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THE SLEEPLESS OUROBOROS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree for Master of Fine Arts
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at the University of Central Florida
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Major Professor: Donald Stap

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ABSTRACT

The poems in *The Sleepless Ouroboros* are about the obsessions which come to define a person. These obsessions are memories, dreams, objects or ideas that cannot be separated from the whole. Poems such as “Thinking of Big Moe” and “It Begins with a Fox” grapple with the limitations of memory, while poems such as “The Python” and “Heirloom” counterpoint memory’s weakness with the supposed permanence of physical artifacts. Depression and anger, the anxieties of identity and displacement, and representations of the people and animals that leave lasting impact on a life are all addressed as vital components of the completed speaker. In the middle of the collection “The Mad Scientist Sleeps” and “Through Milk and Oil” surround “Insomnia and Autocannibalism,” reaching the core of the speaker’s identity throughout the collection, imagined, present, or past.

The collection, like its namesake the ouroboros, ends in the same place it begins. This cyclical motion through the collection seeks to bring the varying voices throughout into a complete, if conflicted whole.

For my mother, Angel Welch, and my step-father Wesley Welch
for indulging me.

For my brother, Leo Bohl, and my sister, Angelica Bohl
for putting up with me.

For my father, Albert Grant Bohl Jr.
for the memories, however fleeting.

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I want to thank my mother, Angel Welch. She constantly reminds me to pursue what I want to do. Far too often, she has to drag me out of the hole of “the pragmatic thing to do,” only to set me right on my feet again.

Dr. Don Stap isn’t just my committee chair, he is also the man who taught me how to write poetry and how to read poetry. He saw some of the first poetry I wrote, and the absolute first poem that was any good. He has endured four workshops, three lecture courses, many one-on-one meetings, and many more emails. He is the reason I reached the point where I am willing to call myself a poet.

Finally, I need to thank Jonathan Perry and Christopher Strachan. They are two of the truest friends I’ve ever had, regardless of how far apart we’ve become. They are also the artists that always make me want to be a better poet, a better writer, a better artist. They astound me with their talents and their practiced skills. Thank you Chris, even though I never knew you by that name. You inspired a much younger and much more directionless version of me continue walking the path that eventually lead me here. Thank you Jon for finding me along the way, and constantly pushing me, socially, physically, and artistically, making me strive for something greater than I ever previously planned.

I probably couldn’t or wouldn’t have done it without any of them.

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A poem is not a magic trick.

I start with a deck of cards—
blue backed Bicycles, a classic—
and a pledge to turn the common
into something uncommon.

The cards fall over each other
with a slap, a shuffled cascade
of blue and white air-cushioned finish.

Poems, like card tricks,
require the interaction of the audience.
Riffling through the cards I need
to be told when to stop—
this is your card, what you bring
to the trick. It all depends on memory.

Reintroduce your card into the whole,
let it mingle with all fifty-one of mine.
In this moment the magician
and his audience are lost in the deck.
Both wait to see what happens next.

But a poem is not a magic trick.
If it all ends there, and the deck is packed away
without some grand reveal the audience
will riot, cheated out of the promised prestige,
their contribution lost.

And if the outcome is certain— the one-eyed poet,
Jack of Hearts revealed with a flourish—
the reader is robbed, their contribution
no longer their own.

How does this end? Does it mean any more
to walk away with questions unanswered
or to reveal that your card was—

A Pretty Face

Dad wanted to breed him,
but the vet warned
“A horny Rottweiler could hump the head
clear off a three-year-old’s shoulders.”
So that I could keep my head,
he lost his balls.
The true mark of a loyal friend.

Facha Bella,
my father’s Upstate New York Americanization
of my great-grandfather’s Philadelphia Sicilian.
For those in the know,
it meant Pretty Face.
Honduran mahogany highlights
surround a black leather nose and mouth,
and two eyebrow islands of brown
on a sea of high-gloss black.

In terms of size, growing up with a Rottweiler
can’t be very different from growing up with a horse.
But can a horse fit three tennis balls in its mouth—
four if one doesn’t have the neon fuzz—
and still find a way to baste you in floppy-tongue slobber?

All evidence suggested
he was a terrible guard dog.
All newcomers were greeted with excited barking
and wet kisses.
Any cry for help from me,
when I was being wrestled or tickled
by a relentless parent or sibling
would summon him to fill
the spaces between my toes with slobber.
He helped in strange ways.

The dog died of liver cancer.
Dad died of liver cancer.
Two grandfathers
A grandmother
An aunt

All livers.
Pretty faces
and big hearts.
But the livers just aren't built to last.

Crossroads

The air is uncomfortably still
as I approach the crossing
where the cracked blacktop
meets the dusty road
of another era.

When Robert Johnson walked
this road, guitar on his back,
almost one hundred years ago,
both roads were dust.

The sun's glare makes it hard
to discern any detail
of the figure I see
on the far side of the cross.
It's just a black, humanoid stain
on the side of the road.

When Paganini drunkenly stumbled
this path at the end of the eighteenth century,
did the same stain of a man
inspire any one of the twenty-four
caprices that would fly
from his fingertips in the coming years?

As I approach, the stain becomes a man,
wrinkled with time, skin as dry
as the road on which he waits.

His eyes appear to glow,
reflecting the red cherry
on the end of his cigarette
and all of the passions
that drive men here.

When Faust met Mephistopheles
here, where Ambition and Damnation
intersect in the dust,
did he have a plan?

A soul for knowledge.

A soul for violin.

A soul for guitar.

Surely the deal is worth it.

The stain takes a drag,
smiles
and waves me over.
My hands tremble.

Home is Where

Mom keeps saying
home is wherever she is,
but Shelby, North Carolina
isn't my home.
Abington, Pennsylvania
wasn't my home.
Gainesville and Spring Hill,
Florida were never my home.

Home used to be Sarasota,
where I knew which roads
had palm trees on the median,
or where the speed bumps
and humps and tables were.
I knew where US 301 changed
from downtown, to downtrodden.
I could place all three
Publix Supermarkets on Bee Ridge,
and I knew the Denny's by the mall
was better than the other one.

I can't call Sarasota home,
not after years
with no more than
stopping into town
to grab lunch with Uncle Al
at the Sonny's on 41.

Pumba taught me
that home is where
your rump rests,
but my rump has rested
in so many places,
on uncomfortable chairs
or beds that smell like linen
rather than like me
that I don't know
if he was fully right.

Home is where

the keyboard is at
just the right height,
and the computer monitors
are at just the right distance.
Home is where the mouse
has glossy spots
where your fingers rest.
Home is where your hard drive
reflects your life's work
and all of your passwords
are saved.

Life in Film Noir

Sometimes when I wake
from Technicolor dreams,
the fog rolls in
muting color in its wake.
I expect to find Bogart
in a smoke-filled office
romancing the woman
with the silver hair.

It seems to always rain
on these foggy days,
and on roads slick
with oily grayscale rivers
it is impossible to gain
any traction.
Even when the light
drops to Go,
I can only stand still.

Late into the night
I am the man in the gray suit
eating alone at Phillies
while at the far end
of the hardwood counter
the night hawk
and his date are served.

Close-up—
Exhausted from chasing
images of Marlowe or Spade,
knowing that a good P.I.
is all I need to find
the source of the fog,
I fall back into
the technicolor space
behind my eyes
until morning.

Ten Tricks to Impress and Amaze

- 1: Reveal a signed card from a sealed deck.
- 2: Pull coins out of the air and drop them into a glass bowl.
- 3: Wear a convincing smile.¹
- 4: Juggle² nearby objects, tasks, relationships.
- 5: Walk a tightrope. Resist the call of the void.³
- 6: Make impossible promises.⁴ Keep them.
- 7: Eat fire. Spit out flames hotter than before.
- 8: Escape judicially mandated straight-jackets.
- 9: Pick locks. Pick brains. Pick battles.⁵
- 10: Throw cards, throw your voice, throw them off your trail.

¹ The trick is in the eyes.

² jug·gle /ˈjəɡəl/

Verb: Do the same thing over and over again, hoping that this time it works.

³ The subconscious draw to jump when on the edge. Most successful tightrope walkers suggest you don't jump. It is visually interesting, but difficult to replicate.

⁴ Stick to emotional promises like "I will love you unconditionally" or "I will never forget you." Physical promises often require overcoming physics, which can be very difficult. See footnote 3.

⁵ Advice for all three tasks: Keep a careful feel on the tension.

Heirloom

I always reach for Dad's Swiss Army Knife
to open a package
or for my monthly ingrown nail dig.
The classic Victorinox,
red scaled,
cross in shield,
with a standard corkscrew,
and A GG BOHL Jr—
two superimposed G's
of Dad's inexperience with the engraver—
carved into the big blade's flat.

I've never visited his grave.
Buried in the family plot
in Bolton Rural Cemetery
on the coast of Lake George,
far enough in his mind
that we could never come visit him.
Far enough that we might move on.
I was there once, when we buried him.
My sister and I collected leaves.
They were turning colors,
almost to brown,
but more than Florida's binary
of green or dead.
I've only seen his headstone—
the original broken in delivery
before it could be used—
plastered on my aunts' Facebook walls
every September 20th.

The knife sits in my memorial to him,
the top shelf of a splintery bookcase,
with his framed picture—
the same one everyone at the memorial got—
a lose photo a toddler me and him,
his father's fake Rolex,
his October '79 printing
of U.S. Army Training Aids Center
Aircraft Recognition Playing Cards,

a world's greatest dad ribbon—blue and green,
the flag the Army sent us,
and a glass
stained with two fingers
of evaporated scotch,
poured on the anniversary of his death.

The knife is missing the tweezers and toothpick,
incidentals lost in half a dozen moves
and a mistaken trip through airport security,
and while I can replace them—
sold by the set on Victorinox's website—
I have to wonder,
is it worth completion
if I sacrifice perfection?

(Im)mortality

I was born in January,
so for my first five months
and thirteen days,
each one was
the longest day of my life.

Those were the immortal months,
when everything always existed
and always would.

The summer solstice marked
the first death of my lifetime,
Mufasa the second,
my grandfather the third.
As we grow, we lose our immortals.

Two months and thirty days
after my eleventh summer solstice
was the last time
I would hear my father's voice.
It was gravely,
full of the death and sadness
that comes with the C-word
I soon grew tired of saying.

The second CD I ever bought
was Queen's Platinum Collection.
"Under Pressure" is carved into my mind
just like the circular scratch
which ruined the CD.
Imagine my surprise to learn
I missed living
in the same world as Freddie Mercury
by one month and sixteen days.

Not long after our shared birthday—
my twenty-fourth and his sixty-ninth—

I lost David Bowie.
Thanks to that C-word
King David joins the Queen himself,
King Mufasa,
and the king of my household,
leaving me
with no immortals left.

Cluttered Bookshelf

A more obsessive man
would use a system
to organize the shelves
other than how it fits,
but as it is Jim Daniels
leans on Douglas Adams,
a signed copy of *M-80*
rubbing elbows with *The Guide*,
and a monolith of Bukowski
crushes Ginsberg
between Simic and Frost.
Adams spills down
onto the next shelf
where *The Meaning of Liff*
preaches its gospel
to a lifetime of required reading
and impulse buys.
Asimov reads Owen's biography
and Gulliver travels to Orwell's farm.
One shelf lower
is rather low brow.
Koontz reads comic books,
Clive Barker chooses
between Star Wars
or fantasy novels,
and fourteen decks of cards,
collected by an amateur magician,
fill all of the remaining space.
Board games claim
the last two shelves,
complicated fare from specialty shops
about independent car companies
or well-regarded Sci-Fi shows.

Charles the Great

God is an old Sicilian man
living in Philadelphia,
brought to life in nineteen sixteen
while the first Great War pushed forward.

He is pious in all the ways
that I was always told were sins.
Every week he visits the church
to forgive himself of his flaws.

He walks five miles every day
just to keep his mind occupied,
and during the nights, drinks red wine
glass by glass, bottle by bottle.

He smiles upon his children
and the children they have made.
I still remember his blessings.
They looked like crumpled dollar bills.

But now, I cannot hear his voice.
It has faded, gone far away.
In my heathen heart, I miss him.
At ninety-six years, God is dead.

Nine-Tenths of the Brain

“About a tenth of the cabin trunks were full of vivid, and often painful or uncomfortable memories of her past life; the other nine-tenths were full of penguins, which surprised her.”

– Douglas Adams, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*

Sometimes I look for my father’s voice,
pull out the bins
and dump the contents on the floor.

It was in the blue one.
There are ten blue ones.
It had a label that said “Grant’s stuff.”
All of them are labeled “Grant’s stuff.”
It was in the same bin
or packed at the same time
or on the same side of the closet
as his faded black “1st RANGER BN” hat.
Nope.
Just penguins.

I leave the squawking mess
to pile into different bins some other day.
I thumb through my small stack of photographs.
Just Dad.

Wait Five Minutes

The weather in Florida
is best described as fickle.
The wind can be as slow
as the Oldsmobile in front of you
with its blinker on,
only to change directions
and charge like the lunatics
in the left lane of I-4.
In Florida, if you don't like the weather
wait five minutes.
It gets worse.

One morning,
when the walk to the bus stop
was like the idyllic walks
that kids in TV shows from the fifties
would take with their dogs.
The sun was just climbing over
a clear horizon, its light
making its way through the trees,
but before the bus reached my stop
the sky filled with dark clouds,
and the street lights turned back on,
as if the sun had set again.
The rain came down in a way
that my young mind associated
with water parks, where the giant bucket
would fill in the children's area
only to eventually tip
pouring hundreds of gallons
on the children below.
My brother, sister, and I
took refuge under the star fruit tree
that we would take ripe fruits from
on the calmer mornings,
but the rain was too much,
soaking us through, wet clothes,
wet backpacks, everything wet
down to our bones.
The shelter of the school bus

wasn't much better.
With the windows up
to keep the rain out,
and the seats and floor
wet from the children inside,
the whole bus smelled like a kennel.
The clouds were gone
by the time we got to school,
but the humidity remained.
With wet clothes and wet hair,
one hundred percent humidity,
and the sun now brutally shining down,
the best we could wait for
was the first bell to ring
and to be let into
the now too cold classrooms,
where we would shiver until lunch
when it was raining again.

It Begins with a Fox

“Well, a sort of fox”
is all I remember
the old poet telling me.
My view jumped
from the page he held
back to his face
and he was young,
his wide smile
the only source of wrinkles,
overjoyed to be sharing
this poem, like a child,
or a lunatic,
giving the guided tour
of a rainbow Lego castle
of his own design.

I close my eyes,
looking into the files
of my mind, flipping
through stacks of blank
paper, desperate to find
what he showed me
just before the alarm
tore us apart.
When I fall back asleep,
I do not find
him, or his work,
or even the stained glass
train car he called home.

In my memory
the page shifts
from a handwritten document
on browning parchment
to typed text
on new, white paper.
It had to have been

on a typewriter though,
I can still see
the rough edges
of bleeding ink.

Maybe tonight
I will talk to him again,
remembering more
than the old poet's
young smile,
the way the light
through stained glass walls
cast green shadows
over all,
and the first two lines,
"It begins with a fox.
Well, a sort of fox."

The Mad Scientist Sleeps

It is just before dawn,
Not that The Mad Scientist would know
Since the windows were boarded up
To keep out looky-loos
And men in suits from three letter agencies.
The Mad Scientist stops his work
On some unnamable device,
Likely a doomsday weapon
With which to hold the world hostage,
Or a novel design for a panini press.
With his head full of bees
And the lullabies they sing while they work,
The Mad Scientist doesn't even know.

He turns off the old soldering iron,
Stained with too many
Of his burned in fingerprints.
He hangs the magnifying goggles—
Long since shattered but worn out of tradition—
Next to the welding goggles of the same purpose.

“Good night,” he says to the computer
Which hears him, but doesn't respond.
“Good night,” he says to the tank of fish
With too many legs, and the tank of spiders
With too few eyes, and he hopes
They won't respond either.

The Mad Scientist pours himself a drink,
Something to help the voices and him to fall asleep,
A shot of some libation, clear as water,
Home-made for degreasing engines.
Maybe honey, The Mad Scientist thinks,
Will calm the bees as well.

He makes a note—something about apiaries—
And drops like dead weight into bed.

Behind his eyelids he sees them,
Bees in perfect harmony,
Robust yet docile—
None of that Africanized killer instinct—
A boon to global agriculture,
Or an army at his command.
Either way,
It is a project
for when The Mad Scientist awakes.

Insomnia and Autocannibalism

I am the sleepless Ouroboros.
Driven by unknown anxiety
I pick and bite away at my fingers—
mostly thumbs—
unconsciously searching for greater comfort
than my extra-plush, queen bed can provide.

Voices in my head keep me awake at night.
 What didn't I do today?
 What am I forgetting about tomorrow?
 What will I do when this all crashes down?
These voices, from deep within
my Broca's and Wenike's areas
are just as much mine
as the one that starts in my chest.
 Stop biting your thumb. It's bleeding.

I am not confined to my bed
and neither are my neuroses.
I sit at my desk, chewing on a bit of skin and cuticle.
 This isn't very good.
 You should really stop.
 What happened to the last time you quit? Two months clean.
Blood and saliva blend fairly well into dark jeans.
I try to confine my mark to my own person,
though a trail of thumb blood follows me through life.

I am stuck in a cycle.
I can't sleep
because I can't shut the fuck up in my head.
Idle or anxious, I fidget and find a rough spot,
something on a finger caught by a nail
during a semi-random sweep.
I pick or bite until uniform
or until too much damage is done.
 You really need to stop that.
Another voice joins the conversation.

This is why you are embarrassed of your hands.
I made myself self-conscious
and I still can't fall asleep.
In the darkness of my room
and the comfort of my bed
I bite at my thumb until I taste blood.
It continues
the same as it always is.

Through Milk and Oil

An animated short film by Christopher Strachan.

```
:Boot_Up_Initializing  
:Tabula_Rasa
```

There is something electric about digital memories.
Static arcs from key to fingertip,
charging up my nervous system,
filling my synapses so completely with ones and zeros
that I can no longer see the trees
for the HTML forest.

The static seeks a long forgotten message board.
It finds a 404 error,
a hallmark of my generation's nostalgia.

```
:You_are_not_limited_to_your_body  
    Your_body_is_limitless
```

Few words scared the early 2000s media more
than "unsupervised internet use."
Pedophiles,
pornography,
a plethora of all that pearl-clutchers would cite
while crying "But think of the children!"

There were a lot of children,
congregating on forums, moderated by users
who were barely not children themselves.
It was Web 1.0 Neverland,
where flight manifested as art,
people built from pixels,
personalities and pseudonyms
changing with the tides of inspiration.

They plastered their art on walls in BBCode
all over their crumbling city,
built on the ruins of PHP and free webhosting.

```
:What_separates_you_from_others  
    Is_a_lack_of_connection  
:Cultivate_good_connections  
    Watch_them_grow
```

With the ancient forums long since 404ed
and the acronym chat programs
either dead to the world
or graveyards of

User Last Seen Online: A Lifetime Ago
the static drags through my binary synapses
seething at Web 2.0 and the end of an era.

Facebook Messenger chimes.
Moving through the clean lines of white and blue,
less complicated and more friendly
than the internet I grew up on,
there is one new message from
a name I barely know,
a name I was never introduced to
a name that replaces a long gone pseudonym
a name put to a voice
a name put to one of Neverland's greatest artists
a name belonging to an old friend.

The contents, a hug that hurts.
The static becomes a constant pulse,
120 volts AC contracting every muscle.
The binary clogging my synapses explodes into octal,
branching into hexadecimal and beyond until
256 bit emotions flood the surface of my brain,
welling up behind my eyes,
pouring out of my fingertips,
pooling on the surface of every key I hit.

```
:Relax  
    Know_that_you_can_always_come_back_home  
:Maximum_Character_Limit_Reached
```

A Florida Boy in North Carolina

My sister's in-laws,
NC natives, correct me
when I mention the
mountain roads.
Hills they say,
but at home
a hill is a bump,
not the crest
before the
rollercoaster's
drop.

After a week
of corrections
and carsickness
on asphalt thrill-rides
in the husband-to-be's
electric blue,
limited edition
Charger Super Bee,
I'm still sold on
mountains.

Hill doesn't convey
the grandeur
of the ride.
My brother's
little Corolla
dropping out
from under me
into the valley,
only to redline
trying to climb out.

I'll let the locals keep
their giant hills.
I'd rather take home

stories of
mountains.
I wouldn't want
to disappoint
the tiny hills
back home.

Civility

My older brother once said “fuck you”
to a guy from high school he didn’t like
when the guy said “hi” to him at the mall.

I can’t help but hold grudges.
It takes small amounts of anger
to keep the boiler in my chest pressurized.

“You know,” Jim said, cornering me
in the apartments’ communal laundry,
“people around here don’t like you very much.”
I hid my gritting teeth behind raised eyebrows
and a confused shrug.
Boiling water bubbled up into my mouth.
“Sorry to hear that,” I said,
releasing curls of steam to climb my face.
“Have a good one.”

Like my blood, I set the washer
to HOT/HOT.
What did he get out of that?
Maybe his boiler makes annoying noises
when he needs to vent.
Maybe he’s just a prick.
Mercifully, by the time my quarters dropped,
Jim was gone.

My brother sent an apology email
after Mom gave him a lecture
on burning bridges and being a dick.
Sometimes I wish I had his brazen courage though,
So I could have told Jim
“go fuck yourself.”

Wreckage of the Swedish Warship *Mars*

My friends and I throw mulch at recess.
Florida kids can only imagine
Snowballs in the heat of a green winter.

Fistfuls of splintery wood are dug up in layers,
Wet brown under last year's red
All covered in sun-bleached blond.

We create mounds of wood chips in the grass,
Stockpiles in the sand we call soil for when we venture
Out past the perimeter ties of the playground.

I don't know that this will be a moment I come back to,
While sitting in my apartment at the start of a distant spring
And looking at a picture of a sunken ship online.

We threw acorns in autumn.
This will feel important too.

To a Goth Girl

We were edgy,
the two of us in all black:
my black leather trench coat,
your black skirt,
my black Chuck Taylors,
your black choker,
my black void where confidence should be,
your black nail polish,
my black shirt,
your black outlook on life.
So much black counterpointed
by matching long, blond hair.
We could have been siblings,
but that would have made the things we did
and the things we wanted to do
very wrong and very illegal.

We were freshmen,
young, horny, and dumb.
I locked up completely during our first kiss.
You shoved your tongue into my mouth
and a wrench into my cognitive machine.
I could feel everything: your warm tongue,
the rough concrete of East Side High's outdoor bench,
your breath and the wind drifting across my face,
an entire lunch period of eyes
watching the two weird, white kids make out.
I pulled away.
I had to breathe.

We were not meant to last.
We had our fun times,
like nearly getting kicked out
of the skating rink for getting too PG-13
or in the darkness of the movie theater
getting to a hard R.
Then you cheated on me,
dumped me,
left me without my best friend,
and the dumbest part of me

still wants you back.

Road Trip

Phenergan, the little,
white anti-nausea pill
carries a special side-effect
for the motion-sick traveler;
the ability to sleep
through the end of the world.

The sleep it brings
holds no dreams.
Instead I blink
and many miles have passed.
I remember entering Georgia,
but when did we reach
the interstate?

The Corolla's engine drones
as I fade in and out
of existence.
Somewhere north of Atlanta
I exist for long enough
to feel the AC freezing my face
while my knees bake
in the sun.

As we exit just past
mile marker one
in South Carolina
for fuel and food,
I rejoin the world,
just awake enough
to order my meal
and fail at the
Cracker Barrel puzzle.

Fed and sedated, I don't
exist again until we pass
Charlotte. Watching the signs,

I'm convinced that all
roads in North Carolina
lead to Spartanburg,
and for a moment
before I fade again
I think it's a shame
that we aren't going there.

Jim Daniels Esperanto

The nuns call them “tasks”:

Hands blistered from using
that beat-up shovel.
Yard work. Work work.

Sometimes you just want
to email back
It's in the syllabus.

Grit from the sandblaster
in your clothes. Under your skin.
Hungover on the assembly line.

Dancing to the motor city's music,
the smell of second-hand smoke,
the growling of American steel.

The pounding in your chest.
Chains of M-80s, quarter-stick
of dynamite of the heart.

The Python

Stainless steel, double action, rubber grips.
It sits heavy in my hands.
As I pull the trigger
it makes three sounds.

Click:
The hammer pulls back,
rotating the cylinder,
bringing the shiny brass into place.

Click:
The hammer releases,
falling forward to the firing pin.
I tremble slightly, anticipating the

Boom.
The firing pin hits the primer
of the .357 magnum round.

The chain explosion
forces the lead wadcutter
down the spiraling, rifled barrel.

I miss and set the gun down, wide-eyed.
My dad pats my seven-year-old head.
“You hesitated,”
he says through his movie-star smile.

It was my father’s gun,
the .357 Colt Python.

At nineteen, it isn’t as heavy in my hands,
but memories weigh it down.
My dad passed nine years ago
and I haven’t held it since.

I load it with six
pieces of the shiny brass,
and take aim down range

at the paper on the post.

Its three sounds echo through me,
as comforting as the voice
that I can barely remember.

It speaks six times
before I put it down
and look at what I've done.
Up and to the left,
I'm still hesitant.

Glenfiddich 12

Unsheathe the bottle from the box,
its protector from the light.
Under the golden stag
thick green glass surrounds single malt.

Peel back the foil, stamped with the seal,
and pull out the cork, twisting slightly.
Strongly inhale a preview of the scents
and flavors to come.

Pour a dram of warm caramel color
into the little pear shaped Glencairn,
appreciate how it clings to crystal
as you swirl it gently.

Bring the glass to your lips
but don't sip quite yet.
Bury your nose in the glass
taking in esters of pear and oak.

It is pleasant to the nose,
with a hint of smoky wood
and Scottish peat
in a fragrant fruity mash.

At last, take a sip.
A light kiss of scotch
just passes your lips
and bobbles on your tongue.

It lingers as it hums
a delightful, crisp note.
A light butterscotch
is underscored with cream and malt.

The finish is mellow and long,
like the twelve calm years isolated—

protected, in barrels
in the Valley of the Deer.

Anger

In the Star Wars universe
the Code of the Sith says
“Peace is a lie, there is only passion.”
Contentedness is dangerous,
as I sit around, happy enough
that I am no longer driven
to change, to create.

I dated a girl in high school
who baked when she was angry.
I could always tell
when a teacher was a hard ass,
or she was fighting with her friends,
because she would give me
the moistest chocolate cake,
or marshmallow, mint fudge
made with those chocolate
mints with the green stripe.

My father would shout
when he was angry,
not overcome by the need to act,
but overwhelmed
by his boiling blood.
My step-father taught me
to curse and grit my teeth,
allowing the steam to build
and drive me like a steel fury
hurtling towards the horizon.

As I push forward
through the rage
and the rage inducing,
with the taste of blood
and Andes mints on my tongue,
I am still afraid
of the day when I am happy,

with no more wars to fight,
or mountains to grind
down into molehills.
Nothing scares me more
than the stagnant tranquility
that leaves the water
of my life's river poisoned.

The Long Halloween

With a smile painted on my face,
like the Joker's pained grin,
I move unseen through crowds,
dressed up like a normal adult.

Sometimes I don't take off
the costume for weeks on end.
Every day the same holiday,
and though I search for a solution,
some answer to this riddle
that will let a new morning come,
Calendar Man sees fit
to never let it change.

Batman is never seen
without his mask,
but neither is Scarecrow.
Am I the hero
who hides his face
to protect those he loves
or am I the villain,
clinging to the security
of a false identity?
Each day it depends
on a flip of Two-Face's coin.

Everyone wears a mask
in comic books
where it is always Halloween,
but when I look up
and out at the world
I wonder if out here
it really is just me.

Before the Fall

The great fire broke out
in July, 64 AD.
It started in the market,
the heart and stomach
of the Empire of Concrete.

The Romans invented concrete,
the miracle material
that like the empire's fall
would not be seen again
until the British Empire
of the 19th century.

I can hear the screams
of a burning citizenry
as the chaos surges
into the night.
People call out to Nero
who is nowhere to be seen.
He is most likely
out of the city,
or busy burning Christians
on the palace lawn,
but the legends will tell
of an incompetent leader,
sawing on his fiddle
as the seat of the empire burns.

Even when it dries
concrete still contains
a little bit of trapped water.
This tiny liquid volatility
makes concrete unsuitable
for fire pits or oven bricks.
Concrete explodes
under extreme heat.

The pops of high power rifles
as anachronistic as I am
pierce through the smoke,
echoing louder than an outraged,
out of work, out of time populace.
And somewhere safe,
far from the burning din
of fire and outrage
Nero and his advisers know,
just as the Persian Xerxes did,
and the king of England one day will,
that this too will pass,
and peace will return
to their eternal empire.

Thinking of Big Moe

Big Moe sits
stoic and majestic,
a boulder in the hazy river
of pre-kindergarten memories.

Big Moe and his excitable compatriot,
Dennis,
the two blue-and-gold macaws
that marked each school morning.

Big Moe stood watch from his cage,
guarding the furniture repair shop—
I think—
that belonged to a friend of someone.
It was close enough to walk from
while skipping the wait
of the child drop off line.

Big Moe was there when we drove in,
before Dad traded his nondescript white pickup
for a red Mustang convertible.

I wish I remembered more about Big Moe.
Dad, the only person to share memories
of this beautiful bird and the repair shop
is too long dead to ask.

For now, Big Moe marks
the furthest back into the haze
that I can still swim
before the current drags me back,
far away from Macaws
and Catholic Pre-K,
and all the other things
that have been lost upstream.

The Hurricane Change

Invented by Harry Levine

Published in "The Trapdoor" #42 (1992)

To begin the trick
start with the deck in the Mechanic's Grip
and a general sense of ease
regarding hurricanes.
You've never been through a bad one.

Hold the deck face up
and let the news get under your skin:
"Going to be the worst storm in years."
"Going to be a direct hit."

Reveal the exposed card, two of hearts,
making sure your audience knows
something big is going to happen.
Convince them to fight
lines at Sam's Club
for sold out water and ice.

With your free hand, palm down,
wave over the card,
passing back and forth,
fully exposing the card each time,
demonstrating projected paths and landfalls.
Don't forget to charge your batteries,
and consolidate the household's candles.

On the final pass, move your free hand
slightly up the opposing arm,
revealing no way
to manipulate the exposed deck,
and that you are uneasy.
Maybe even scared.

Bring your hand back across the deck
and try to get some sleep
as the wind makes train whistles
and the rain threatens
to break the window next to your bed.

Wake up and reveal
the ten of spades,
and a complete miss
as the storm skates along the coast.

Never let the audience linger.
Move on to the next trick
so the audience doesn't have time
to question what they just saw.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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