drown.

You're floodin it, Merlon told him

Buzzard didn't nod or say anything. He just quit the choke and
dropped the clutch, levered the ignition until the tractor bucketed alive,
belching out a black diesel gut of smoke and its parts chattering to-
gether like they were all fitted with paste. I waved to him as he left the
yard. He waved back, but I still felt just a little sorry for him. Then I
thought about the county line, about the Salty Pork which is the bar
out that way, and about how Buzzard probably wouldn't feel so sorry
once he got there.

He really gonna go twenty mile on that tractor? Fish asked.
Just for some beer.

We all kind of nodded. Or at least tucked our chins or bent our
faces into confirming shadows.

Does it all the time, Merlon said.
I heard Fish click his tongue and then start with the pine tar
again, his fingers black by now and I wanted to tell him about George
Brett. I wanted to tell him lots of things. It was full dark by then and
none of us knew exactly anything so I thought maybe then, while
there was just a little nightly hush around, I could tell him something.
I wanted to tell him about the tiny ounces of space there on the porch,
the empty air between objects, the small, unkempt spots of zero that
held maybe a half-inch of truth. My voice wanted to tell him to never
take a pitch. Not even on a 3-0 count. He should know about things
like that. And girls. Girls are trouble for a ballplayer, but booze is no
problem. Look at Ruth or Cobb or Mantle. Fish should know about
the vague slots of dark here on the porch, I think. Like the little
cranny of space between where Merlon usually sits and my old vic-
trola. I've got one old scratchy forty-five of Jimmie Rodgers yodeling
blue numbers and the music curls up and drops there in that little
cranny until something comes to sweep it away. I put that record on
when I want everybody to go home and let me be. It scares them off.
Fish is the kind of boy that should know things like that.

In this town, I'm the only one that knows who Dom Dimaggio
was. Even the old timers, the real bristled up sodbusters who remem-
ber when the Braves were in Milwaukee, even they don't remember
Dom Dimaggio. I ask them sometimes. They give me this croseways
look with their old eyes dry and red like me asking this is something
they can't face headon, but a question they've got to stare-down from
an angle.

You mean Joe Dimaggio, they tell me. There weren't no ball-
player ever went by a name like Dom. Not nobody ever.

They pitch away cigarette stubs and bow over their bad knees,
tease another breath out of themselves. It's a way, the way we've got-
ten in this town. Anything not remembered becomes fiction. We re-
vice so many histories with this amnesia, pulling apart the past like it's
a chicken dinner: always taking the white meat, the tender breast, but
leaving the dark, the drumstick of memory that has beaten us so.

I've seen the old black and white films of Dom Dimaggio turn-
ing two or laying a threebagger off the Green Monster at Fenway.
Without color, baseball reads like a Bible verse, like something
pressed and heavy and urgent. This kid in my town, this kid Fish is
gonna play just like that. Only he doesn't know it yet. It's a secret I
keep waiting to tell him. This kid, he's a ninth inning walk-off home-
run at an away game. This kid's a pinch-player, can come off the
bench cold as dirt and get you anything you need. Believe me, I know.
I've seen the black and white films.

I usually have two RC sodas for breakfast, maybe a candy bar. For years, I would only eat 100 Grand chocolate bars. Now I only eat ZERO bars, buy them in bulk from the nearest 7-11 over in Rockport. For lunch, I might have a bologna sandwich and three more sodas. Buzzard told me once that I was going to get diabetes because of all the sugar I eat. He said that he knew about things like that.

Let it happen that way then. At least I'm never drunk before evening. There is still that much to build a small and hopeful life upon. My mornings are a practice of temperance. I want my life to be halved this way, by all the good I tried to do before five o'clock.

These are the bad things that have happened to me so far:
1. My old man died before I got a chance to shoot him. He used to live here with me and we were always fighting. One time he dotted my eyes because I slurped my tomato soup, come right across the table and slugged me two good ones, threw all that soup up in my face. Then one night he got drunk and died out in the yard. It was in January and I found him the next morning. His face was like a salt spill, a white-gray scatter. After that, I had to pawn my pistol. What good was it? Who was left to shoot?
2. My old man died before he got to see Fish play baseball. Much as I hate my old man, I think it would have done him some good to see how this boy plays. Like if Fish quit playing, he'd probably just lay down out in the yard and die.
3. I make lists that mean nothing. Who can number the miseries of one life, itemize each tragedy down to its specific start? When I was little, I made a list of things to do so I would live to be two hundred years old. My pen scratched out strange doctrines of health like don't smoke, don't drink, eat your vegetables especially the green kind. I thought I could will myself a duo of centuries. Now I make lists of the brands of beer that give me the worst hangovers.
4. Mostly, I live alone. Maybe this isn't so bad, but I don't think it's very good either. Merlon crashes here sometimes and Swampmoose sleeps over on the nights I'm drunk enough to tolerate her stink, but I'm alone mostly most of the time. My house is wedged into one of the far corners of the town just like you'd expect, a little vinyl-sided hut that threatens to break apart in the easiest breeze. Last summer, Merlon and me tar-patched the roof and weighted it down with old truck tires, but the tin still warps and thunders in the wind and I expect it to roll back any day now, just like the lid on a sardine can.
5. One good thing. I have a two acre yard that I never mow.

Sedge and dock thatch up and the grass swarms in thick weave ripples and on hot days in June you can count eleven snakes that rattle the sun-blackened weedstalks. There's a little bald spot right off the porch where we roast hogdogs and leave our beer cans. Each morning, I get up and pop myself an RC soda and step out on the porch to look at that tiny piece of yard, that gray ash area of burnt things. Each morning I look at that and I think, just for maybe, I will live for two hundred years.

Buzzard brought me insulin and some hypodermic needles one afternoon. He brought them wrapped in a kitchen towel and said he had connections, but I gave him a bad look.

You better start an early dose, he told me. Might as well seeing all the sweets you take in. Won't be long now before you get the diabetes.

Buzzard has a bad scar that traces itself like a half-halo over the back of his skull. It's from a wreck he had years ago, the last time he ever drove a car. Everyone has noticed that the scar is getting smaller, shrinking like a parched riverbed. Buzzard knows that he will live after me, after everyone, beyond this town. He knows that he can reduce the wounds of the past. He knows about things like that.

In the 1950s, my great uncle Herbert ran a ball bat mill in this town. He was under contract with the Louisville Slugger company and gave all the local drunks an honest job tramping through second growth forest slashing down ash and hickory saplings. Can you imagine one dozen lumbering jacks inebriated in the dim dizzy of the forest, clapping blades against birthwood, slurring their work? Can you see them taking a midday lunch beside a trebling creek and drumming the dry out of themselves with quick swallers from a pocket flask?

Their job was to fell the wild timber and bring it to the mill where it was formed into even slats and sanded smooth before being sent to the finishing factory up in Louisville.

Sometimes, I wonder off into the woods for almost a week. I drink what water I'm smart enough to find, eat blackberries or maybe a squirrel I manage to kill with a deadfall. I come home ten pounds lighter, my face polished to a wild and platinum blond. No one ever asks where I've been. In a town this broken, we are all afforded a certain quota of strangeness.

No one ever asks, but I sometimes wish they would. I would tell them how I stood on a rotted ash stump and heard again the preaching of ax and saw, the vibrant sermon of holy timbers falling. I would say that any tree you touch can spark the heart and that there is
at least the notion of victory in the frigid wicks of lumber. I would tell them that Mickey Mantle's bat had its origins right here in this weary groove of the world. That is what I will say if anyone ever asks me and that will be plenty.

There is no bat mill anymore. The operation went belly up because my uncle Herbert drank quite a bit. They say he once went on a two week bender, drinking at least as much as the world.

Sometimes, I meet an old face in the general store. A real gristle granddaddy who looks like he should be buying sacks of feed instead of the canned tomatoes and carton eggs I see him with. Sometimes, I see these old men and see how maybe they've got a missing pinkie, an absent forefinger, a dozen lost digits and these injuries read like an index to the legends of this town. Our fables are maimed, our father's flesh tailored and taught the story of further times in rent scars and mended skin.

Blood spilled in Kentucky creates a Yankee dynasty. I want a headline like that on the Sunday sports page. I want someone to repair these old men, their injury and their legend.

On a gray evening when the far, hill-covered distances spoke with rain, we were all on my porch again and the wind was sturdying itself against us, a steady breeze that we would shoulder home like an old, affectionate drunk. I thought some about cranking up the old victrola and scaring everybody away, but I didn't. Fish was there and I thought maybe, a little later, I would tell him how he was going to play like Dom Dimaggio someday. The coach at the high school had just moved him to shortstop, Dom's position, and I wanted to tell him about that, how everything was already starting to fall right over for him. Like the world was nothing but a stack of toothpicks he could smash anytime he wanted.

Then Buzzard started talking. He'd just come from the county line with two cases of Old Milwaukee that we hadn't even asked for. He sat on the front tire of his tractor with a beer, the engine starting to time down and cool in steady, talking clicks behind him.

Constable pulled me over on the way back, he said.

Really? somebody said, breathing it out kind of slow.

Yeah. Asked just what the hell kind of corn was I planting in

the middle of September.

No shit?

Not a smear. Buzzard gulped his can. I tolle him there weren't no corn. Said I'd been down bush-hoggin Lanny Geary's bottoms and left the batwing back with him cause it wasn't mine. He let me go and never said a word bout those two cases of Milwaukee.

Maybe he didn't see et, Merlon said.

Maybe not. But I got it figgered that he knewed who I was and that's why he let me off. Buzzard finished off his beer, slapped the can against his thigh to leak the dregs out, and threw it into the yard. Hard to haul somebody's ass in if you know who they are, he said.

I was sitting next to Swampmoose again and I felt her thigh start to Jell-o when she laughed. She waved her hands at Buzzard and said a tall, easy cuss.

Shit. That constable didn't know who the fuck you are. He probably just figgered out how much of a waste of time it'd be to haul in a piece of stinkshit like you. That's the only reason he let you slide.

Naw, Buzzard said. He opened another beer and took a few quiet sips. Then he touched the balding tractor tire, his hands slicking the worn rubber. He knew who I was. Ain't never been a stranger to nobody before. Everywhere I go, folks is always remembering me.

Yeah, said Swampmoose. It's a hard business trying to forget an ignorant sumbitch like you. No wonder everybody remembers you so good.

Naw, Buzzard said again. It ain't like that.

He shook his head and sipped at his beer like it was a cup of coffee. Scalding black Joe. I thought maybe I saw him grin. Just a little.

Swampmoose started to say something else, but didn't. She wasn't really mad, but I guess she wanted to be. That's what she wants mostly, I think. That and a Coors Light in a bottle, but she never gets that. It's all right though. I let her sleep over and sometimes she puts her hand in mine and I hold it there, this squish of fingers and the palm wet and like a damp rag under my knuckles. I buy her razors at the general store. Her beard grows in so thick that sometimes she has to use a straight blade and I buy razors for her so nobody gets anything to talk very loud about.

Y'all know why they remember me so good, don't you? Buzzard said.

We all looked at him. I kind of shrugged and I think Merlon belched. There was a little traffic up on the 62 highway and we all kind of hoped it would get louder so we wouldn't have to listen to Buzzard anymore. We knew that wasn't really going to happen
They remember me cause I played baseball, Buzzard said. He wasn't looking at us then, but was still just wiping at the slick rubber of the tire. That was a time ago, but I done it and those that was there ain't forgot.

When did you ever play baseball? We were all asking that question. Even Fish moved his mouth enough to whisper it out, a slow piece of quiet words dripping from his broad face. When did you play?

Buzzard chugged at his beer. One time, he said. Just one game. I'd rode the bench all year before the coach finally got me in that game. Put me in just to pinch-run for the catcher cause his legs was hurting him.

He stopped his story and threw the can out into the weeds where it clanked half-full like a horseshoe against the pile of empties we were building.

Well, I said. What'd you do? Steal second?
No. Buzzard kind of grinned and scratched behind his ear. I got picked off.

Nobody said anything. We knew it was a big place of hurt that we were entering and none of us wanted to say nothing about it. It was too bad, we thought. But we wouldn't say.

First time all season I got on base and the bastards picked me off. Buzzard kind of laughed and swung his legs back in under the tractor, then out again. Wasn't but about fourteen but I still remember it. Most everybody else does too.

It was very quiet then. The only sound was of our drinking, a hollow clamor of can-slimps and the like and not much else besides a few bullfrogs blowing down in the creek. Merlon said he wanted to turn the porch light on, but it was my house and I told him not to. Brings the bugs in, I told him. But it wasn't that. It was something else. It was the two halves of quiet: the one we kept ourselves and the one quiet that was the town, not wholly still but bobbing like a docked ship.

After a little bit, I looked over my shoulder and told Fish to crank up my old victorla.

He said, Sure Bud. And we listened to Jimmie Rodgers until the rain hit us, waters we wore bright and heavy as chainmail.

In October, Fish is the only one who comes to see me. He tells me about the World Series which I can't see because my television got broken over Merlon's head one night. That was a bad mess, but I don't guess it matters. I just dropped the t.v. on Merlon like I was trying to smash him into something else, something better. I can't even remember why I did it. All I know is what Fish tells. He says Merlon didn't even blink, that he just walked home with his face all painted and the blood falling of him like a ponytail in back.

Fish is the only one who comes around after that. He tells me that the Yankees are in the series again and it looks like they'll probably win. He tells me about the high school coaches and how they're these real thick-necked cocksucks from upstate who drink protein shakes and eat glycerin pills and wonder why the county doesn't have a Wal-Mart.

Do you ever see Swampmoose no more? he asks me.

Nope, I told him. And say it mean like stomping something. Then I lighten up. I'm thirsting is all. She don't come around, I say. Heard she took up with Merlon. Imagine the kids those two could calve, I say. Behemoths. And we both laugh, mostly cause I use a word like behemoth which sounds kind of like a real educated cuss if you listen.

I seen Buzzard the other day, Fish says.

Oh?

Yeah. He was on his tractor. He waved but I kind of looked the other way and acted like I didn't see him.

You oughtn't do that.

Fish sweeps a foot through the grass in my yard, kicks up a dry yellow smell that almost makes me sneeze before I think better. I expect him to shrug, maybe cuss, but he don't. Just goes right on talking.

Nuthin but a crazy old drunk, he says. All Buzzard is.

You sure about that?

Sure I'm sure.

I nod and take up an old rotted broom handle that I keep on the porch to beat snakes out of the yard with, start poking in the combed grass that the first early frost has already killed. I just go on poking with the broom handle and Fish moves with me, staying out of my way. Then I'm finished and I hand him the stick and he holds it real natural like a bat.

Moles eatin up your yard? he asks.

I'm sitting on the steps again and I show him my teeth cause I know they're bad, speckled and dark from all the candy I eat, jagged shrapnel's in my jaw.

They gettin kindly thick, I tell him.

Need you a cat around here. He kicks at a dirt clump. Or a good dog maybe.

Need something. That's for sure.
I lean back into the steps, put my hands behind my head. For a little while, Fish doesn't say anything. He turns some in the yard, but doesn't talk. Then I see him reach into his coat.

Maybe you need some of this, he says. And shows me a pint of Early Times that he's stolen off somebody, probably his old man. Wanna slug?

I hold out my hand and he gives me the whisky. The label's a little worn and I know that's from Fish holding it too tight, trying to squeeze something out of it like it was a ketchup tube. I used to do the same thing when I first started drinking.

Early Times, I say big and proud. I turn the cap and have a pull. Not much, just enough to get my throat screaming. Then I hand the bottle over to Fish. He takes it quick and drinks without even giving me a look, coughs and sputters some, tries to spit.

Hard iddin it? I say.

He nods. You ain' kiddin. He's soap-eyed now, all squinty and down turned. He holds the bottle against his side, holds it by the neck like its something he's wrung the life out of.

Hell, I say. That soldier ain't even near dead yet. Pass im over here.

Fish doesn't do what I say, though. He just gives me this low angle look and takes another plug out of the whisky. I watch him for a good bit. He's half-staggering already, swimming against some big river current somewhere while the 62 highway does double-time. Even over this though I can hear a few frogs down in the creek, a gas-stomach growl in the late evening. I can see Fish's face fill up with sick. He lays one hand on my porch, looks like he might fall over right in my yard.

Hey, I say to him, hoping it will be enough. Did you ever hear of Dom Dimaggio?
Clemensky Strikes Back
Chuck Williamson

remember: clemensky's fedora is flaming pink, cockatiel feather sensible, stylish, darting into the flaccid beaks of birds crying overhead, collar open & visible blonde chesthair, combed w/ malpractice grace, long as i've been familiar w/ the art of losing love...

his sequined white bellbottoms are aflame when he attends local screenings of cabaret, the sole of his left loafer is personally autographed by cher

kissing men's more than sport. the exacting nature of clemensky duplicates emotion and primal sexuality & his wrist glowers sassy - your shoes are white sans memorial, he gets catty when the pd chortle and choke up as he flaunts his fluffy kitten embroidered vest & matching necktie, amethyst rock throned upon his slender index finger

fractures crooked noses, spinning hurricane uppercut (!!!!!)

clemensky's on the prowl, cruising the clubs for info on benny the mule, a parttime pimp & local drug runner pushing to kids and yuppies and business is booming, nypd scratch head / eat doughnut & his benefactors call him a rat, a sneak, a kissass but in fact he's a linchpin for the italians & fall guy for the cubans -

a battered polaroid is all clemensky has to go on. a heroin-addled chinaman sends him to total tool, the club where benny's sometimes lover does a lounge act in shrill ethereal undertones

carlota is the drag queen honey that falls like a glass toupee for our pink & brass PI protagonist, for his encyclopedic knowhow of broadway musicals & clean shaven aftershave sighs orgasmic (60 pgs. scream ecstasy, echoes scrape fearless porcelain)
when benny
hears the deal he lunges toward
clemensky w/
a cleaver, sharp and phosphorescent,
smells like meatloaf and
wheat bread and his uvula
emulates a lean vibrato –
‘clemensky, look out!’

but it is much too late and
your softspoken narrator must
take this moment to silently
conmemorate the life of carlota
(1960-1978)
for ‘eulogy’ is too selfish a word
to justify her sacrifice; caught
between clemensky and the glinting
cleaver, her dying words are:
‘clemensky…’

loafers flounder about
the pallid ny city streets
and as clemensky pi
corners the mule, the mule
approximates his namesake’s
neigh, falling to his knees,
weeping, weeping, weeping
like a child as he pleads for
his life, his motives were
always clean, always civilized,
and he will come clean,
because it’s a man’s world,
a man’s world, a man’s

world, a man’s –
blamblamblam
is the revolver’s retort and
smarmy we call it but the job
is done, benny the mule is
brought to justice &
love and disco have prevailed
thanks to clemensky
Brandy, tart as early morning sunshine, or perhaps tonight it was to be gin, gin approximating the smell of cheap aftershave, an acidic burn over adolescent wounds. When mixed with tonic, music would linger in the air and the ceiling would be spotted in clouds. The whiskey could have sung homilies to downtrodden laborers; the brandy would deliver diatribes to solemn-faced businessmen. Scotch, warm scotch, the color of my mother’s hair. But it was bourbon that I wanted, bourbon, the arbiter of poetry, brown as Autumn leaves, each drop as poignant as a pair of bloodshot eyes. Bourbon it was. I drowned myself in a tall glass of the cheapest Mexican brand this bar had to offer and came to a conclusion formed on the basis of the errors of my mortality. If I were bullet proof, I would parade along the intersections of this piss-ant town like raging electricity, leaping from car to car, clawing away at the windshields of passers-by, slogging through the sea of traffic heaped upon the pregnant hills and wailing elm trees, my teeth baring down on the throat of some unsuspecting dreamers, and from that, what is the interpretation?

This was not the case.

As it stood, I was lighting a Parliament on the butt of a Newport, a trembling flame pressed between clammy fingers. Stagnant smoke unfurled inside the clamped shell of the bar, the clamor of honky-tonk men erupting to the steady beat of a jukebox. Yet at two o’clock in the morning, this was full-fledged glory, spindle-spinning euphoria, heave-ho, ladies and gentlemen, everything’s twilight. There was a cloud of cigarette smoke hanging over my head and it would not go away.

I was speaking with a man in this bar, you see, and when he smiled it sparkled like grains of sugar and I was duped. Fooled me like a pearly-toothed car salesman, ‘a steal at any price’ sort of find, a yuppie in every sense of the word. So I opened up. I slurred and I gesticulated inane and he smiled and nodded, loosening his tie and rolling up his posh little sleeves; he could tell that I was a student at the university and, what’s more, knew that I was underage. Didn’t seem to care and I didn’t mind that he knew. We shared a bond; we were natural born liars.

“What are we coming to, these days, when the sky is falling, unhinged, and I’m the only person that knows, god bless, this thing, this horrible thing, what are we to do, for the children, what are we to do? We must find what is weighing the skies down. What is it, what
is it that is making the spectrum of space and time move so slooo-
ooloo-ooow?" I am pretentious when sloshed.

"I don't know," the angel-faced cherub said. "We could blame it on NASA, I suppose, for congesting our solar system with satellites and rocket ships and we should also blame all those science-fiction writers for inspiring them. Nothing good has ever come from art."

"That's not what I mean," I said, voice wavering, lifeline bleep-bleeping along just fine, thank you nurse. "What I want to know is who's to blame for my tragedy? Who? I have no suspects, no canon for inquiry, no one to expurgate expect myself. Always myself. I wish there was a way out of here. I wish I could go away, get out of here, hole myself up good and tight."

"There's always a way."

"Pardon?"

"There is a way. Has anyone ever told you about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the splendorous kingdom of Heaven?"

I declined the offer and apologized. My coat tails fell to the floor, my sneakers played the game pernicious, and with a small, unsteady nod I finished my drink and doddered off into outside, into my car, alone. Alone? Where was he then, I suppose? Where was he at this moment? Had he confirmed the model and make of my beat-up Chevy and was he crafting his chapbook as he hid behind the fluorescent residue of the bumper stickers on my car? But I am getting ahead of myself now.

I was driving along there; driving against the torrents and tufts of hefty wind, cancer spirits forming at my back, haggling over the sanctity of my lungs, and those lungs were embalmed in black. The radio knobs were useless, the music was loud; a pretty-faced siren sang a song of love lost, love found, love eternal and the saccharine pettiness pulsing through every syllable of that lark's warbling voice made a monorail of my mind, children spinning like balle-rinas in the dusty dawn, progressively all the ghosts will trip over your grave. Ravens are overhead and I don't like their hungry eyes.

What I saw in those eyes, of course, was a woman, the starry-eyed girl with mousy hair and lips laced with satin. Her name was X. I threw her away, used her like I would a toothbrush, and if hurt, oh my, did it ever hurt, but who precisely was the one to receive my damage? Long had the shadow of my follies loomed over me and the regret was too heavy, too heavy for a crystal-boned malcontent such as myself. I cannot speak upon the sort of sonnet those days could possibly amounted to, her hair in my mouth, a taste of cherry, the panic, we counted the stars on a mid-summer night and lost count after three hundred and six, the shivers, sparks, percussion of grinding thighs. It was all too much and there was no musical arrangement to romanticize this romance, it was through, finite, and as my ego ballooned out like a pugnacious parachute, I told her, in so many words, to go. I was through with her, she was garbage now and she'd be better off finding someone else because I didn't love her anymore.

So what does a measly couple of years amount to on a calendar that goes on eternal? I didn't know the answer to that and as much as I pressed every two cents toward finding that answer, all I came up with was the bottom of a bottle. Writing this to you, I suppose, makes this sort of a heroic epistle minus all the couplets and, as some may call it, the 'nancy-ass posturing' found in that sort of stuff; these are the methods in which I must save myself, for all that I write is true, all true, and although what I may have is a single piece of the jigsaw (or perhaps two or three, but I am always wary of red herrings), to this day, I search for the rest, as scattered as they are, because I'm lost in the sea of human flesh and sinew, just drifting, drowning.

On the dashboard a fake plastic Hawaiian girl was grinding her hips according to the lost beat of the childish pop song and while watching her I felt a heaviness fall over me. I had not slept in twenty-seven hours. There was only bourbon. Gin. Tonic. Brandy. The names of fresh-faced baby girls, the names of lovers spinning thread for mittens. The thought occurred to me at that moment to turn tail and find someplace new, someplace clean. It was a long and spiraling drive and my apartment was always foreboding, a stinking tenement full of spiders crawling over ovens, kitchen ware worn in canola oil, forks and spoons scattered like schoolchildren, drowning in my hair-clogged sink. It was all paid for another three months, mark that, but it was a wasteland, a litter box for humans. Home was the last place I wanted to be, especially now that I am a prisoner on the loose, hook man on the prowl. With that settled, I pulled over, turned off the ignition, and leaned back against cool leather, the final chords of that silly love song washing over me as if I were being baptized into a faith of forever love and as hokey as that sounds, it rang cathartic in my ears and I saw myself, my reflection, and I grew disheartened and in dreams I found something more, something haggard, for the sharp-beaked ravens were feasting upon my innards, my lifeblood, and it was as good as over.

Three days later and everything was hectic, spleen splitting,
and once I lost grasp of my tongue I became accustomed to the lost language of silence. These days I spoke to no one, nothing, but always I was always yammering on to myself, voice crackling in monotone, empty spaces filled to the brim with words. I was shaving that particular day (the day that started me off, you see) and all I remember from looking into my reflection was how pale and wan I looked, how the trajectory of my sadness was equated with the pallor of a seventeenth century poet. How sickly I appeared, a modern-day leper, a functionless cog. I was never good looking by any means, but I never remembered myself to be this haggard, never the human shithouse peering through the looking glass. I felt like expired milk, something that should just be tossed aside and replaced with something fresh and soothing. Humans don’t work like that, unfortunately, and I was on my way, a mug of instant coffee in my languid left hand. Off to a day of morning classes and Winston cigarettes!

Like brittle leaves I entered the elevator and, stepping in, I looked to my left and lo and behold, we may have a winner, folks, there she was, another passenger aiming to make it to the top of the building, a girl, possibly a year or two my senior, but not without her perks; she was tall, slender, a piece of workmanship, hazel eyes, small teeth, a casual smile parted her lips to say hello and I, to be perfectly honest, was baffled as to how I should respond to this, this homecoming of sorts, and when my heart fluttered I knew it was more than mere bewilderment on my part. She was quite a catch, a placebo with long, long legs, and what, do you suppose, would it be like to communicate in nods, to smile back, to crawl inside her, to pour myself into another, to make her porcelain thighs bleed for days and infect her, infect her with whatever sickness I had. She could take this sickness from me and her flesh would sag, her smile would wane, to touch her would be to touch an amphibious stomach, and maybe then I would be peaches keen once again, all smiles and fireworks.

It is only you, dear reader, that I confess these things to.

My mother had called the night before, I now recall, an excited bundle of mementos and when I stammered out my most pleasant hello, she gasped, said my voice was hoary, thorn-like. This did not deter her from the usual prying and I gave her the answers she wanted to hear.

“Good, good, Harry. I’m glad to see you’re fine,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“You know, you should really, I don’t know, get out more. You sound sick.”

“I go out. To the movies and to plays and concerts.”

“Oh really? Have you found someone you can take with you?”

“No. I’m always at my best behavior when I’m alone.”

Her breath made a sort of whooping sound: “You’re too young to be a hermit, Harry, to be a social misfit. You need friends.”

“I’m fine. Don’t need them.”

“Well—”

“Look, mom, I’m making good grades, right, and I’m making a life for myself and in three years this strange holiday will be over and done with, I’ll go into some job or something and that’ll be that, my university life will be over and I can be a hermit on my own time. It’s just college. Nothing here matters. Everything’s cool.”

“I still worry.”

That was her problem: she never stopped worrying. She was all nerves and no gristle, a spasmodic sea of shellfish poured into a human frame. I tried to appease to her sensitivities, pull a shadow over my natural dispositions and keep all the undesirables to myself and it normally worked. I could grit a smile when the occasion was appropriate.

What would she think now, I wonder, if she saw this thing that I had become, a cockroach freewheeling in human skin, teeth stained with stale cigarettes and coffee, shoulders hunched over like a donkey’s back, eyes draped with bags large enough to pack up, get out and turn your back on these plains forever and ever.

Tasting the waves of the first pure morning’s breezy fresh air cutting between my teeth, I ambled on from class to class, racing like a pinball tilting his chances in every direction, long way down, spanning every space in the core of the machine. Green grass crunched beneath my feet and at the end of the day, the final class was Metaphysical Poetry (this is about when it all began to happen, it was written in the stars, as they say, ha ha).

The words on the blackboard sent shockwaves in my brain into my arms into my hands but not a lick of it had any permanence. I read it all, every word, about Zionist motifs scattered throughout the works of Henry Vaughan and so forth and my pencil whirred about like a panicked mockingbird, that gentle hum, silent and sweet. I nodded like a drunk man, my mind distanced from the unveiling mysteries of the cosmos, pipe dreams playing against a cardboard backdrop and we’re off, trot-trot-trot, da-dee-doo, a single slice of heaven would mean so much in these dark, dark times, yes they would, son, and do you remember love, oh no, that was too long ago.

My professor eyed me occasionally, his arms flailing in unison with whatever he had to say at the moment but those dead fish eyes laying their deadweight charm on me, me and my seasonal atten-
tiveness. As you might imagine, he was not particularly fond of me. It all stemmed from this: one day, after class, he pulled me aside and asked me why I wrote all of my papers in such flowery prose. I responded: “I use words as long as my forearm in a desperate bid to spite you at every turn, sweet prince, and besides, it helps to hide my utter ignorance of everything you say. Every consonant is the bullet in a machine gun and I just go rat-a-tat in the hopes of making you keel over and die.”

At any rate, the class had ended and I was trotting like a show horse over to my car, another day’s deed done, trot-trot, book bag slung over my shoulders and the day was winding into night, stars flickering like candles in the dark, trot-trot, my car looked welcoming enough, trot-trot, but what’s this? I looked on and beneath the left windshield wiper was a small piece of paper, snapped underneath like a frightened shellfish. I picked it up. It was a message to me and it read in bold, handwritten letters:

‘Marmalade children on
a
Sunday afternoon
file paperwork for lions, tigers, bears,
(oh my!)
nightht, camels in a Span-
ish caravan march through Jerusalem
seas o’er the green grassy hills, fish
fresh for the pickins fall from the sky –
oooh, I’m hungry papa
- Your Friend, Mister Crayon’

This is how it started, with a ridiculous, half-baked poem that would have been labeled dada if it wasn’t nonsensical rubbish beforehand, and though these preceding were all so silly and theatrical, although the apparatus of Mister Crayon’s art was far from utilitarian, for the first time in years I felt a heaviness in my chest, like I had lost something precious, something that defied the tangibles of this world, a trinket to my youth and to my past and perhaps this was the key, this array of nonsense vowels and consonants bumping and grinding like an amorous young buck and these words marched into my head. Perhaps Mister Crayon would arrive also, a smile and a handshake and that would be that. Mister Crayon. How elusive your vegetable garden must be.

This was a short-lived emotion, as you might imagine, and once vanquished, I read that poem once again and again for good measure.

It was a puzzle, who this Mister Crayon was, what his relationship was to me (if there was one), and why he had felt the sudden impulse to tag me with his rejected high school poetry. It was a shame; if someone was going to plaster my car with poetry, why could it not be an abomination, this laughable entanglement of recycled themes. I didn’t think anything of it. I threw it away and moved on to the nearest bar.

---

The next day was no different from the last. My pencil was an apparatus used for encryption and everything I needed to know about John Donne’s “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” was there, until cigarettes limp between my lips, and I was skulking around, striding like a prince over red carpet, eyeing the pillars of gardenias, silent as stillborns, pacing myself in the oppressive white heat, chattering children.

When I walked to my car, there was a note pinned exactly as the one before. Yet another poem, which read:

‘Iron lungs
burst
in beautiful midnight
tripods carrying babies carrying
lunch bags full of rats that taste
like cats in the
local fast food chain w/
extra mayo, honcho.
beware the bourbon,
there are no poem there!
I hope you enjoy, Harry, Mister Crayon’

Now it was obvious that this Mister Crayon somehow knew me, that I was not some random victim, that this was a deliberate assault and it was an odd predicament for someone who never spoke, never socialized, drank like a fish but always alone, alone with a bottle of Bourbon against the sunrise, the taste – the taste reminiscent of, yes, fine poetry, but not yours, Mister Crayon. For the first time in ages, I felt the pangs of fear, fear I had not known since early childhood, nestled against my mother’s bosom when a scratching was heard against my window. Was it Mister Crayon, now, who scratched at my window, who pilfered through my underclothes while I was away, who hired spies to follow me between classes, who slipped
sedatives into my daily meals and hoped for the best. It was disconcerting, to say the least, that someone knew me so intimately, well enough to write a poem just for me and here I was with nothing but wind and troubles whipping past my face.

---

The weeks that followed repeated this oft-beaten pattern; everyday after Metaphysical Poetry there would be a poem ready for me to read and each one read like the last—imcomprehensible and oblique, rife with some potential meaning lost in translation. If anything, they grew more and more erratic as time went by, one telling me to ‘seize the day before you are swallowed up by a great whale’ and another to ‘spit out radios and make electricity with sex’ and another claiming ‘machines make the best friends b/c I know which button does what.’ I remember in one, he opened by saying, ‘You’ll like this one, Harry, because yr Hawaiian did not.’ Mister Crayon’s words were in my brain day in, day out, every moment was spent poised, his verse dancing between my ears. My grades sank along with my ambitions, or rather the ambitions to get drunk, gesticulate the stupid, pass out, etc. All I could do was sit, speaking to the door knobs, saying things like, “I have not seen Mister Crayon today? He forgot to punctuate his sentence fragments today and I thought he should be aware of this. Was here, doorknob? Was he here? Was he digging through my garbage, hoping to find used condoms and snot rags?”

To which the doorknob replied, “Don’t ask me, Harry. I’m just a doorknob.”

Skipping classes one evening and looming over the parking lot proved a futile means of finding Mister Crayon. I spent the afternoon with a pack of Pall Malls, frustrated at his cunning, his gall to stay paces ahead of me and as the sky turned as pink as a wound, I spat at the wind and it spat right back at me. The man never showed himself and when I retired to my bed, he struck. I awoke that morning to find a hastily written message saying ‘he wants me away but I know the intricacies of his heart. Bypass yr strangeness and I’ll alter your altar.’

That was the day I bought a bolt and latch for my door.

Mister Crayon was an obvious pseudonym, but this did not stop me from checking his name through a variety of references and it was all for sport, because he was not registered with the university, nor was he listed in any phone book. Library periodicals proved useless as well; Mister Crayon’s name never popped up the text outside of his scattered verses. Contacting the authorities was out of the question; mother had a particular distaste for police officers and, as a consequence, so did I. Mister Crayon was a phantom, a beast that prowled about unseen by all, his fingers clenching a sturdy black tome full of pretentious verses and words cryptic enough to sound profound to the untrained ear.

Everywhere I walked I chanced a look behind. I went out of my way to sit in the back during lectures and watch every glass-eyed passer-by leave once finished. I slept less and less. I was afraid of being caught unprepared. I trusted no one. Every man, woman, and child was a suspect and I was wary of all their doings. During those wild and sleepless days and nights I learned every inch of myself, I learned the name of every part of myself that Mister Crayon could not touch, I heralded my fingers and toes and apostles and prophets and baptized them in cheap whiskey, another sunset melting into another sunrise and the stink of my apartment made the hair on my chest curl, swinging me this way and that, over the fake greenery and majestic, smiling faces found in fashion magazines. I found myself yearning for a woman’s touch, to be one with another, to whisper my fears behind the nape of a lover’s neck, to say that name that I oft remembered on nights like these.

I found, during this time, that I detested the core of my very being and if I were not a coward I would claw away at my eyes, cut out my tongue, bleed crimson all over my dirty linen and spoiled clothes. I had done nothing of merit in my sad eighteen years and to commemorate that I wanted it all to end, to send smoke signals to that robed practitioner of the curtain, tell him it’s showtime, I’m ready, swing your scythe and be done with it, I don’t speak Swedish, don’t own a chess board, and to be honest, I was never good at the game to begin with.

I wished to be a libertine, chaste as snow, unwelcoming to look upon, alone with only these thoughts and nothing more. I wanted to be away from anything and everything, but I especially wished to be away from the phantom of Mister Crayon.

---

It was a month after that the poems ceased and I began to function once more, the gears lacerated with spit and petroleum jelly, everything cranking along hunkily-dory. Mister Crayon’s last words were this: ‘Poe in Limbo said ‘yes, yes’ when I strangled his sweet cousin.’ I was puzzled at first as to why, with no explanation, Mister Crayon lost faith in me. Perhaps he had found a more captive audience. Then again, perhaps he had heard the secret conversations I
held from the mouth of my electric oven, begging it to please, please, just this once, operate on the gas. All I got was a scar on my face from where the grill sank into my cheek.

I questioned Mister Crayon’s final poem often as why his father had abandoned me, but I found that each stanza spoke a foreign language. The most I got out of that simple sheet of paper was, “Régalez-moi avec des poissons, de petits hommes expirent en papier journal.”

“Aufenthalt, süßer Tod!” the second stanza said, and from there I let it be.

Mister Crayon was a memory. Everything is an eventual memory.

Mister Crayon was a memory. But one day he learned to dial a telephone number.

I believe this was a year later, maybe more. I had found a job in the meantime, a new way of supporting myself, and my lungs felt as crumpled and worn as my childhood pajamas. You see, things were no different as they were before, Mister Crayon’s words wall-papered my apartment as mementos and my sadness weighed like winter in my bones, everything was the same, yes, only this time I could feel the stubble on my chin and when I bent a joint I was welcomed with a faint popping sound. I hid the sour smell of my rank apartment with cheap perfumes and incense.

That’s when it happened.

Instead of ringing, the telephone yawned voraciously, and said, - Harry, old chum, a friend would like to speak with you. Better pick up.

I knew immediately who it was, and yet I did not hesitate. I bowed and thanked the telephone and picked up the receiver.

“Hello.”

“Hi Harry.” The voice was familiar, but strangely so, like I had known that nasal drawl all my life.

“This isn’t – who is this?”

“You don’t know? Come on, take a guess.”

“I – I don’t want to guess.” My throat was slack. “Jesus. Jesus Christ.”

“Not quite. This is Mister Crayon, Harry. Remember me?”

I could think of nothing to say, quite honestly, so I defaulted to, “Hello Mister Crayon.”

“How have you been?”

“I’ve been - well. A little lonesome, but these things never change. And you?”

“All right. I’ve missed you.”

“Cut it out, Crayon. You never knew me.”

“Shows what you know, Little Baby Boy Harry. I know you better than I know myself. I know you better than I know Captain Ahab, or Agamemnon, or perhaps you’d prefer Leopold Bloom.”

“So who are you, Mister Crayon? Who?”

“That’s simple: I am Mister Crayon, world-weared poet and bohemian of the modern ages, a character, Harry, a plot contrivance that will make everything crystal cathartic once your story comes to an end. You may call me a sketch, if you like, or a caricature, but I assure you that such mean-headed bullying will get you nowhere with the ladies, Harry. The question is this, though, Harry: who are you? My answer, of course, would imply that you’re my finest creation, something to be printed and lauded – or lambasted. You could have been a tragic hero if we could have only divvied up your tragic flaws. No matter. Work with what you have and I believe I have performed suitably.”

“That’s fine and all, I guess, but in fifty billion years or so we’ll all be toast, none of this remembered, not me, not you. I don’t see what you get out of this.”

“Don’t worry about it, Harry. I called because I want you to do something for me, all right? I want you to look on your wind-shield, the usual place. I want you to try and appreciate this one, okay?”

There was a pause and a click and Mister Crayon was gone.

Crude oil may strangle the dolphins and middle-eastern children may starve, but the ebb and tide of the world goes on and on and there I was, outside, welcomed in a veil of darkness, a new poem in my hand, and it was like fifty lash across the back, snap, crack, this is what it said:

‘Harry, this is the last one. It speaks for itself:

In poetry, we fear –

that making the women

love you is easy &

but keeping that love is tuff as teeth

& when

you love a woman

(esp. with mousy hair, firm breasts, et. al. --)

you take her by the feet and throw her

in a gutter

beat her of her beauty and when that’s done

congrats

yer a man

- Hope you like, Mister Crayon, signing off’
With that, it was all over, and I found myself muttering Crayon’s name over and over as my eyes welled up with a thick wash of water. I could not believe it. Mister Crayon was good and gone, gone for good to mingle with Captain Ahab and Agamemnon and Leopold Bloom and I was still here, still here to sit about and miss him dearly.

---

It is for this reason I write to you, dear X. Everything enclosed within is true, it happened and I would like to believe that it has made me complete, or perhaps it has not. I do not know. I think I have a long way to go. What I do know is this: I am ready to move forward, to move forward and grow again. The things that I should not have done cannot be erased, but life is life and I cannot imagine living it alone. I don’t want to disappoint Mister Crayon and I especially don’t want to disappoint you.

Now I don’t expect a response to this because I don’t expect you to be mired in the past as I have been these days, to recollect nostalgia as our grandparents may have done when they recalled what it was like to be young. You have moved on and on and on and I am still here. You are something new and I am something worn and tired. You have probably found someone, a replacement, which was my advice, if you’ll remember correctly. I know all of this has come to pass. I just want you to know every inch of what I am today, every last inch and, as you may know, these things cannot be expressed in the base language we use today and what I want to do is become Mister Crayon, to be Mister Crayon, to live as Mister Crayon and can you imagine the beauty of a life like that? And the poetry, my god, the poetry!